

An overview of a modest proposal: swift's persona as absentee



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In his 1976 essay “ A Modest Proposal: Swift’s Persona as Absentee”, Robert Willson examines Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal through analyzing and discussing the meaning behind his offensive proposal, revealing a clear message from Swift – “...to warn of the imminence of total destruction for the Irish people [at the hand of English control and exploitation]” (Willson 9). Willson begins his analysis by comparing several popular interpretations of Swift’s “ proposal”, systematically discrediting each one and finally culminating in confidently revealing his own interpretation. The author also carefully examines the personal characteristics of the narrator and the discrepancies he conveys during his devious planned proposal, which lend to Willson’s idea that Swift intended this strange and ludicrous proposal to alert the audience to Ireland’s real demise.

To support his analysis of A Modest Proposal, Willson describes several well-known theories regarding Swift’s message and motivation for the proposal, and discusses why each one does not have the full picture. Landa focuses on the narrator as a selfish economist who Swift uses to criticize commercial policy. Price views the narrator as a politician – an “ eager collaborator” to the opposing side (England) who is clearly blind to the economic aspect of this plan and its implications for Ireland. Ewald contended that the narrator was meant to be an economist based on two famous economists of the time who proposed ways to solve Ireland’s financial problems without interfering with England’s own economy. Rosenheim thought that the narrator was Irish himself, disgusted with unreasonable economic solutions, expressing his contempt through satire. Cook thought that the narrator was a “ self-deceived enthusiast”, and a clear window to Swift’s own political opinions.

Carnochan discounts the narrator as a misguided person the reader is meant to dismiss. Most of these analyses reduce the proposal to harsh political commentary from Swift in the form of satire, but Willson has decided that these ideas don't capture the full sentiment of Swift's message to the audience.

Willson claims that Swift's goal is to have the audience decide that the narrator and proposer of the plan is the " archetypal absentee landlord", meant to lead the audience to read between the lines and deduce that this plan is not actually in their favor (as it is meant to appear on the surface), but just another way for the English to prey on the resources of the Irish, and with their own permission, at that. Willson suggests that the audience is to pick up on the cleverly hidden anti-England message in that, "...though the speaker claims to be offering a way for the Irish to use only what they produce the scheme is really just another sham by which England could continue to devour Irish resources" (Willson 6). Swift wants the audience at this point to be outraged and make the connection between the " absentee landlord" and England, noting the likeness of the " inhuman" (according to Willson) narrator and his attempts to deceive the public as to England and their self-serving control of Ireland.

Willson describes the proposal's construction as a "...strongly implied Swiftian purpose of exposing an attempt at public deception". Willson contends that the narrator has carefully calculated a ridiculous plan for the audience to analyze and realize their enemy, the absentee landlord. Then, according to Willson, the audience is supposed to make the connection between exploited tenants of absentee landlords and England's strong-

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handed grip on Ireland and their economy. Then, finally, the audience gets to the true message meant to be delivered by Swift – England is going to cause Ireland turmoil due to the fact that this analogy (that England's relationship with Ireland can be accurately compared with a cannibalistic-entrepreneur attempting to swindle the Irish by writing up an outlandish action plan to supposedly solve economic problems through selling and eating impoverished children – and implying that from this a tasteful gentlemen's market could be born) can be made at all.

According to Willson, Swift wrote *A Modest Proposal* in this way to underline how close he felt Ireland was to a major demise and to jar the audience with an outrageous economic plan for the Irish people. In his deeply political interpretation of *A Modest Proposal*, Willson's main claim is that the absurdity of the proposal combined with the absenteeism of the narrator is meant to draw attention to English control over Ireland and portray Swift's own distaste for the situation.

Works Cited

Willson, Robert F., Jr. "A Modest Proposal: Swift's Persona as Absentee." *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, vol. 101, Gale, 2004: 1-9. Literature Resource Center. Web. 2 June 2018.