

A modest proposal: one of the most satirical works in literature

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February 18, 2012 ENGL 216-B03 Jonathan Swift was an author during the eighteenth century also known as the “ Age of Enlightenment”. Swift is well known for his use of satire and irony in his literary works. His essay “ A Modest Proposal” has become known as one of the greatest satirical works in literature. In this essay, Swift proposes that the Irish begin using cannibalism as a means to overcome their poverty and deplorable living conditions. Although Swift’s recommendation of pursuing cannibalism is sarcastic, he uses his essay as a political statement of the unfair treatment of the Irish by the British people.

Jonathan Swift was born in Ireland to English parents. According to David Cody, Swift spent time in England early in his life but returned to Ireland and became an ordained Anglican minister. Politically, he started out as a member of the Whig party but switched to the opposing Tory party after learning of the Whig’s opposition to the Anglican Church (2000). In “ A Modest Proposal”, Swift uses a dramatic form of irony to engage and inform the audience of deeper political and social issues. Swift used his writing skills to issue pamphlets to take a stand against the British treatment of the Irish people.

The expanded title of “ A Modest Proposal” is “ A Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public”(Greenblatt, 2006). The title of this pamphlet is ironic because the proposal is anything but modest, but the purpose of this essay is to inform the audience of the awful conditions the Irish people were dealing with. During the eighteenth

century, the British government was treating the people of Ireland very poorly.

The multiple problems between the British and Irish had been ongoing since 1199 when King John had began holding Ireland as a sister kingdom to England. The condition of Ireland had been deteriorating since then but in 1729 Swift finally decided to take a stand against the British. He distributed “A Modest Proposal” as a pamphlet which were distributed to people to inform them of a political, social or cultural issue. The government in Ireland was full of British people who did not care about the conditions of the Irish and only wanted what was best for their own country.

If Ireland were to flourish, they would become competition for the British and that is the last thing they wanted. Because of this, Ireland was overcome with famine, poor people and deplorable conditions. In “A Modest Proposal”, Swift proposes that one year olds and older people should be cooked and eaten as a solution to their hunger. Because the monarch of England was also the religious leader, there was also much religious persecution for the majorly Roman Catholic population in Ireland.

According to Britannica Online Encyclopedia, there were multiple laws known as the Penal Laws which were passed throughout the 1600s and 1700s which eliminated Roman Catholics’ rights to vote, hold public office and hold land among other things (Penal Laws, 2012). Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” was a statement to the people of Britain but it was also a way to wake up the people of Ireland and to encourage them to stand up for themselves. The

people of Ireland had been treated poorly by the British for many years and Swift wondered why it took them so long to take a stand.

Swift's proposal is sarcastic in the sense that the person proposing these solutions is unaware of the inhumane actions that he is suggesting. He suggests eating infants and the elderly because the infants will have good meat and the elderly are just no good to society but when he proposes the eating of teenagers he states that that would be preposterous because teenagers are helpful and an important part of society. The fact of the matter is that any form of cannibalism is in fact preposterous and in no way should be seen as a solution to their problem.

Swift may have been trying to say that eating the infants would be beneficial because then it would allow the infants to not have to face the deplorable conditions of the real world they would have to face when they grow older. It would save them from the posterity and poor lifestyle they would be forced to face when they grow up. "A Modest Proposal" was written as a political statement by Swift. He was sickened by the conditions the people of Ireland were surrounded with. He used his gift of satirical writing to write about a horrible situation in a somewhat humorous way.

Although his writing may be slightly biased because he was Irish, the extreme poverty and poor living conditions he wrote about were historically accurate. He used his essay to let people know the reality of the situation and painted a very vivid visual using his words. When reading this essay, the readers experience a wide array of emotions. Disgust and even a slight hint of humor can be experienced when the proposer makes the suggestion of

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eating infants and the elderly as a means of survival. After reading the entire work though, the reality of the situation sets in and pity and sorrow are felt.

Humans are emotional beings and Swift used his words to stir the emotions of the reader to take action against the British to help his people. Because television and the internet were not around during the 1700's, newspapers, pamphlets and word of mouth were the means of communication. The distribution of pamphlets brought the issue to the attention of the people. By proposing something so preposterous, he made the problem seem even that more real which caused the reader to understand the inhumanity that was happening in the world around them.

Swift states in "A Modest Proposal" that he could "[t]hink of no one objection that will probably be raised against the proposal" (1118). In his mind maybe the proposal he was making was not any crazier than any of the propositions created by the British. Swift's "A Modest Proposal" was written as a way to inform the general public of a political, religious and social issue. The irony and satire that it contains brought some humor and even more reality to the situation. Swift used his talents to waken the hearts of the public and urged them to take a stand and not allow the Irish people to be treated so poorly.

Works Cited Cody, David. "Jonathan Swift: A Brief Biography." The Victorian Web. The Victorian Web, 2000. Web. 17 Feb. 2012. www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/swift/bio.html Greenblatt, Stephen. The Norton Anthology of English Literature. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006. Print. "Penal

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