

# Jonathan swift- a modest proposal

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Jonathan Swift, a celebrated name during the eighteenth century, was an economist, a writer, and a cleric who was later named Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. Although Swift took on many different roles throughout his career, the literary form of satire seemed to be his realm of expertise. Because satire flourished during the eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift is arguably one of the most influential political satirists of his time. In one of his famous essays, *A Modest Proposal*, Swift expresses his anger and frustration towards the oppression of the Irish by the English government.

In order to gain attention from his audience, Swift proposes the outrageous thesis that the solution to Ireland's problem of poverty is to feed children of the poor to the wealthy, aristocratic families. To whom Swift is directing his satire towards is a multifaceted question. Taking on the persona of an intellectual economist, Swift attacks England for their ignorance, criticizes the Irish for their submissive ways, and on a deeper level, censures the reader who embodies all that disregard the cruelties of the world.

Although Ireland was an autonomous kingdom during the eighteenth century, the English Parliament still exerted its power from afar. The weak social relations made it so that England overlooked the economical instability in Ireland. The anger that lies behind *A Modest Proposal* holds both England and Ireland dually responsible for the turmoil. This is illustrated first by dehumanizing the Irish people.

The proposer compares them to livestock, referring to the women as "breeders" (Swift 342), and proposes, "a young healthy child" will serve as "a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled" (Swift 342). By doing this, Swift criticizes both the English

government for merely viewing the people of Ireland as insignificant, and also attacks the Irish for allowing themselves to be reduced to that of livestock. Children are viewed as a commodity whose “carcass” is worth “ten shillings” (Swift 343).

For the wealthy, the proposer suggests that the skin of the carcass “will make admirable gloves for ladies, and fine boots for gentleman” (Swift 342). A child is regarded by many cultures as inferior, naive, and innocent. The idea of a child being marketed as an item used for economic purposes emphasizes the inhumanity inflicted on someone as helpless as a child. Here, Swift cleverly brings England’s ignorance and Ireland’s passivity to attention by using a vulnerable child as a victim. The use of dehumanization is also shown when Swift speaks of the Irish as statistical data.

Regarding the “hundred and twenty thousand children already computed,” the proposer explains that, “twenty thousand may be reserved for breed” (Swift 343). Once again, [England] referring to people in a statistical, numerical sense dismisses the individuality of a human being. Swift’s feelings of enragement with the Irish Catholics’ lack of self-respect are clearly portrayed as they too permit themselves to be classified as a number. Swift also shows that both countries are responsible for the poverty in Ireland when he censures the politics that surround the issue.

In the treatise, the idea of cannibalism is used as an analogy for the oppression in Ireland. Towards the end of the essay, this is shown when the proposer remarks that “perhaps [he] could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without [this proposal]” (Swift 346). Here, Swift makes a counterargument towards the people of England who would

be appalled at such a cannibalistic idea. Even in the absence of this proposal, Swift explains that England would still devour Ireland's resources and undermines its people.

This analogy is also used to attack Ireland when the treatise addresses the value of a plump child. Because this food will be expensive, Swift remarks that it should be, " very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children" (Swift 343). In other words, the wealthy Irish landlords have already taken everything they can from the poor. Not only has England oppressed Ireland, but also the Irish have oppressed themselves.

Due to the grieve-stricken conditions Ireland faces during the eighteenth century, Swift speculates that the as the children age, they either flee Ireland to " fight for the Pretender in Spain," or " sell themselves to the Barbadoes" (Swift 341). Here, the proposer unmistakably attacks the Irish for being disloyal to " their dear native country" (Swift 341), by fighting for the English government and fleeing to America. Reading further in between the lines, one can see that Swift is also blaming England for engaging its citizens in military action. To let one's country suffer while they fight or the nation that enables their poverty, illustrates a weak and cowardly nation. In the same sense, England should be reprimanded as well for using the poor to their advantage, and overlooking the poverty dilemma. In addition to Ireland's disloyalty issue, Swift also attacks current marriage laws in place. Marriage, the proposer states, " is encouraged by rewards, or enforced by laws and penalties" (Swift 345). These rules and regulations were not only

enforced by England, but “ all wise nations” (Swift 345) during the eighteenth century as well.

Specifically designed for absolute patriarchal power, these marriage laws were unjust in which Swift attempts to bring to the reader’s attention. Instead of this, Swift argues, “ the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women” (Swift 346) should be stopped. Through various portrayals, it is proven that Swift’s treatise was not intended to only blame the British for their cruelty, but the Irish for their passivity as well. In attacking England and Ireland on equal levels, one cannot fail to recognize the satire Swift directs towards the reader.

The reader serves as a representation of all mankind who blatantly disregard the fellow man in need of nourishment. Through critiquing the reader, Swift can give us a broader perspective of the inhumanity that occurs everywhere and still occurs unnoticed. In the end of his argument, Swift does offer a number of solutions that are actually rational, such as “ taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound,” or “ rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury” (Swift 346).

However, he dismisses these sound ideas quickly since there will never “ be some hearty and sincere attempts to put them in practice” (Swift 291). Until the public makes an effort to enforce these rational proposals, the idea of feeding children to the wealthy stands as the only logical suggestion. Next, the proposer admits that he is “ not so violently bent upon my own opinion as to reject any offer proposed,” but in hearing another proposition, it must be “ found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual” (Swift 346).

The proposer is willing to hear another proposition on the account that it addresses certain issues. This opens the reader's eyes to the problem of poverty in Ireland as a complex one that cannot be solved with a quick solution. The significance of the issue increases and brings attention to the fact that the reader is a casualty to ignorance like all human beings. The satire that is produced by Jonathan Swift in *A Modest Proposal*, exemplifies many problems that seem to be overlooked and ignored.

England, who enforces laws from afar, chooses to turn its head towards the growing poverty in Ireland. Ireland is equally responsible however, because their passivity rears them as helpless, and thus they have not made any effort to encourage change among their people. Swift does not forget to take a stab at the reader for partaking in the same cruelties as England and Ireland. In a broader perspective, inhumanity often goes unrecognized because we as humans choose to look the other way. Swift effectively uses satire to critique three different audiences and encourage change for the better.