

## "A Modest Proposal"

Swift published the Modest Proposal in 1729. At this time, and for many years afterward, Ireland (not an independent country) was far poorer than England. Most people born there were Roman Catholics and employed as agricultural labourers or tenant farmers. The landlords were paid from the produce of the land, at rates which the workers could rarely afford. The landowning class were usually Protestants. Many of them were not born in Ireland, nor did they live there permanently. If the labourers lost their work, there would always be other poor people to take it up. There was no social security system and starvation was as common as in the Third World today. Swift knows, in writing the Proposal, that in living memory, Irish people had been driven to cannibalism.

### What does Swift propose in this pamphlet?

The Modest Proposal begins by describing the very real poverty of people in Ireland. Swift presents this quite sympathetically but sets out facts and details, showing that there is a "surplus" of children who cannot be fed. He considers the possibility of selling the children into slavery, but objects to this - not because it is cruel or wrong, but because no-one will buy children below twelve years of age. This means that there is a long period in which the children cannot be fed, because their parents are too poor, but are too small and weak to be sold into work. Next he digresses to make the shocking claim that, according to an American whom he knows, a healthy child at one year old is: "a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome Food, whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked or Boyled".

From this beginning, Swift proceeds to develop his scheme of breeding children for food. For example, he states that landlords will be popular with tenants because they will be able to pay them more, to buy the children for the table. He reasons that, by selling their children so soon, mothers will be able to go back to work, until they produce the next child. He notes that, as Catholics seem to breed more rapidly than Protestants, his scheme will help reduce their numbers - as most of the children sold for food will be "Papists" (Catholic). And he suggests that some purchasers will not only wish to eat the children, but will flay the skin and make gloves or boots from it, as from a fine leather.

Swift considers the possibility of eating older children, but decides against it - the boys would be tough and lean, while the girls would be near to the time when they could "become Breeders themselves", and it would be best to let them do so. He moves to list six reasons why his scheme is a good one. Before concluding he advises people not to suggest other solutions - like taxing absentee landlords, of encouraging the domestic economy by buying Irish goods, of discouraging pride, vanity, idleness and gambling, and generally of expecting the wealthy to be more compassionate to the poor. He argues finally, that an early death would have been preferable to the misery many poor people experience in their adult lives. And he claims to be quite impartial, because his oldest child is nine and his wife past child-bearing - so that he will not be able to make any profit by selling his own

"A Modest Proposal" on the surface follows the classical elements of persuasive writing that we use today. His essay is still regarded as a model for writers of essays

and editorials. However, with careful attention to his audience and a few clever tricks, Swift uses these classical elements to his own purpose, and the reader is caught in a persuasive trap.

### **The Audience**

The last half of the eighteenth century has been called the Neoclassical Age, a time when writers and leaders looked to the Roman and Greek classics for their ideals in writing and in common life. These classical writings called for self-control and a peaceful life surrounded by selected friends. However, Swift saw his country as a sad contrast to this classic ideal. He saw moral emptiness, political corruption, and gross abuse of power by the wealthy landowners. In this essay, he points out these abuses, but he knows that his readers would quickly reject any direct accusations, so he gradually pulls them into his essay - until they are caught in his trap.

### **The Point of View**

Swift's satirical piece makes reference to the attempts of the English to resolve problems in Ireland, yet with the force of English prejudice against the Irish holding them back. While maintaining a serious and sincere tone throughout the text, Swift's outlandish proposal makes for dark humor. The reader must ask himself how anyone could propose such a solution.

### **The Form**

Writing during a time when objectivity and self-control were revered, Swift writes his essay using the style of the formal proposal. In Swift's case, the ancient, classical form helps to disguise radical new ideas.

The basis of a persuasive proposal is:

1. A clearly-defined problem.
2. A proposed solution – a clear thesis
3. Convincing argument supported by facts, examples, and opinions of recognized authorities
4. Recognition of opposing viewpoints - anticipating objections and allaying fears of the opposition
5. Comparison of proposed solution to alternatives
6. A controlled tone – rational, specific, avoiding exaggerations, never quarrelsome

### **SATIRE**

A satire holds bad or foolish things up to ridicule: it employs humor and wit to criticize human institutions or humanity itself, in order that they might be remodeled or improved. Satire as an English literary form derives in large part from Greek and Roman literature. The eighteenth century, in which poetry, drama, essays, and literary criticism were all imbued with the form, was the golden age of English satire.

### **IRONY**

What the writer says literally (surface meaning) is quite different from what he really believes (deep or underlying meaning) and the reader is expected to see this.

## Glossary

- Chair: (Here) a Sedan Chair - a covered chair supported by poles, carried by two bearers.
- Episcopal: To do with (here appointed by) a bishop - the adjective refers to church administration at the time Swift wrote.
- Gibbet: Place where criminals are hanged.
- Mandarin: Important official serving an oriental (originally Chinese) ruler, or any high official today.
- Papists: Supporters of the Pope, an insulting name for Catholics.
- Pretender: James Stuart, a Catholic who pretended to (claimed) the English and Scottish thrones.
- Shambles: Place (usually in a town) where animals are slaughtered and butchered.
- Solar year: A year in the ordinary sense (as measured by the earth's going once round the sun).