

# 18th century satire: a modest proposal assignment

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During the 18th century and the Restoration, a new form of literature became very popular, satire. Satire, according to [www. dictionary. com](http://www.dictionary.com), is the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice or folly. Commonly, satire is used to give one's opinions or commentary about public issues. As a writer it is important to be well educated on current events, politics and the interests of the general public. Writers, such as Jonathan Swift, have commonly used satire to discuss important issues about the follies of governments, persons and social issues. It has been said that " although it (satire) is usually subtle in nature, it is used to bring light to contemporary societal problems and provoke change within a culture" (Friedman). One of the world's best known pieces of satire is Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal*. This piece of work aimed to expose the flaws regarding poverty in Ireland and the overwhelming and suffocating influence of the British government and Irish land owners. Swift uses satire to explain his " modest proposal"; in other words, he aims to prevent the people of Ireland from viewing children as a burden.

In his use of satire, Swift places the blame of the abundant poor Irish population upon the English and the landowners. He also exposes the misuse of Ireland and forced trade, as well as satirizes those who made suggestions to resolve the problem without regard for the human cost involved. Satire is used " not just to remind us of our common often ridiculous humanity, but rather to expose those moral excesses, those corrigible sorts of behaviour which transgress what the writer sees as the limits of acceptable moral behaviour" (Johnston).

Uses of satire, such as Swift's *A Modest Proposal*, are developed to not degrade an individual directly, but bring light to a sensitive issue that hopefully will inspire change in society. By using satire, writers are also able to appeal to a particular readership or viewership. Those who are educated enough to understand what is trying to be said, hopefully, have enough of a role in society to spread the knowledge. John Dryden says it best, "a witty man is tickled while he is hurt in this manner, and a fool feels it not" (2131).

In *A Modest Proposal* Swift exposes numerous public authorities for their failure to help the poor people of Ireland. He suggests that the use of the children will turn and benefit the country as a response to their greed: "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" (2463).

A child is the responsibility of the parent; it is the parent that conceives a child. In addressing this issue, he also hopes this it will end voluntary abortions and the murdering of bastard children. In most society's, including our own, these are very touchy issues that evoke strong opinions and emotions. For a person to publicly announce that such actions are wrong could surely end a career, potentially a life in exile. Through satire, such issues can be discreetly spoken upon.

Swift's subtle insinuation of the fault of the wealthy Irish landlords financially crippling families could not be bluntly stated. Swift himself was an Irishman. He reserves respect for the landlords but that does not stop him from pointing out their greed: "I grant this food will 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" (2464).

Satire, in this situation prevents added tension being focused on Swift.

Also, it clearly states the absurd nature of the landlords "devouring" their tenants as they would children, and cattle; stating that the amount of money being demanded by the landlords is higher than reasonable and makes it impossible for the tenants to have a livelihood. Swift is also able to express his disgust with the Irish and English gentry through the use of satire. Not only does Swift suggest that children be used for their meat but, in addition, for their skin, which can be used as a snake or an alligator's skin may be used to create boots or gloves.

This is a very bold statement, expressing that the upper-class has no regard for the working-class, the cattle. Swift was not born into the gentry, he rose like many. He has fought corruption and the inconsiderate actions of the gentry that attempt to fix the poverty for most of his life. He is able to express disgust for the upper-class by the fact that they would be not only cannibalistic but go as far as to walk around in the skin of a child. These are aggressive statements that are focused on powerful class of people, however through the comedic nature in which he presents this issue he is not scorned.

Not only does he use the flaws of public figures, but Swift uses the benefits of his proposal to discuss flaws in the nation. Himself being an Irish Protestant, he expresses that there would be less papist in the kingdom, for it is their fault that there is crime and that they are the major producers of

children. This is an issue that has been in public for a great deal of time in Ireland and he merely continues to agree with the public. Secondly, the poor will possess something of value that will enable them to pay their debts, satisfying the landlords.

Yet again, pointing out the greed of the landlords. The sale of children will procure an increase of fifty thousand pounds per year, boosting the economy, touching on poor state of the Irish economy. The “ breeders” of this crop will no bear the burden more than a year, a growing season. The sale of children in the taverns and the stylized methods of preparing the meat will also boost the economy, because they will become desired and frequently visited. Finally, marriages would become more successful.

With this, they would be able to provide for the children they keep, as well as the financial burden of excess children will not negatively affect one’s marriage. Therefore, divorce or separation rates will not be so high; there would be greater appreciation between the husband and wife. As state previously, these are very important issues that are spun in a comedic method as to not offend but as to reveal the sad truth behind the actions of which Swift proposes. What were the current conditions of Ireland, under the United Kingdom rule, are not free from Swift either.

The use of taxation, prevention of education, only allowing purchase of items produced in England, suppression of Irish pride, national turmoil, lack of mercy for tenants, and the lack of trained retailers are just some of the issues that Swift shows that are public knowledge but uses his ability to satirize them as “ unimportant issues. ” Although Swift does not give further

attention to these issues it is through his lack of attention that he reveals how the public and people are letting such important laws and treatment continue on the Irish people without reaction.

Swift is indeed the master of satire. It has been said that his work is so unique that there is little else to compare to it. Indeed, most writers do not take their satire to such extremes, but by doing so Swift evoked change and stayed true to the goals of satire: " the best satire does not seek to do harm or damage by its ridicule... but rather it seeks to create a shock of recognition and to make vice repulsive so that the vice will be expunged from the person or society intended to benefit by the attack... whenever possible, this shock of recognition is to be conveyed through laughter or wit... " (Friedman). Through the use of satire the uninformed are educated, a following is created, followed by the demand for change. Even though the power of satire has faded over the centuries it was an essential and effective tool in making an impact on the ways of society. Through the use of humor and in-your-face realism writers, such as Swift, are able to criticize their communities, nations, and friends without the intent to offend but to educate.