

### Analysis of Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"

During the late seventeenth century, political pamphlets were distributed throughout Ireland to promote the ideas of various intellectuals and laymen. However, many discarded them and did not pay attention to them. Jonathan Swift, author of "A Modest Proposal," takes advantage of the overlooked pamphlets, and constructs a ridiculous proposal. He does this to illustrate how backwards and bad the state of Ireland is and the social classes. Swift proposes that the babies of all the poor and desolate will "contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing, of many thousands" to improve Ireland's economy and standard of living (Swift 868). He says this because many women kept having children but were unable to provide for them. He also states that his proposal would make the babies "beneficial to the public" (866). Also, it is proposed because of Ireland's sincerely grim living standards. For these reasons, he looks at the politicians to blame for the poor conditions because of the apathy they presented while in the decision making process, to resolve the conditions. In "A Modest Proposal", Swift effectively uses insincerity, sarcasm, and rhetorical exaggeration to reveal his annoyance of politicians, papists, and overall citizens of poverty-stricken Ireland in the late seventeenth century. However, there are three factors that make Swift's argument not serious: the tone of the author, his insincerity, and ridiculousness of the proposal.

In "A Modest Proposal" Jonathan Swift does not blame the shortcomings of Ireland on the people. He says that the people, politicians, and English were all to be at fault for the terrible state and poverty of Ireland. Swift states that if a poor infant passes the dangerous years of childhood, they would "leave their dear native country to fight for the Pretender in Spain [James Stuart]" or "they would sell themselves to the Barbados," as indentured servants (867). Here, he

suggests that neither the ones that did leave the country, have no sense of nationalism, nor do they have any pride in their country and have also lead to its demise.

“A Modest Proposal” also reveals to the reader a sense of resentment towards Roman Catholics, often referred to as “papists” within the essay. In paragraph thirteen, Swift mentions that more Catholic babies are born nine months after Lent and will flood the market with infants. Later on, he says his proposal “will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of papists among us” (869). From paragraph thirteen, the author reveals animosity towards papists by wanting to reduce the number of their children and therefore reducing the amount of Catholics. Also, another assessment can be made by the fact that Jonathan Swift himself was an ordained Anglican priest (866). Since the ever-present conflict between Catholics and Protestants existed, it makes it quite possible that the Catholic Church had an influence on Ireland’s economy at the time or so Swift leads the reader to believe.

Another annoyance revealed to the audience is the confrontations that Ireland had with England. During the late seventeenth century, Ireland was controlled by her neighboring nation, England. England imposed many heavy taxes upon the Irish as well as commandeered their resources for their own. In the text, Swift profoundly states how the English exploited Ireland by saying:

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, wherein 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 consciences for nothing: of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants. (872)

As we can see from the above, Swift wants the people of Ireland to take a stand against English opposition, work towards Irish “self-determination,” and have an overall sense of national pride to solve Ireland’s economic situation. Similar to talking about England’s opposition, Swift attacks America by calling Americans cannibals. He says “a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London” assured him “that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food” (869).

Not only does Swift blame others for the state of the poverty in Ireland; he also exaggerates how horrible it is to amplify how poor and disgusting Ireland was. He first does this by making his “proposal” unserious. One way he makes his argument unserious is when he starts to become insincere. However, he uses the dishonesty and insincerity to his advantage in his underlying thought of the essay. Jonathan Swift comes across as insincere throughout his proposal because of how absurd the whole idea is. He is proposing that people should eat children, who are helpless and innocent. Because Swift talks about killing and eating the children so freely and without much guilt, one would think that he is insincere and untrustworthy. Later, he becomes more insincere when he states that he “[has] the least personal interest” in killing many of Ireland’s children for food. He does not believe that “endeavoring [them] to promote this necessary work” of “the public good of” Ireland by the advancement of their “trade, providing for infants, [and] relieving the poor” (873). Another instance where Jonathan Swift also brings on a sense of insincerity is when he states that he does not have any personal

attachment to his proposal because he does not have a suitable child. He also states that his wife is no longer able to have children.

Another instance where Jonathan Swifts emphasizes that the essay is not serious by any means is through the tone of the essay. He is serious throughout the essay but constantly changing the tone of the essay. The changing of the tone helps the reader see that “A Modest Proposal” is absurd. At first Swift is very sympathetic toward the people of Ireland. Not much later, he changes his tone to be more matter of fact. Swift changes the tone of the essay to a state of shock by making “a modest proposal” that is contrary to its name.

Swift’s proposal is for women to sell their children to benefit Ireland. Doing so, he shocks the reader. The trust that has been built between Swift and the reader, at the beginning of the essay has been broken and the reader does not know what to think of swift and his ideas. Using this tone makes his ridiculous proposal stand out profoundly and helps portray the un-seriousness of his argument.

Jonathan Swift also uses irony to satirize what is going on in Ireland. Irony is the expression of one’s meaning by using contradicting language. For instance, Swift says to “sacrifice the poor innocent babes” to “prevent...voluntary abortions and [the] horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children” (868). He is telling the reader that women are performing abortions because they are not financially stable to support their children and that children are actually stealing at the age of six, just to survive.

Swift incorporates a diverse system of rhetoric in “A Modest Proposal” that gives the reader a “love-hate” relationship with the speaker. In the first paragraph of the text, the reader is sympathetic towards the proposer because Swift uses language to show that he is very sympathetic toward the poor and that he does not believe the thought of the day that essentially

said that the poor were poor because they made themselves that way. He shows sympathy towards the poor women and their children. He then says that the mothers are “forced” to spend “all their time” walking about the streets of Ireland begging for “sustenance for their helpless infant” (867). The strong words “forced” and “helpless” makes the reader feel sympathy towards the mothers and children. It also creates a strong bond and trust between the speaker and the reader.

Once the strong bond of trust has been built, Jonathan Swift quickly gets rid of it by employing several terms and phrases that dehumanize humans and also compare humans to animals. He says “a child dropped from its dam” to dehumanize woman and compare women to animal in how they give birth to many children, presumably that animals tend to have numerous young (867). Another common term used throughout the text is “breeder”. He uses breeder to make woman seem as their only purpose in life is to produce children and in turn sell them to the market as a “delicacy”. In addition with breeder, Swift goes on to say that “twenty thousand [women] may be reserved for breed, whereof only one-fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle or swine”(869). Here, Swift compares women to livestock and gives the reader an insight as to how a farmer would assess how to breed their animals. He talks of children and women as animals and dehumanize them.

Not only does Swift dehumanize humans through his choice of words, but he also makes them seem insignificant. He does so by turning them into data. In paragraph six, he calculates the total children from poor couples, but while doing the calculation, he also submits the couples into categories: couples who cannot maintain their children and women who miscarry. He starts to make a list of all of the people in Ireland and then, throughout his calculations, makes their numbers shrink which makes them seem even more unimportant.

Another way Jonathan Swift uses rhetoric to make his proposal less serious is when, he describes infant's meat as a sort of delicacy and that certain parts of a child's body is particularly good to eat, especially for special occasions. Swift also comments that a child's skin would make "admirable gloves for ladies" and "summer boots for fine gentleman", which gives them a sense of a delicacy (870). The words "admirable" and "fine" can be seen used aggressively towards the wealthy because of how they prosper from the poor. Also, Swift employs words that further emphasize the fact that the "babies" that are to be eaten and used for clothing as more of a delicacy in that they are worth "ten shillings." Earlier in the text, Swift says that it cost two shillings to raise a baby until it is "one year of age." He also later states that a child who is twelve would cost their parents about twelve shilling to rear them. The high price of the children of the "breeders" is comparably high which most delicacies are.

Jonathan Swift not only uses rhetoric to dehumanize the children throughout the proposal, but he employs his sarcastic tone, his insincerity, and idea of how ridiculous the proposal is to make his argument not serious. Jonathan Swift illustrates the poor living standards in Ireland as well as the corruption in the social classes within "A Modest Proposal". In the proposal, Swift recommends that women sell their children as commodities because they were unable to support their children.

#### Works Cited

Atwan, Robert, McQuade, Donald. *The Writer's Presence*. 6. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009. 866-873. Print.

