




# A MODEST PROPOSAL

by  
**Jonathan Swift**



FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND  
FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY, AND  
FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLICK



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1729



# Complete Title

- .....The complete title of "A Modest Proposal" is:
  - ☐ "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."



# Historical Background

## *Abridged Version*

- Ireland under British rule since 1171
- Ireland =majority Irish Catholic
- England (and Irish minority)= Protestant
- England controlled Irish Parliament and passed laws limiting the rights of Irish Catholics
- British trade policies crippled Irish economy
- Swift= advocated for Ireland, especially at the height of terrible Irish famine and absurd British tax on the poor



# 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.



# Historical Background

- 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.



# Historical Background

- ..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.



# Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

- Born in Dublin, Ireland
- Protestant
- Traveled back and forth between Ireland and England
- In Ireland: modest income as an Anglican priest
- In England: wished to be accepted in to literary society
- Accepted in England as a literary “great” for his fictional Satire, *Gulliver’s Travels*



# Pamphlets

- During this time, many writers wrote and published pamphlets with proposals to solve the economic problems in Ireland
- Swift parodied the style and method of the other writers
- His purpose was to blame the Irish, his audience, whom he thought were apathetic and needed a call to action









# 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.

# Purpose

- .....In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift satirizes the English landlords with outrageous humor, proposing that Irish infants be sold as food at age one, when they are plump and healthy, to give the Irish a new source of income and the English a new food product to bolster their economy and eliminate a social problem.



# Purpose

- He says his proposal, if adopted, would also result in a reduction in the number of Catholics in Ireland
  - since most Irish infants—almost all of whom were baptized Catholic—would end up in stews and other dishes instead of growing up to go to Catholic churches.
  - Here, he is satirizing the prejudice of Protestants toward Catholics.



# Purpose

- Swift also satirizes the Irish themselves in his essay, for too many of them had accepted abuse stoically rather than taking action on their own behalf.