

# The means of persuasion in "a modest proposal"



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On the surface, Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" (1729) suggests that the most convenient method for dealing with the starving children of Ireland is to convert them into useful — and edible — members of society. His horrid proposal recommends "plumping" babies up until they reach the age of one, and then selling them as food for the rich. Swift then concludes that implementing this project will do more to solve Ireland's social, economic, and political problems than any measure previously offered. Beneath the surface of the essay, it seems that Swift is venting his aggravation towards the Irish people for their inability to take action on their own. He is covertly claiming that the Irish must come up with a logical way to better their weak economic situation, so that the poor are not "eaten alive." Throughout, Swift uses careful rhetoric in his writing to argue for his overt proposal. He effectively exploits the three rhetorical appeals known as pathos, logos, and ethos throughout the piece to make his bizarre idea seem convincing and logical.

These three persuasion tactics, also titled the "artistic proofs" by Aristotle, date back to ancient Greece and are used to convince and persuade an audience: all three are now established as crucial techniques in the art of rhetoric. Pathos is the Greek word for "experience" and "suffering," and it is used to manipulate a reader's emotions by raising sympathy or stirring anger. Logos is the Greek term for "word" and is used to convince readers by means of logic and reason. Ethos is the Greek word for "character," and it is used to convince readers that the author is credible and reliable. Johnathan Swift was thoroughly trained in classical rhetoric at Kilkenny

School and Trinity College, Dublin (Beaumont). Therefore, it is not surprising that he is able to exploit these methods in an effective manner.

Swift begins to implement his rhetorical techniques and control the readers by manipulating them with pathos. He “ Illustrates the dominance of his rhetorical method over his subject matter” (Rogal), by raising sympathy. The first sentence of the essay reads, “ It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for alms.” Here, Swift has already activated the emotions of the audience, and his readers are beginning to feel sorrow for the misfortune of the poor. He continues to control his readers with a strong statement, “ There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas!” Now, not only has he continued to captivate the readers with sympathy, but he has also invoked an anger that will cause them to support him.

As important as Swift’s use of pathos is his ongoing delivery of factual information, or his use of logos. Logos is commonly developed by constructing a logical argument; naturally, most of Swift’s persuasive piece is a significant illustration of logos. He shares precise information and specific statistics throughout the essay to support his proposal. For example, throughout his fifth paragraph he makes a few calculations, stating, “ The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple

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whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couples who are able to maintain their own children..." This is one of the many statistical surveys that Swift offers during his proposal. His well-presented information makes his argument seem very logical, thus influencing his audience immensely.

Throughout the piece, Swift also proves that he is a credible source by displaying his character and establishing himself as the "projector" of his modest proposal, thus demonstrating proper use of ethos. The persona that he assumes is "humane, self-confident, reasonable, competent, and somewhat exhausted in his attempts to improve his native kingdom" (Beaumont). He exemplifies his humanity in the opening words of the essay by raising pity for the poor children of Ireland, and by sharing that he feels sorry for them. He is also very humble throughout his proposal, stating, "I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection" (Swift). Swift's narrator not only exhibits his humility, but also his fair-mindedness throughout his piece. He proclaims, "After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinions as to reject any offer proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual" (Swift). The last example of Swift's proper use of ethos is that he shows sincerity and unselfishness in his closing paragraph. He writes, "I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country..." These examples display Swift's character, and they encourage the audience to believe that he is reliable.

Although Swift uses pathos, logos, and ethos in his satire to discuss his apparent proposal, he also uses these persuasive techniques as well as underlying irony to argue what his work is actually about: the need for a logical solution to solve Ireland's tragic economic state. By illustrating his outrageous plan to sell impoverished babies for food, he actually sheds light on the deeper issue at hand. Even the title, "A Modest Proposal," suggests that what he is proposing is refined and timid, when in reality it is absurd. Swift captures the reader's attention and directs the reader's moral compass through this elaborately 'modest proposal.'

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