

British Literature & Composition
C. Hightower

Satire/"A Modest Proposal"
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Satirist Jonathan Swift

Who is Jonathan Swift? **Jonathan Swift is one of England's greatest Satirist. He is the principal prose writer of the early 18th Century. In his writings he defends the Irish against the oppressive policies of their English rulers.**

1. Read Swift's biography on page 486 of the text book Elements of Literature 6th edition, write 4 facts about Jonathan Swift which you consider interesting .
2. What was Swift's aim in writing?

Satire

"A Modest Proposal"

3. Read "A Modest Proposal" Study Guide
4. Read "A Modest Proposal" An Introduction
5. Read "A Modest Proposal"
6. Complete "A Modest Proposal" Satire Graphic Organizer
7. Write a brief essay analyzing "A Modest Proposal." Include what issue is exposed/criticized, the satirical devices used, and the reformation/change sought.

Satire

8. Read Boyle's "Top of the Food Chain." Write a main idea statement of this reading and use textual evidence to support your assertion.

A Modest Proposal Study Guide

By Michael J. Cummings

Historical Background

Over the centuries, England gradually gained a foothold in Ireland. In 1541, the parliament in Dublin recognized England's Henry VIII, a Protestant, as King of Ireland. In spite of repeated uprisings by Irish Catholics, English Protestants acquired more and more estates in Ireland. By 1703, they owned all but ten percent of the land. Meanwhile, legislation was enacted that severely limited the rights of the Irish to hold government office, purchase real estate, get an education, and advance themselves in other ways. As a result, many Irish fled to foreign lands, including America. Most of those who remained in Ireland lived in poverty, facing disease, starvation, and prejudice. It was this Ireland—an Ireland of the tyrannized and the downtrodden—that Jonathan Swift attempted to focus attention on in "A Modest Proposal" in 1720.

"People are the riches of a nation"

At the start of a new industrial age in the 18th century, it was believed that "people are the riches of the nation", and there was a general faith in an economy that paid its workers low wages because high wages meant workers would work less. Furthermore, "in the mercantilist view no child was too young to go into industry". In those times, the "somewhat more humane attitudes of an earlier day had all but disappeared and the laborer had come to be regarded as a commodity".

Type of Work

"A Modest Proposal" is an essay that uses satire to make its point. A satire is a literary work that attacks or pokes fun at vices, abuses, stupidity, and/or any other fault or imperfection. Satire may make the reader laugh at, or feel disgust for, the person or thing satirized. Impishly or sardonically, it criticizes someone or something, using wit and clever wording—and sometimes makes outrageous assertions or claims. The main purpose of a satire is to spur readers to remedy the problem under discussion. The main weapon of the satirist is verbal irony, a figure of speech in which words are used to ridicule a person or thing by conveying a meaning that is the opposite of what the words say.

The essay was originally printed in the form of a pamphlet. At the time of its publication, 1729, a pamphlet was a short work that took a stand on a political, religious, or social issue—or any other issue of public interest. A typical pamphlet had no binding, although it sometimes had a paper cover. Writers of pamphlets, called pamphleteers, played a significant role in inflaming or resolving many of the great controversies in Europe in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, as well as in the political debate leading up to the American Revolution.

In addition to "A Modest Proposal," Jonathan Swift wrote many political pamphlets supporting the causes of the Tory political party after he renounced his allegiance to the Whig party.

Purpose

Jonathan Swift wrote "A Modest Proposal" to call attention to abuses inflicted on Irish Catholics by well-to-do English Protestants. Swift himself was a Protestant, but he was also a native of Ireland, having been born in Dublin of English parents. He believed England was exploiting and oppressing Ireland.... Many Irishmen worked farms owned by Englishmen who charged high

rents—so high that the Irish were frequently unable to pay them. Consequently, many Irish farming families continually lived on the edge of starvation.

"A Modest Proposal": An Introduction

David Cody, Associate Professor of English, Hartwick College

Swift's motives for writing "A Modest Proposal", which appeared in 1729, were complex. He felt, for his own part, that he had been exiled to Ireland when he would have much preferred to have been in England, and his personal sense of the wrongs he had received at the hands of the English only intensified the anger he felt at the way England mistreated Ireland. Though he was most concerned with the plight of his own class, the relatively prosperous Anglo-Irish who were members of the Church of Ireland, rather than that of the Irish Presbyterians of Ulster or that of the Roman Catholics who made up the largest, and the poorest, segment of the Irish population, he spoke, in the end, for the country as a whole. He lived in an Ireland which was a colony, politically, militarily, and economically dependent upon England. It was manifestly in England's interest to keep things as they were: a weak Ireland could not threaten England, and the measures which kept it weak were profitable for the English. As a result Ireland was a desperately poor country, overpopulated, full, as Swift said, of beggars, wracked periodically by famine, heavily taxed, and with no say at all in its own affairs. England controlled the Irish legislature. English absentee landlords owned most of the land which was worth owning. Irish manufacturies were deliberately crippled so that they could not compete with those in England.

Swift was enraged at the passivity of the Irish people, who had become so habituated to the situation that they seemed incapable of making any effort to change it. The Irish Parliament ignored numerous proposals which Swift made in earnest — proposals to tax absentee landlords, to encourage Irish industries, to improve the land, agricultural techniques, and the quality of manufactured goods — which would have begun to rectify things.

"A Modest Proposal," then, is at once a disgusted parody of Swift's own serious proposals, as well as those of less disinterested "projectors," and a savage indictment both of the exploitive English and of the exploited Irish. Rhetorically, it is enormously sophisticated; requiring that we accept and reject its central premise at one and the same time. In it Swift owes a debt to Defoe's "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters": behind the role-playing, behind the semblance of quietly realistic humanitarianism and calm reasonableness lies a savage indignation directed at the exploiter as well as an implicit compassion for the exploited. Behind the "Modest Proposer," that is, stands an enraged and sardonic Swift, asking both sides whether the whole matter is not merely a question of degree; a question of the extent to which a human being — the manipulator or the manipulated — can be dehumanized. Once the process of dehumanization gets underway, as it obviously is, in a country in which no one — not even the unfortunates themselves — seems to mind or object to the fact that tens of thousands of human beings starve to death each year, where can one calmly, sanely, and logically draw the line and say thus far and no farther? "A Modest Proposal" is a manifestation of Swift's sense of anger and frustration, and as such it is merely the most savage, the most brutal, the most heavily ironic, of the numerous tracts which he produced during the early eighteenth century in an attempt to shame England and to shock Ireland out of its lethargic state. It is a ghastly masterpiece, cunningly devised, horribly plausible, deviously manipulative: it remains for the reader to come to terms with it, to comprehend it, and to determine the extent to which, oddly enough, it might be relevant in our own world.