

A Modest Proposal



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JONATHAN SWIFT

Jonathan Swift was born in 1667. His father, a Protestant Englishman who moved to Dublin during a period of increasing English settlement in Ireland, died just months before Swift was born. Despite this, and thanks to the generosity of a few relatives, Swift received the best education possible in Ireland. He attended Trinity College, Dublin, received a Master of Arts degree from Oxford, in England, and was eventually ordained as an Anglican priest. As a young man, Swift shuttled between Ireland and England often. During this period he became increasingly invested in English politics. He gained notoriety for his impassioned essays on religion and all matters of domestic and foreign policy, and for his works of biting satire. *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), his first major prose work, mocked intellectual pedants and religious fanatics alike. In 1713 Swift was appointed as the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and in 1714 he settled permanently in Ireland. Swift was sympathetic to the plight of Irish Catholics under English rule, and wrote frequently in defense of their cause. His frustration with the political situation in Ireland culminated in *A Modest Proposal* (1729), a bitter and darkly hilarious satire of English indifference to the suffering of the Irish poor. Today, Jonathan Swift is most remembered for *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), his complex, fantastical parody of utopian literature and early-modern travel narratives. He died in 1745.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Jonathan Swift was born, Ireland had been subject to English rule, treated as a colony of the English crown, since the 12th century. When England became a Protestant country under Henry VIII in the 16th century, the vast majority of Irish remained Roman Catholic, and English rule became much harsher. A series of "penal laws," which were meant to encourage the Catholic Irish to convert to Protestantism, rendered the native population disenfranchised and destitute. In 1627 all Irish Catholics were denied the right to vote. Strict inheritance laws dramatically reduced Catholic land ownership: in 1703 the Catholic majority held only 14% of the land, down from 59% in 1641. By the time Jonathan Swift penned *A Modest Proposal*, poverty and famine were widespread in Ireland, and many of the poor Irish had resorted to begging in the streets.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A Modest Proposal was most obviously written in reaction to the

flood of political essays written and circulated in early 18th-century England. Daniel Defoe's *An Essay Upon Projects* (1697), a series of proposals for the social and economic improvement of England, is a clear target of Swift's satire. (Swift considered Defoe his biggest literary rival.) In addition, Michel de Montaigne's famous essay *Of the Cannibals* (1580), in which the French essayist argues that the cannibalism practiced by the Tupinamba people in Brazil is no worse than the barbarism of their European conquerors, might be considered an influence.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Modest Proposal For Preventing the Children of Poor People From Being a Burthen to their Parents, Or the Country, and For Making Them Beneficial to the Publick
- **When Written:** 1729
- **Where Written:** Dublin, Ireland
- **When Published:** 1729
- **Literary Period:** Enlightenment / Augustan Literature
- **Genre:** Satirical essay / Polemic / Argumentative essay
- **Setting:** Dublin, Ireland
- **Climax:** The proposer, while trying to defend his call for cannibalism as the only possible solution to the crisis in Ireland, unknowingly gives a strong argument for the many sensible alternatives to his proposal.
- **Antagonist:** The Anglo-Irish ruling class / the Irish poor / humankind
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

You can't hide behind a pseudonym. Despite the anonymity of the original pamphlet, many readers of "A Modest Proposal" knew immediately that Swift was behind it.

Famous Family. Jonathan Swift was a distant cousin to Jonathan Dryden, then one of the most famous poets in England.



PLOT SUMMARY

Ireland is in crisis. Throughout Dublin and across the country, the Irish people live in poverty and squalor. Many women, unable to find work, have resorted to begging, many of them trailing their young children behind them. The Proposer, the anonymous speaker of the essay, sees these children—who probably number in the hundreds of thousands, and who cannot be supported by their parents—as a great burden to the

public. Their mere existence poses an extremely difficult problem.

Not to worry, though: the Proposer has an ingenious solution! This solution, he promises, will ensure not only that the children of beggars become contributing members of society, but it will also ensure that *all* the children of Ireland's poor will be rescued from their sorry condition.

So, what is this genius plan? Simple, the Proposer explains: those mothers who cannot provide for their children will rear them for one year, then sell them to wealthy men of taste. These wealthy men will slaughter the infants and eat them. The Proposer's friend, an American, has informed him that infant flesh is, in fact, delicious.

As the Proposer sees it, this one quick fix will bring about many improvements to society. For one, the mothers will be able to sell their young children at a considerable profit, as it costs little to rear a child for one year. These mothers, some of them beggars, others indebted to their landlords, will thus be lifted out of poverty. The profits overall will boost the Irish economy, as the children are an entirely domestic product, their flesh being too delicate to export. Further, the great majority of Irish poor are Catholic, so the sale and consumption of their children will limit the Catholic population, a group that the Proposer sees as especially wicked. Finally, the Irish public will learn to value marriage, as husbands will come to treat their wives as prized livestock.

The Proposer refuses to take seriously any objections to his plan. The alternative plans that can be proposed in its stead—such as improving manufacturing in Ireland, taxing landlords who do not themselves live in the country, instilling in the public values of temperance, prudence, and love of country—strike him as clearly impossible to put into effect. Further, the Proposer promises us that he is speaking in complete earnest. He stands to gain nothing personally from his plan, as his own child is no longer an infant, and his wife is now too old to bear more children.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Proposer – The unnamed speaker in *A Modest Proposal* is not Jonathan Swift himself, though at first he may appear to be. Rather, he is an exaggerated persona meant to represent a class of people whom Swift especially disdained. The Proposer appears to be a wealthy, highly educated, Protestant Englishman with little regard for the humanity of Ireland's Catholic poor. He is a fastidious but entirely deluded planner, whose grand designs for the improvement of Irish society fail to take into account the most basic assumptions of human decency and morality.

George Psalmanazar – Psalmanazar is, in fact, a historical

figure. He was a French literary imposter who claimed to be a native of Taiwan (then called “Formosa”) and wrote a made-up account of his travels. By the time *A Modest Proposal* was written, Psalmanazar had been exposed as a fraud. The Proposer is apparently unaware of this development, and writes that the “very worthy person” got his ideas from Psalmanazar.

The Pretender – The Pretender, mentioned twice, is James Francis Edward Stuart, the son of the recently deposed King James II. (King James II was replaced as the leader of England by William III and Mary II in what was known as the Glorious Revolution of 1688.) James Francis Edward Stuart, a Roman Catholic with the support of the Pope, claimed to be the true heir of the British throne, though that claim was denied by the Protestant English (hence the nickname they called him by: The Pretender). Because he was Catholic, he was favored by the Catholic population of Ireland, and became a figure of hope and revolution for them, and much hated by the English.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The American – This mysterious character is mentioned only briefly. A friend of the Proposer's, he is the first to suggest to him that the flesh of infants is edible and, in fact, delicious.

A Very Worthy Person – This is another friend of the Proposer's. This “worthy person” suggests that the lean flesh of teenagers may be a fitting substitute for venison (deer meat), which has lately become scarce in Ireland.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



SATIRE AND SINCERITY

Today we regard “A Modest Proposal” as a seminal work of Western satire—satire being the use of humor or irony to reveal and criticize the evils of society. Though Swift wrote the tract in response to the specific social conditions afflicting his native Ireland, its bitter humor shocks and delights as much now as it did in 1729, when it circulated the streets of Dublin as an anonymous pamphlet. The power of Swift's satire resides in the intensity of his verbal irony—that is, his ability to say one thing and mean precisely the opposite.

In large part, the humor of “A Modest Proposal” arises from the enormous gap between the cool, rational, self-righteous voice of the speaker and the obvious repulsiveness of his proposal:

that the infant children of Ireland's poor be raised as livestock, slaughtered, and sold as food to the wealthy, who will enjoy them as a tasty delicacy. No reader, no matter her personal values or political allegiances, will be able to take seriously the speaker's proposal. Thus, the reader's engagement with the text will consist in constantly looking *beyond* what is said in search of what is *meant*—or, to put it another way, looking for a sincere message hiding behind the obvious satire.

One way to understand the text's irony—this discrepancy between saying and meaning—is to imagine the speaker as a fictional persona (call him “the Proposer”) who is totally distinct from Jonathan Swift, the author. The Proposer truly believes in the genius of his plan, and seems oblivious to the fact that it will strike any sane person as monstrous.

Yet, at a few moments in the text, it is possible to recognize Swift's own voice and ideas sneaking around or through the Proposer's ludicrous suggestions, advancing instead Swift's own sincere convictions. This happens in the opening paragraphs of the essay, when Swift can be heard speaking alongside the Proposer—it is safe to say that both he and the Proposer share a mutual concern for the state of society in Ireland. This agreement makes the Proposer's sudden endorsement of cannibalism all the more shocking and hilarious when it finally arrives. It is important to note that, in 1729, political pamphlets often made the rounds in Ireland, many of them offering earnest if somewhat misguided solutions to the social ills plaguing the country. Accordingly, the first readers of “A Modest Proposal” might not have caught on to the essay's satirical intent until they reached the speaker's startling claim that the flesh of an infant could make a fine “ragout,” a type of stew.

In what is perhaps the climax of the essay, Swift presents his own sincere (you might also say “actual”) thoughts on how best to resolve the situation in Ireland. But he does so backhandedly. Rather than state his proposal outright, he embeds it within the Proposer's dismissal of any and all solutions that do not involve eating children. These alternatives, which the Proposer criticizes as impossible, will strike the reader as exceedingly reasonable, not to mention humane. The literary term for this rhetorical move—advancing an argument by pretending to refuse it—is apophasis, Greek for literally “speaking off.”



COLONIALISM, GREED, AND INHUMANITY

Beginning in the 12th century, England ruled its neighboring island Ireland, essentially treating it as a colony. English rule grew increasingly oppressive as it became a Protestant country, while the vast majority of the Irish remained Catholic. By 1729, Irish Catholics, though greater in number than their Protestant rulers, owned less of the land, and they couldn't vote. To put it simply, a minority of wealthy,

Protestant Englishman held all the power over a disenfranchised Irish-Catholic majority.

“A Modest Proposal” relentlessly lampoons this wealthy, educated, English, Protestant ruling class—a class, it should be mentioned, to which Swift himself partly belonged. Swift paints this group as vain, pompous, predatory, and disastrously out of touch with the humanity of the lower classes. The Proposer serves as the chief representative of this class. What he has in learning and rhetorical skill he seems to utterly lack in common sense and morality. He is blind not only to the clear ethical problems posed by his suggestions to cure the economic crisis through cannibalism, but also to the fact that anyone reading his pamphlet will quickly judge him to be psychotic.

At the same time, the Proposer's inclination towards cannibalism illustrates, in painfully literal terms, the power dynamic between English colonial rule and the widely impoverished Irish populace. In Ireland, the wealthy were *already* (figuratively) devouring the poor. There is not much difference, Swift suggests, between the everyday activities of Ireland's rich and the Proposer's literal cannibalism. Like so many 18th-century colonialists, the Proposer cannot conceive of colonized people as anything other commodities, to be sold, bought, and eventually consumed.

In all, the Proposer serves as a caricature of the English colonial powers in Ireland, who Swift seems to suggest are inherently cannibalistic, exploitative, and inhumanly indifferent to the suffering of the colonized Irish.



SOCIETY, RATIONALITY, AND IRRATIONALITY

Not only does “A Modest Proposal” satirize the casual evil of the English rich and the hopelessness of the Irish poor, it also satirizes the culture of pamphleteering and political grandstanding that flourished in response to the crisis in Ireland. In 18th-century England and Ireland, it was common practice for the civic-minded to write short essays on all matters of politics, which they would then distribute among the public in the form of cheaply printed pamphlets. Many of these pamphlets tried to engineer simple solutions to extraordinarily complex and pervasive social problems, often making use of shoddy statistics and wild speculation to support their claims.

Swift uses the character of the Proposer to satirize this tendency towards social engineering. The Proposer arrives at his solution through a series of calculations which may or may not have any basis in reality. He seems obsessed by numbers, and constantly refers back to the math of the situation—how many poor children are born annually, how much an average infant weighs, how much money the Irish collectively owe in debt to their English landlords—to support the perfect rationality of his morally reprehensible suggestions. In one

sense, it seems that the Proposer's methods, which are abstract, mathematical, and hyper-rational, have actually led him to his monstrous conclusion. In his excited pursuit of the best possible fix, the Proposer seems to have forgotten the most basic assumptions of human morality.

The Enlightenment, during which Swift wrote "A Modest Proposal," was a period of renewed faith in the powers of human reason. Following the incredible advancements and discoveries made by scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers such as Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and David Hume, intellectuals across Europe began to trust that man could cure all of society's ills, and, indeed, that the world could be perfected. Jonathan Swift didn't by any means lack faith in reason, but his outlook was ultimately much bleaker than that of most Enlightenment thinkers. As he famously wrote to his good friend, the poet Alexander Pope, Swift saw man not as an *animal rationale*—an inherently rational animal—but as *rationis capax*—an animal capable, on occasion, of reason.



MISANTHROPY (HATRED OF HUMANKIND)

In a letter to his friend, the poet Alexander Pope, Swift famously wrote, "I have ever hated all nations, professions, and communities, and all my love is toward individuals: for instance, I hate the tribe of lawyers, but I love Counsellor Such-a-one, and Judge Such-a-one: so with physicians—I will not speak of my own trade—soldiers, English, Scotch, French, and the rest. But principally I hate and detest that animal called man, although I heartily love John, Peter, Thomas, and so forth."

Swift is perhaps the most famous misanthrope in the history of English literature. As mentioned previously "A Modest Proposal" most obviously lampoons the colonial powers in Ireland. But less obvious—and perhaps less comfortable for us as readers—are the ways in which the essay also satirizes the poor. As becomes clear in Swift's backhanded disclosure of his *actual* suggestions for dealing with the crisis in Ireland, he tends to think of the Irish population as depraved, self-loathing, and unable to organize on their own behalf. He is disgusted by the way Irish husbands treat their wives, and he really does hate Catholics (though he isn't about to kill any of them). In this sense, he spares neither the English nor the Irish from his biting satire.

With this in mind, one could argue that the absurdity of the proposed cannibalism illustrates not just the evils of English colonial rule, nor just the basic hopelessness of the Irish situation, but in fact the depravity of humanity in general. For Swift, the world is utterly and irreversibly fallen, and even on their best days humans are little more than beasts. Therefore, even as he proposes it in total irony, Swift seems also to be genuinely asking: why doesn't humanity, given all of its terrible

faults, deserve cannibalism?



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



EATING

Eating is an important symbol throughout "A Modest Proposal," illustrating in painfully literal terms the predatory behavior of the upper classes, and colonial powers more generally. For the Proposer, resorting to cannibalism is just a natural extension of the daily activities of landlords and aristocrats. In addition, Swift uses the symbol of eating to paint humankind as fundamentally bestial creatures—creatures not inherently rational but only capable of reason on rare occasions.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications, Inc. edition of *A Modest Proposal and Other Satirical Works* published in 1996.

A Modest Proposal Quotes

●● 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 an alms.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

"A Modest Proposal" opens with this sentence. The Proposer does not delay in explaining what has moved him to write: the Irish commonwealth is in peril, and Irish mothers are begging in the streets. Swift's use of the demonstrative phrase "this great town" situates the essay firmly in its context. "A Modest Proposal" originally circulated Dublin as an anonymous pamphlet, so all of its first readers would have immediately understood which "great town" the speaker was referring to. Indeed, the Proposer seems to be appealing to a sense of community,

inviting the reader into a circle of concerned citizens. And while the Proposer's description of streets "crowded with beggars" is somewhat overblown, the reader will have a hard time seeing his concern as anything but earnest. For the time being, at least, the Proposer and the reader are on the same page.

●● As to my own part, having turned my thoughts for many years upon this important subject, and maturely weighed the several schemes of our projectors, I have always found them grossly mistaken in their computation.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

As the Proposer prepares to unveil his plan, he places himself—perhaps unwillingly—in the company of “projectors.” This term describes a specific group of political writers who in the late 17th and early 18th centuries took to writing proposals for various “projects”—vast social programs and reforms, often overzealous and poorly conceived, that were meant to cure society of its ills. These projectors tended to base their proposals in crackpot demography and primitive statistical methods with little bearing on reality. The Proposer wants to distance himself from these methods—as he says, the projectors are “grossly mistaken in their computation.” However, as we soon find out, the Proposer's own computations are completely ridiculous, perhaps even fabricated. Thus, he comes across as oblivious to his own stupidity, distancing himself from “projectors” while proving himself to be the worst projector of all.

●● The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about 200,000 couple whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract 30,000 couple who are able to maintain their own children, (although I apprehend there cannot be so many, under the present distresses of the kingdom;) but this being granted, there will remain 170,000 breeders. I again subtract 50,000 for those women who miscarry or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain 120,000 children of poor parents annually born.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Here the Proposer presents his computations, which he has promised will serve as a worthy corrective to the “grossly mistaken” computations of his contemporaries and colleagues. The skeptical reader will certainly raise his or her eyebrows, however. Where is the Proposer getting these figures? His subtractions seem entirely arbitrary. Still, this kind of armchair demography (the study of social statistics) was fairly typical of the political writing of the day. The first readers of this paragraph might not have immediately picked up on its irony, as Swift, as usual, remains entirely deadpan and sincere even as his “proposals” grow increasingly absurd.

●● I am assured by our merchants, that a boy or a girl before twelve years old is no saleable commodity; and even when they come to this age they will not yield above 3l. or 3l. 2s. 6d. at most on the exchange; which cannot turn to account either to the parents or kingdom, the charge of nutriment and rags having been at least four times that value.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This paragraph directly precedes the Proposer's big reveal, and clues the reader in to his deeply sinister, amoral nature. In the Proposer's twisted universe, the children of Ireland's poor should not be sold into slavery—not because this would be morally repulsive, but because children before the age of twelve won't fetch a worthwhile price at auction! The Proposer clearly has trouble conceiving of the Irish poor as people, preferring to think of them as “saleable commodities.” It seems that it is this utter lack of compassion that allows him to earnestly and without reservation suggest cannibalism as a solution to poverty.

☛ I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection. I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or broiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or ragout.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker), The American

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In these two shocking paragraphs, which appear on the second page of the proposal, the Proposer abruptly unveils his plan to cure Irish society of its many ills. Until this point, the Proposer has seemed basically innocuous, if a little out of touch and certainly condescending towards the Irish poor. Now, however, he reveals himself to be nothing less than inhuman.

And, in turn, Swift wrenches his essay into the realm of satire. Here the Proposer comes across as a caricature of a morally empty aristocrat. What he boasts in rhetorical skill, refined manners, and worldliness (his friend is an American, whom he met in London), he completely lacks in empathy and basic moral insight. The delicate and fussy French terms “ragout” and “fricassee” stand in sharp contrast to the monstrous context in which they appear—lovely dishes showcasing an unspeakable ingredient.

☛ I grant that this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

The Proposer makes this assertion soon after revealing his

plan, saying that the cost of infant flesh will likely be “dear” (expensive), and so it seems appropriate that only the wealthy landlords should be able to afford it. This is the only place in the text where the connection between the literal cannibalism of the Proposer’s plan and the figurative cannibalism of the English upper class is spelled out in explicit terms. The Proposer is making what amounts to a pun: English landlords have been financially devouring their Irish tenants for years, so why don’t they start literally devouring them? In this way, the Proposer frames his plan as a matter of inertia. Swift seems to argue (almost breaking his deadpan sincerity for once) that as things stand, the English are not far off from literal cannibalism as it is now.

☛ For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being the principal breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies; and who stay at home on purpose to deliver the kingdom to the pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an episcopal curate.

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker), The Pretender

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Of all the “benefits” of the Proposer’s plan, this is the first that he lists. The Proposer’s use of the word “we” is telling. Though he means “we” to stand in for the entire nation, he clearly doesn’t mean for it to represent the papists (Catholics). This is certainly strange, because Catholics make up the majority of the Irish population. It would appear that in the Proposer’s mind, the wealthy Protestant minority—many of whom don’t even live in Ireland full-time—are the true citizens of Ireland, while Catholics are enemies of the country. The backwardness of this worldview is only compounded when the Proposer humorously suggests that the Catholics who remain at home are clearly treasonous (staying in their own country to try and deliver it to “the pretender,” James Francis Edward Stuart, a Catholic with claims to the throne), while the Protestants who evade taxes by going abroad are merely acting on their conscience.

●● Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: of taxing our absentees at 5s. a pound: of using neither clothes nor household furniture except what is of our own growth and manufacture: of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury: of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women: of introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence, and temperance: of learning to love our country, in the want of which we differ even from Laplanders and the inhabitants of Topinamboo: of quitting our animosities and factions, nor acting any longer like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their city was taken: of being a little cautious not to sell our country and conscience for nothing: of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy toward their tenants: lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers...

Related Characters: The Proposer (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

This sentence, appearing toward the end of “A Modest Proposal”, is the essay’s longest and arguably its climax. The long, impassioned string of alternative plans will read as a breath of fresh air amid the Proposer’s insistent calls for cannibalism. Jonathan Swift’s sincere convictions seem to be breaking through the Proposer’s voice, without the Proposer realizing it. Swift’s alternative suggestions focus, for the most part, on instilling good principles and values among the Irish populace and their English colonizers. In this sense these alternatives are difficult to put into practice, and this is why, it seems, the Proposer has abandoned them in favor of cannibalism, which he sees as highly practical. And though Swift seems to harbor a certain optimism here about the possibility of improving society, he is not afraid to describe the current state of humankind as utterly fallen.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A MODEST PROPOSAL

In his opening remarks, the Proposer outlines one of the biggest problems facing the Irish commonwealth: women beggars are everywhere in the streets, and many of them have children whom they cannot support. If nothing is done, these children, like their parents, will end up begging in the streets as well. But the Proposer claims to have a plan that will ensure that all the poor children of Ireland grow up to become contributing members of society.

The Proposer claims to have devoted years of careful thought to this problem. He has weighed the many other plans proposed by civic-minded gentleman like himself, but has found these plans insufficient, their “computations” inaccurate. To offer a corrective, the Proposer makes some computations of his own. The cost of supporting a child for one year is about two shillings, which any beggar can certainly manage. (Under the Proposer’s plan, the child will be released from the care of its parents after its first year.) By the Proposer’s count, there are 200,000 Irish couples who are actively “breeding.” He reckons that, of these 200,000, about 30,000 couples are able to provide for their children. An additional 50,000 lose their children to miscarriage or disease within the first year. That leaves 120,000 couples who are unable to provide for their children, which means that about 120,000 children are born into abject poverty each year. But what to do with them?

These children can’t be trained in crafts or farming, the Proposer claims, because the Irish neither build houses nor cultivate land. The children can’t support themselves by stealing, either; they’re too young! Nor is selling them into slavery an option—if only because no infant will fetch a worthwhile price at auction.

In these opening paragraphs, the Proposer comes off as fairly innocuous—he is an earnest, concerned citizen, and the problems he describes are indeed serious. In fact, it’s a little hard to tell whether there is any significant difference between the Proposer and the real writer, Jonathan Swift.



The Proposer’s complicated and apparently baseless calculations begin to suggest that he is something of a quack. He pulls his statistics out of thin air, and yet he seems to trust in them utterly. Furthermore, his flurry of calculations belies his concern for the Irish populace: he is unable to think of impoverished families as anything other than data points, perhaps even commodities. However, it’s still somewhat hard to see the distinction here between the Proposer and Jonathan Swift. This kind of off-the-cuff number crunching was common in political writing of the time period.



The Proposer’s assertion that the Irish neither build houses nor cultivate land, while clearly exaggerated, illustrates one of the effects of colonialism in Ireland: the Irish rely greatly on imported goods. In addition, the Proposer’s casual mention of slavery further reveals his total disregard for the humanity of the lower classes.



At long last, the Proposer finally unveils his own plan. He has heard from an American friend that the flesh of a one-year-old, breastfed infant is delicious. So, of the 120,000 impoverished children in Ireland, 20,000 will be reserved for breeding in order to maintain the population, while the remaining 100,000 will be reared for a year on their mother's breast milk and then sold to wealthy gentleman—who will **eat** them. In particular the children will be sold to wealthy landlords, who have “already devoured most of the parents,” and so “seem to have the best title to the children.” The mothers will turn a considerable profit by selling their offspring. If they're feeling extra entrepreneurial, they can even sell the hides of their children, which make for lovely gloves and boots!

In a stunningly dark turn, Swift's satirical intentions become immediately clear, and the reader will be shocked by the Proposer's monstrous and repulsive suggestion (and by the deadpan manner in which it is delivered). The Proposer is revealed to be a clueless and fundamentally evil member of the ruling class. His comfort with the idea of cannibalism illustrates in literal terms the figuratively cannibalistic greed of the English colonizers. The Proposer makes this connection explicit when he remarks that the (mostly English) landlords have “already devoured most of the parents”—an aside that almost seems to come from Swift himself (rather than the voice of his narrator), winking at his own satire.



The Proposer then explains that a Very Worthy Person has offered an amendment to this plan: in addition to infants, young teenagers may also be sold, slaughtered, and **eaten**. Their flesh is, apparently, similar to venison (deer meat), and the Irish deer population has recently been hunted to extinction. However, the Proposer respectfully declines this suggestion. Firstly, he argues, the flesh of teenagers is far too tough. Secondly, certain sensitive people may (wrongly, the Proposer emphasizes), see the consumption of teenagers as somewhat cruel.

In a troubling and hilarious reversal of expectations, the Proposer rejects his friend's amendment not because it strikes him as unethical, but because he doesn't believe a teenager would taste very good. At most he is worried that other people will see eating teenagers as cruel.



The Proposer wants to give his friend a little credit, however. This Very Worthy Person got his idea from George Psalmanazar, who spoke of an incident on his native island of Formosa in which a young woman was executed for treason and then **eaten** by various members of the court. Hearing this tale, the Proposer admits that he wouldn't mind if some of the plumper young women of Dublin's high society met the same fate.

The mention of Psalmanazar, whose name an 18th-century reader would have certainly recognized, further exposes the Proposer as out of touch with reality. Psalmanazar was widely known to be an imposter, a Frenchman pretending to be a native of Formosa (Taiwan), but the Proposer seems unaware of this. In addition, the Proposer's suggestion that the female members of his own class be eaten introduces the theme of more general misanthropy.



The Proposer acknowledges that while his plan will take care of all the impoverished children, it fails to account for all the many aging, sick, disabled, and starving adults in Ireland. How will they be provided for? The Proposer shrugs this question off, reasoning that the old and sick are nearing death anyway. Soon they will no longer be a burden to the country.

Here the Proposer doubles down on his disregard for the lower classes, revealing that he doesn't much care if the old and sick simply die. He seems to regard them as eyesores and burdens to the public, not humans in their own right.



Now the Proposer begins to list in detail the many advantages of his plan. Firstly, the plan will greatly reduce the number of Papists (Catholics) in Ireland—a wicked group. These Catholics, who are prolific breeders, insist on remaining at home in Ireland, hoping to deliver the nation to the Pretender. They take advantage of the absence of good Protestants, many of whom have left Ireland to avoid paying taxes “against their conscience.”

The Proposer casually lets fly his hatred of Catholics, and employs some incredibly backwards logic to do so. By simply living in their own country, the Catholic Irish are supposedly committing treason—and by evading taxes, Protestants are merely obeying their conscience. Thus Swift satirizes the Protestant minority's total lack of regard for the actual interests of the Irish people.



As a second advantage of the Proposer's plan, poor Irish tenants will finally have something with which to pay off their rent. They are in dire need of this, as their cattle and corn have already been seized by their landlords as collateral.

As a third advantage of the Proposer's plan, the profits made off the sale of children will total 10,000 pounds per year. All of this money will circulate internally, within the country, as the children are all of Irish "growth and manufacture."

As a fourth advantage of the Proposer's plan, those "constant breeders" who have a new child every year will be relieved of the burden of raising many children at once, as their children will be taken from their care after only one year.

As a fifth advantage of the Proposer's plan, the practice of **eating** children will "bring great custom" to all the local taverns, whose cooks will come to pride themselves on their own preparations of infant flesh, and attract gentleman of taste to their businesses.

As a sixth advantage of the Proposer's plan, the Irish people will feel encouraged to marry—so they can make some money off their children—and Irish husbands will refrain from beating their wives, choosing to treat them instead as prized livestock.

Further, Ireland will be able to export all the beef and pork that the flesh of infants will inevitably replace. This will be good for the Irish economy.

Here Swift seems to comment on the predatory behavior of the (mostly English) landlords in Ireland. It strikes the Proposer as perfectly normal that a landlord would demand further compensation from his tenants, even after seizing all of their possessions. The reader, however, will (hopefully) be appalled by this notion.



The Proposer's use of the words "growth and manufacture" suggests that he sees Irish children as commodities, little more than livestock. Once again he pulls numbers out of thin air to support the supposed rationality of his plan.



For the Proposer, the idea that Irish parents might want to keep their children is entirely out of the question. He's doing them a favor!



This vision of monstrous gluttony and excess is sure to make the reader's stomach churn. In the Proposer's universe, eating children is a lovely pastime, even a pleasure for the upper classes to aspire to enjoy.



The Proposer has an exaggerated idea of the brutality of Irish husbands, but it may be that Swift is also poking fun at the Irish himself. Now not only the children are "livestock," but the mothers as well.



Here, again, Swift makes reference to Ireland's lack of exports. And, once again, the Proposer fails to see the children as anything other than livestock.



The Proposer can't think of a single worthwhile objection to his plan. Some people might point out that his plan will lead to a decrease in population, but the Proposer sees this as its chief advantage. Further, all of the alternative plans he has heard—such as instilling values of temperance and moderation among the Irish people, curbing the nation's reliance on imported goods, taxing landlords who don't themselves live in Ireland, overcoming factions and mutual bitterness, encouraging honesty among shopkeepers and mercy among creditors—strike him as completely impossible to execute. The Proposer has already wasted many years on such idle, visionary, and ultimately useless thoughts. Now, finally, he's found a practical solution. The whole nation is deeply in debt—two million pounds collectively—and the Proposer's plan is the only one that can fix it.

To those who would be so bold as to attempt a rebuttal to his plan, the Proposer makes only one request: that they ask the impoverished parents of Ireland if they would have rather been sold and **eaten** at the age of one than endure the endless series of misfortunes that have marked their lives. The answer, the Proposer heavily implies, will be yes.

Finally, the Proposer notes that he can't help but speak sincerely about his plan, because he stands nothing to gain from it. His own child is too old to be sold, and his wife can no longer bear children.

Though the Proposer refuses to entertain the many other plans that have circulated among politicians, he proceeds to list them anyway. Of course, these alternative plans, when compared to outright cannibalism, seem utterly sensible. In this way, Swift's sincere entreaties to the public can be heard through the voice of the Proposer. At the same time, the Proposer's refusal to accept any sensible alternative to his plan seems to come from a place of extreme frustration with the human race, a frustration that Swift clearly shares. In one elegant rhetorical move, Swift manages to communicate both optimism and total despair at the same time.



This is an ironic request for the Proposer to make, because all the evidence suggests that he himself has never spoken to any poor Irish people, much less consulted them about his plan. Swift probably does think that being a poor person in Ireland is worse than dying, but he disagrees with the Proposer on how to resolve that tragic problem.



The Proposer's final promise of sincerity will be laughable to any sane reader, as Swift ends his darkly humorous essay without breaking character.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Preston, Oliver. "A Modest Proposal." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 21 Nov 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Preston, Oliver. "A Modest Proposal." LitCharts LLC, November 21, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-modest-proposal>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Modest Proposal* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*. Dover Publications, Inc.. 1996.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.. 1996.