

Swifts a modest proposal

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Jonathan Swift: "A Modest Proposal." Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is a satire condemning the attitude of the ruling aristocracy towards the impoverished people of Ireland. Swift proposes that poor children be sold in the market as food for the wealthy. This "surprise ending" follows an introduction couched in practical tones. After the surprise, the reader becomes aware of the irony in the writing.

Jonathan Swift: "A Modest Proposal."

"A Modest Proposal" is Jonathan Swift's scathing satire, indicting the ruthless indifference of the ruling Protestant aristocracy to the sufferings of Ireland's poor Catholic population. The writer begins by ruing the prevalence of beggars and impoverished children and proposes to submit a "cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the common-wealth" (Swift, para 2, 1729). Starting on this apparently straightforward note, Swift adopts a tone of practical economics and moral righteousness, which prompts the reader to expect him to list some realistic solution. Swift couches his proposal in terms of apparent objectivity, economic calculation and statistical data.

However, the reader tends to be uncertain about the writer's true motivation, and there is a suspicious undertone of irony in the passage where Swift declares "we neither build houses nor cultivate land" (para 6, 1729). This suspicion is further strengthened when he goes on to speak of young children in terms of a "saleable commodity" (para 7, 1729). However, Swift succeeds in hiding his real agenda. As the reader is lulled by his argumentative tone, the "surprise ending" of Swift's proposal comes as an unexpected jolt: he proposes that poor children be sold on the market as food for wealthy landlords.

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Although the “ surprise ending” of the writer’s proposal is unexpected, Swift is unable to validate his suggestion. It is now evident that the writer is using satire as a weapon and the piece is not to be taken at its literal or face value. Swift’s proposal is an attack on the prevailing social relations in Ireland, the widespread poverty, the indifference of absentee landlords, and their exploitation of the peasants, and British oppression of the Irish nation. The reader is quick to grasp that Swift’s actual proposal to alleviate the misery of Ireland is stated in paragraph 29: taxation of absentee landlords, use of locally manufactured goods, nationalism, unity and virtue. Swift’s “ A Modest Proposal” is a satirical attempt to rouse the conscience of the reader to the plight of the impoverished Irish.

References.

Swift, Jonathan. 1729. “ A Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the publick.” The Victorian Web. Accessed from <http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/swift/modest.html>.

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