

# A modest proposal: an analysis



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One of the “ Tory writers,” “ a talented satirist” (Abjadian 87), Jonathan Swift was born on November 30, 1667, in Dublin, Ireland. His father-an Englishman who had moved to Ireland-died earlier that year. Receiving financial assistance from relatives, Swift attended a good school for his basic education and graduated from Trinity College in Dublin in 1686. He lived off and on in England, became an Anglican clergyman, and eventually was appointed dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin, although he had lobbied for a position in England.

His writing-especially his satires-made him one of the most prominent citizens in Great Britain, and he worked for a time on behalf of Tory causes. His most famous work is Gulliver’s Travels, a book of satire on politics and society in general. “ Despite health issues, Swift continued to write prolifically-especially on issues concerning Anglo-Irish relations and the church. He decried what he viewed as England’s oppression of Ireland in ‘ A Modest Proposal’” (deGategno and Stubblefield 8) Swift died in Dublin on October 19, 1745.

“ 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 Publick,” commonly named as “ A Modest Proposal,” is a Juvenalian satirical essay written and published anonymously by Jonathan Swift in 1729. The essay was originally printed in the form of a pamphlet. At the time of its publication, 1729, a pamphlet was a short work that took a stand on a political, religious, or social issue-or any other issue of public interest. A typical pamphlet had no binding, although it sometimes had a paper cover. Writers of pamphlets, called pamphleteers, played a significant role in inflaming or resolving many of the great controversies in Europe in <https://assignbuster.com/a-modest-proposal-an-analysis/>

the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, as well as in the political debate leading up to the American Revolution. In addition to “A Modest Proposal,” Jonathan Swift wrote many political pamphlets supporting the causes of the Tory political party after he renounced his allegiance to the Whig party.

“A Modest Proposal” is an essay that uses satire to make its point. A satire is a literary work that attacks or pokes fun at vices, abuses, stupidity, and/or any other fault or imperfection. In Abjadian’s words, “satire is often considered as a corrective means of human vice and folly” (11). Satire may make the reader laugh at, or feel disgust for, the person or thing satirized. Impishly or sardonically, it criticizes someone or something, using wit and clever wording-and sometimes makes outrageous assertions or claims. The main purpose of a satire is to spur readers to remedy the problem under discussion. The main weapon of the satirist is verbal irony, a figure of speech in which words are used to ridicule a person or thing by conveying a meaning that is the opposite of what the words say.

Readers unacquainted with its reputation as a satirical work often do not immediately realize that Swift was not seriously proposing cannibalism and infanticide, nor would readers unfamiliar with the satires of Horace and Juvenal-“the two distinguished Roman satirists” (Abjadian 13)-recognize that Swift’s essay follows the rules and structure of Latin satires.

“The fine satiric strategy in A Modest Proposal” (Williams 26) is often only understood after the reader notes the allusions made by Swift to the attitudes of landlords, such as the following: “I grant this food may be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for Landlords, who as they have already devoured most of the Parents, seem to have the best Title to the

Children” (Swift 1080). Swift extends the metaphor to get in a few jibes at England’s mistreatment of Ireland, noting that “ For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it” (1084).

Over the centuries, England gradually gained a foothold in Ireland. In 1541, the parliament in Dublin recognized England’s Henry VIII, a Protestant, as King of Ireland. In spite of repeated uprisings by Irish Catholics, English Protestants acquired more and more estates in Ireland. By 1703, they owned all but ten percent of the land. Meanwhile, legislation was enacted that severely limited the rights of the Irish to hold government office, purchase real estate, get an education, and advance themselves in other ways. As a result, many Irish fled to foreign lands, including America. Most of those who remained in Ireland lived in poverty, facing disease, starvation, and prejudice. It was this Ireland-an Ireland of the tyrannized and the downtrodden-that Jonathan Swift attempted to focus attention on in “ A Modest Proposal” in 1720.

Some scholars have argued that A Modest Proposal was largely influenced and inspired by Tertullian’s Apology. While Tertullian’s Apology is a satirical attack against early Roman persecution of Christianity, Swift’s A Modest Proposal addresses the Anglo-Irish situation in the 1720s. James William Johnson believes that Swift saw major similarities between the two situations (563). Johnson notes Swift’s obvious affinity for Tertullian and the bold stylistic and structural similarities between the works A Modest Proposal and Apology (562).

In structure, Johnson points out the same central theme; that of cannibalism and the eating of babies; and the same final argument; that “ human depravity is such that men will attempt to justify their own cruelty by accusing their victims of being lower than human” (563). Stylistically, Swift and Tertullian share the same command of sarcasm and language. In agreement with Johnson, Donald C. Baker points out the similarity between both authors’ tones and use of irony. Baker notes the uncanny way that both authors imply an ironic “ justification by ownership” over the subject of sacrificing children-Tertullian while attacking pagan parents, and Swift while attacking the English mistreatment of the Irish poor (219).

Swift appears to suggest in his essay that the impoverished Irish might ease their economic troubles by selling children as food for rich gentlemen and ladies. By doing this he mocks the authority of the British officials. This is when Britain had taken over Ireland and put heavy restrictions on their trade, stifling their economy. The essay has been noted by historians as being the first documented satirical essay. A critic (qtd. in Williams) in *Journal Anglais*, in 1777 states,

To ridicule those schemes for reform with which the public was inundated at that time, and which often insulted the misery to which they affected a desire to bring consolation. It will be noticed that Swift has imitated the common expressions and the insinuating tone of the authors of these projects (199).

He wrote “ A Modest Proposal” to call attention to abuses inflicted on Irish Catholics by well-to-do English Protestants. Swift himself was a Protestant, but he was also a native of Ireland, having been born in Dublin of English

parents. He believed England was exploiting and oppressing Ireland. Many Irishmen worked farms owned by Englishmen who charged high rents-so high that the Irish were frequently unable to pay them. Consequently, many Irish farming families continually lived on the edge of starvation.

In “ A Modest Proposal,” Swift satirizes the English landlords with outrageous humor, proposing that Irish infants be sold as food at age one, when they are plump and healthy, to give the Irish a new source of income and the English a new food product to bolster their economy and eliminate a social problem. He says his proposal, if adopted, would also result in a reduction in the number of Catholics in Ireland, since most Irish infants-almost all of whom were baptized Catholic-would end up in stews and other dishes instead of growing up to go to Catholic churches. Here, he is satirizing the prejudice of Protestants toward Catholics. Swift also satirizes the Irish themselves in his essay, for too many of them had accepted abuse stoically rather than taking action on their own behalf.

Regarding the style used in the essay, William Monck Mason states, The cold, phlegmatic style [in A Modest Proposal] of a political projector, who waves the consideration of all the finer feelings of humanity, or makes them subservient, as matters of slight moment, to the general advantages proposed in his plan of financial improvement, is admirably well satirized.... The cool, ‘ businesslike’ manner, in which the calculations are stated, is equally admirable (340).

..... In “ A Modest Proposal,” Swift uses a standard essay format: an opening that presents the topic and thesis (the “ modest proposal”), a body that develops the thesis with details, and a conclusion. In the opening, the author

states the problem: the deplorable economic and social conditions that impoverish the Irish and prevent them from providing adequate care for their children. Before presenting the thesis, he inserts the following transitional sentence: “ I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection” (Swift 1080) He follows this sentence with the thesis, and then presents the details in the body of the essay.

In the conclusion, he states the benefits that would accrue from his proposal. He begins with the following two sentences: “ I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.” He next lists the advantages, using transitional words such as secondly and thirdly to move from one point to the next.” He ends the conclusion by explaining why his proposal is superior to other remedies. Keep in mind that throughout the body and conclusion Swift makes his argument with irony, stating the opposite of what he really means.

The dominant figure of speech in “ A Modest Proposal” is verbal irony, in which a writer or speaker says the opposite of what he means. Swift’s masterly use of this device makes his main argument-that the Irish deserve better treatment from the English-powerful and dreadfully amusing. For example, to point out that the Irish should not be treated like animals, Swift compares them to animals, as in this example: “ I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs.” Also, to point out that disease, famine, and substandard living conditions threaten to kill great numbers of Irish, Swift cheers their

predicament as a positive development:

Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or maimed, and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken to ease the nation of so grievous an encumbrance. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known that they are every day dying and rotting by cold and famine, and filth and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected. And as to the young laborers, they are now in as hopeful a condition; they cannot get work, and consequently pine away for want of nourishment, to a degree that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labor, they have not strength to perform it; and thus the country and themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come (1082).

In “ Sarcasm and Irony in Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal,” a critic, regarding the irony in the essays, maintains,

One of the voices that is present throughout the story is that of irony. The story itself is ironic since no one can take Swifts proposal seriously. This irony is clearly demonstrated at the end of the story; Swift makes it clear that this proposal would not affect him since his children were grown and his wife unable to have any more children. It would be rather absurd to think that a rational man would want to both propose this and partake in the eating of another human being. Therefore, before an analyzation can continue, one has to make the assumption that this is strictly a fictional work and Swift had no intention of pursuing his proposal any further.

There are some allusions in the essay including Barbadoes (Barbados): Easternmost West Indies island, settled by the British in 1627. When Swift



published “ A Modest Proposal” in 1729, the island’s plantation owners used slaves to produce sugar for European consumption; Dublin: The Irish city mentioned in “ A Modest Proposal.” It is the capital of Ireland; Formosa: Portuguese name for Taiwan, a Chinese-inhabited island off the southeast coast of China; Mandarin: High-ranking Chinese official; Papist: Roman Catholic; Pretender: James Francis Edward Stuart (1688-1766), son of King James II, who ruled England, Ireland, and Scotland from 1685 to 1688. James II was a Catholic, as was his wife, Mary of Modena. After his accession to power, Protestant factions continually maneuvered against him in the background. When Mary became pregnant, these factions worried that the birth of her child would establish a line of Catholic kings. Consequently, they plotted to oust James II and replace him with Dutchman William of Orange, whose mother was the daughter of an English king, Charles I, and whose wife was one of James II’s own daughters. When William marched against England, many Protestants in James II’s army deserted to William, and James had no choice but to flee to France. After he died in 1701, the French king then proclaimed James II’s young son, James Francis Edward Stuart, to be the rightful king of England. The English Parliament then enacted laws designed to prevent seating another Catholic king. Nevertheless, in succeeding years, James Francis repeatedly attempted to regain the throne, and the British eventually nicknamed him the Old Pretender. Psalmanazar, George: French forger and impostor who traveled widely under different personas. In one of his most famous schemes, he pretended to be from Formosa (present-day Taiwan), of which little was known in the Europe of his time. In London, he published a book about Formosa in which he wrote that Formosan law permitted a husband to eat a wife if she committed adultery. Psalmanazar

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had never visited Formosa; the whole book was made up. Nevertheless, many Englishmen believed what he had written.

There some themes explained and referred to in the essay. The themes like the exploitation of the downtrodden. Beneath Swift's audacious satire is a serious theme; that English overlords are shamelessly exploiting and oppressing the impoverished people of Ireland through unfair laws, high rents charged by absentee landlords, and other injustices. Another theme is the prejudice: At the time of the publication of "A Modest Proposal," many British Protestants disdained Roman Catholics-especially Irish Catholics-and enacted laws limiting their ability to thrive and prosper. One important theme of the work is the Irish Inaction; Swift's satirical language also chides the Irish themselves for not acting with firm resolve to improve their lot. Another theme is, as Barnett refers to, "the theme of unwelcome reproduction are the wretchedly poor mothers of Ireland in A Modest Proposal, whose children, as the subtitle informs us, are 'a Burden to their Parents or Country'" (121).

It has been argued that Swift's main target in A Modest Proposal was not the conditions in Ireland, but rather the can-do spirit of the times that led people to devise a number of illogical schemes that would purportedly solve social and economic ills. Swift was especially insulted by projects that tried to fix population and labor issues with a simple cure-all solution. A memorable example of these sorts of schemes "involved the idea of running the poor through a joint-stock company" (Wittkowsky 85). In response, Swift's Modest Proposal was "a burlesque of projects concerning the poor" (88) that were in vogue during the early 18th century.

A Modest Proposal also targets the calculating way people perceived the poor in designing their projects. The pamphlet targets reformers who “regard people as commodities” (Wittkowsky 101). In the piece, Swift adopts the “technique of a political arithmetician” (95) to show the utter ridiculousness of trying to prove any proposal with dispassionate statistics. Critics differ about Swift’s intentions in using this faux-mathematical philosophy. Edmund Wilson argues that statistically “the logic of the ‘Modest proposal’ can be compared with defense of crime (arrogated to Marx) in which he argues that crime takes care of the superfluous population”(Wittkowsky 95). Wittkowsky counters that Swift’s satiric use of statistical analysis is an effort to enhance his satire that “springs from a spirit of bitter mockery, not from the delight in calculations for their own sake” (98).

Robert Phiddian’s article “Have you eaten yet? The Reader in A Modest Proposal” focuses on two aspects of A Modest Proposal: the voice of Swift and the voice of the Proposer. Phiddian stresses that a reader of the pamphlet must learn to distinguish between the satiric voice of Jonathan Swift and the apparent economic projections of the Proposer. He reminds readers that “there is a gap between the narrator’s meaning and the text’s, and that a moral-political argument is being carried out by means of parody” (Phiddians 6).

While Swift’s proposal is obviously not a serious economic proposal, George Wittkowsky, author of “Swift’s Modest Proposal: The Biography of an Early Georgian Pamphlet”, argues that in order to fully understand the piece, it is important to understand the economics of Swift’s time. Wittowsky argues

that not enough critics have taken the time to directly focus on the mercantilism and theories of labor in 18th century England. “[I]f one regards the Modest Proposal simply as a criticism of condition, about all one can say is that conditions were bad and that Swift’s irony brilliantly underscored this fact” (Phiddians 3). At the start of a new industrial age in the 18th century, it was believed that “ people are the riches of the nation”, and there was a general faith in an economy which paid its workers low wages because high wages would mean workers would work less (4). Furthermore, “ in the mercantilist view no child was too young to go into industry”. In those times, the “ somewhat more humane attitudes of an earlier day had all but disappeared and the laborer had come to be regarded as a commodity” (6).

Louis A. Landa presents Swift’s A Modest Proposal as a critique of the popular and unjustified maxim of mercantilism in the eighteenth century that “ people are the riches of a nation” (161). Swift presents the dire state of Ireland and shows that mere population itself, in Ireland’s case, did not always mean greater wealth and economy (165). The uncontrolled maxim fails to take into account that a person that does not produce in an economic or political way makes a country poorer, not richer (165). Swift also recognizes the implications of such a fact in making mercantilist philosophy a paradox: the wealth of a country is based on the poverty of the majority of its citizens (165). Swift however, Landa argues, is not merely criticizing economic maxims but also addressing the fact that England was denying Irish citizens their natural rights and dehumanizing them by viewing them as a mere commodity (165).

Charles K. Smith argues that Swift's rhetorical style persuades the reader to detest the speaker and pity the Irish. Swift's specific strategy is twofold, using a "trap" to create sympathy for the Irish and a dislike of the narrator who, in the span of one sentence, "details vividly and with rhetorical emphasis the grinding poverty" but feels emotion solely for members of his own class. Swift's use of gripping details of poverty and his narrator's cool approach towards them creates "two opposing points of view" which "alienate the reader, perhaps unconsciously, from a narrator who can view with 'melancholy' detachment a subject that Swift has directed us, rhetorically, to see in a much less detached way" (Smith 136).

*A Modest Proposal*, A (1729), a pamphlet by Jonathan Swift on Ireland, written during the summer of 1729. In form and tone it resembles a conventional philanthropic appeal to solve Ireland's economic crisis, but Swift's anonymous speaker suggests a barbarous plan, to cannibalize the nation's children. It is a masterpiece of rhetorical irony, a disturbing fiction which marks the end of Swift's pamphleteering role on national affairs after a decade of passionate involvement.

The essay depicts the horrific conditions of Ireland and the lives of the Irish people in 1729. The author portrays and attacks the cruel and unjust oppression of Ireland by its oppressor, the mighty English and ridicules the Irish people at the same time. However, Swift's opposition is indirectly presented. Jonathan Swift is able to do so by using the persona, irony, and wit in order to expose the remarkable corruption and degradation of the Irish people, and at the same time present them with practicable solutions to their unscrupulous and pathetic lives. The author uses a satire to accomplish

his objective not only because he is able to conceal his true identity but also because it is the most effective way to awake the people of Ireland into seeing their own depravity.

Swift creates a fictional persona because by hiding his true identity he is able to convince the readers of the significance of Ireland's problem and allow them to see truth and reality. The persona is a concerned Irishman who is very intelligent, sound, and serious. He appears to be a brute and a monster for proposing something evil and immoral very calmly as if it is normal to consume the flesh of another human being. What makes his proposal to be even more depraved is that he proposes to eat the babies. The persona declares, and at exactly at one year old that I propose to provide for them, in a such a manner as, instead of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the feeding and partly to the clothing of many thousands. The persona justifies his proposal with numerous reasons. Besides the prevention of voluntary abortions and infanticide, it will also prevent the loss of money for maintenance of children and the abuse of women and children. The number of Papists would be reduced and the children will not become beggars, thieves, or prostitutes. The proposal will aid in the increase in the status of the peasantry, promote love, and care from the mothers towards their children. However the persona alone is inadequate to make the narrator seem too plausible. The persona must utilize irony and wit in order for his essay to be more efficacious. In fact, according to deGategno and Stubblefield, it is " the kind of callous indifference toward children that Swift parodied and criticized in " A Modest Proposal" (69).

A Modest Proposal is so effective and appealing because of the authors' copious uses of irony throughout his essay. The title itself is definitely ironic. It provides the reader with false expectations of decency and sensibility on the part of the writer. The butchery of innocent babies and the use of their skin for clothing is way beyond being modest. It is brutal and insane. The proposal is intended to shock and throw the reader off balance. The narrator also ridicules the Irish. Swift impelled and inspired the Irish into rebelling by presenting them with feasible solutions to cease the anguish of Ireland's people.