

A Modest Proposal, Swift vents his mounting aggravation at the ineptitude of Ireland's politicians, the hypocrisy of the wealthy, the tyranny of the English, and the squalor and degradation in which he sees so many Irish people living. While *A Modest Proposal* bemoans the bleak situation of an Ireland almost totally subject to England's exploitation, it also expresses Swift's utter disgust at the Irish people's seeming inability to mobilize on their own behalf. Without excusing any party, the essay shows that not only the English but also the Irish themselves--and not only the Irish politicians but also the masses--are responsible for the nation's lamentable state. His compassion for the misery of the Irish people is a severe one, and he includes a critique of their incompetence in dealing with their own problems.



Political pamphleteering was a fashionable pastime in Swift's day, which saw vast numbers of tracts and essays advancing political opinions and proposing remedies for Ireland's economic and social ills. Swift's tract parodies the style and method of these, and the grim irony of his own solution reveals his personal despair at the failure of all this paper journalism to achieve any actual progress. His piece protests the utter inefficacy of Irish political leadership, and it also attacks the orientation of so many contemporary reformers toward economic utilitarianism. While Swift himself was an astute economic thinker, he often expressed contempt for the application of supposedly scientific management ideas to humanitarian concerns.

The main rhetorical challenge of this bitingly ironic essay is capturing the attention of an audience whose indifference has been well tested. Swift makes his point negatively, stringing together an appalling set of morally untenable positions in order to cast blame and aspersions far and wide. The essay progresses through a series of surprises that first shocks the reader and then causes her to think critically not only about policies, but also about motivations and values.

[< Previous Section](#)

[Next Section >](#)

Paragraphs 1-7

Summary

The author invokes the "melancholly" and all-too-common sight of women and children begging on the streets of Ireland. These mothers, unable to work for their livelihood, "are forced to employ all their Time" panhandling for food. The children, also for want of work, grow up to be thieves, or else emigrate "to fight for the Pretender" (the son of James II, who lost the throne of England in the Glorious Revolution of 1688) or to seek their fortunes in the Americas. The author appeals to the general consensus that these beggared children are, "in the present deplorable State of the Kingdom, a very great additional Grievance." He supposes that anyone who could devise a way to make these street children into productive members of society would be doing the nation a great service. The author's own "Intention," he says, goes even further than providing for these children of "Professed Beggars"; his proposal includes in its scope all children (of a certain Age" whose parents, though they have not yet resorted to begging, are too poor to support them.)



Having considered Ireland's population problem for many years, the author has concluded that the arguments and schemes of others upon the subject are wholly inadequate. They have been, he says, "grossly mistaken in their Computation." He offers some calculations of his own: a newborn infant can be supported for its first year on breast-milk and two shillings, a sum that can easily be obtained by begging. It is after this relatively undemanding first year, therefore, that Swift's proposal will go into effect. "I propose to provide for them in such a Manner, as, instead of being a Charge upon their Parents, or the Parish, or wanting Food and Raiment for the rest of their Lives; they shall, on the contrary, contribute to the Feeding, and partly to the Cloathing, of many Thousands." Another advantage of his proposal, Swift says, is that it will reduce the number of abortions and infanticides. He speculates that most women undertake these highly immoral practices "more to avoid the Expende than the Shame" of unwanted children.

The author fills out the background to his proposal with additional statistical data. In a national population of 1.5 million, there are probably 200,000 women of childbearing age. Out of these, 30,000 might be supposed to be financially able to maintain their own children. That leaves 170,000 "breeders." Of these, perhaps 50,000 will miscarry or lose their children in the first year, leaving 120,000 children born of poor parents each year. The Question therefore is, How this Number shall be reared, and provided for?" In the current state of the nation Swift asserts it to be impossible. They cannot be employed in a country that "neither build[s] Houses,...nor cultivate[s] Land." Except for the exceptionally gifted, they will not be able to steal for a living until they are at least six years of age, "although, I confess, they learn the Rudiments much earlier." A child under the age of twelve "is no saleable Commodity," and even when they are old enough to be sold into servitude, children bring no very large price--certainly not enough to offset the costs involved in rearing them to that age.

Commentary

Swift's opening paragraph offers a starkly realistic, although compassionate, portrait of families of beggars in Ireland. The first sentence gives a fairly straightforward and un-ironic description, but by the second sentence the author begins to offer judgments and explanations about this rampant beggary: the mothers are unable to work, and have been "forced" into their current poverty and disgrace. Swift's language here reverses the prevailing sentiment of his day, which held that if beggars were poor, it was their own fault. The reader is unsure at this point whether to take Swift's professed compassion for the beggars as earnest or ironic. The issue never becomes completely clear. In this passage, and in the tract as a whole, he tends not to choose sides; his stance is one of general exasperation with all parties in a complex problem. Swift is generous with his disdain, and his irony works both to censure the poor and to critique the society that enables their poverty. The remark about Irish Catholics who go to Spain to fight for the Pretender offers a good example of the complexity of Swift's judgments: he is commenting on a woeful lack of national loyalty among the Irish, and at the same time critiquing a nation that drives its own citizens to mercenary activity. He makes a similar stab at national policies and priorities with the aside that takes for granted that poor Irish children will not find employment, since "we neither build Houses,...nor cultivate Land."

The reader is inclined at first to identify with the "proposer," in part because Swift has given no reason, at this point, not to. His compassion in the first paragraph, the matter-of-fact tone of the second, his seeming objectivity in weighing other proposals, and his moral outrage at the frequency of abortion and infanticide--these characteristics all speak out in his favor as a potential reformer. Yet the depersonalizing vocabulary with

which he embarks on his computations is calculated to give us pause. He describes a newborn child as "*just drooped from its Dam*" and identifies women as "Breeders." Against this language the word "souls" (which ought to make sense as a way of talking about hapless human beings) takes on a wry tone when applied to Ireland's now strictly statistical population. This language offers an early indication of the way the author's proposal reduces human beings alternately to statistical entities, to economic commodities, and to animals.

It becomes clear fairly quickly that this will be an economic argument, although the proposal will have moral, religious, political, and nationalistic implications. Despite his own moral indignation, when the author suggests that most abortions are occasioned by financial rather than moral considerations, he assumes that people's motivations are basically materialistic. This is not, of course, Swift's own assumption; he presents a shockingly extreme case of cold-blooded "rationality" in order to make his readers reexamine their own priorities. Swift parodies the style of the pseudo-scientific proposals for social engineering that were so popular in his day. His piece is partly an attack on the economic utilitarianism that drove so many of these proposals. Although Swift was himself an astute economist, here he draws attention to the incongruity between a ruthless (though impeccably systematic) logic and a complexly human social and political reality. Part of the effect will be to make the reader *feel* that the argument is bad, without knowing quite where to intervene--to pit moral judgment against other, more rigidly logical kinds of argumentation.

Paragraphs 8-19

Summary

The author begins detailing his proposal, saying that he hopes it "will not be liable to the least Objection." He offers the information, derived from an American he knows, that a one-year-old child is "a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled." Based on this fact, he proposes that the 120,000 Irish children born in a year should be disposed of as follows: 20,000 should be kept for breeding and continuance of the population, but only a fourth of these are to be males, in accordance with the practice common among breeders of livestock ("one Male will be sufficient to serve four Females"); the other 100,000 are to be fattened and then sold as a culinary delicacy. He proceeds to offer suggestions as to the sort of dishes that might be prepared from their meat.



After this quick outline, the author moves on to the specifics of the proposal. First, he discusses the price of the meat. Since a one-year-old baby weighs, on average, only twenty-eight pounds, the flesh will be relatively expensive. These children, therefore, will be marketed primarily to Ireland's rich landlords, who, as Swift points out, "have already devoured most of the Parents" anyway. Second, he speculates that the new foodstuff will be in season year-round--with perhaps a particular surge in the springtime. The cost of nursing a "Beggar's Child" to marketable age is 2 shillings a year. The cost of the meat will be ten shillings and the profits of the sale will be mutual: the mother will make eight shillings, and the landlord who buys the child will not only have "four Dishes of excellent nutritive Meat," but will also enjoy an increase in his own popularity among his tenants. In times of need, the skin could also be used for leather. The author does not doubt that there will be plenty of people in Dublin willing to conduct these transactions and to butcher the meat.

He then tells of a friend's proposed "Refinement on my Scheme," which was that, in light of the shortage of deer on the estates of Ireland's wealthy Gentlemen, teenage boys and girls might be butchered as an alternative to venison--especially since so many of these young people are already starving and unable to find employment. Swift, however, resists this idea, protesting that "their Flesh was generally tough and lean...and their Taste disagreeable." He also speculates that "some scrupulous people might be apt to censure such a practice (although indeed very unjustly) as a little bordering upon Cruelty." The author follows this up with an anecdote about the natives of Formosa and their cannibalistic practices. He then acknowledges a general concern about the vast number of elderly, sick, and handicapped among the poor, who are no more able to find work than the children. Having been asked to consider how the country could be relieved of that burden, Swift declares himself unworried--these people are dying off fast enough anyway.

Commentary

The irony of Swift's piece turns on the assumption that his audience, regardless of their national or religious affiliations or their socioeconomic status, will all agree to the fact that eating children is morally reprehensible. The reader registers a shock at this point in the proposal and recognizes that a literal reading of Swift's pamphlet will not do. Swift is clearly not suggesting that the people of Ireland actually eat their children, and so the task becomes one of identifying his actual argument. This involves separating the persona of the "proposer" from Swift himself. The former is clearly a caricature; his values are deplorable, but despite his cold rationality and his self-righteousness, he is not morally indifferent. Rather, he seems to have a single, glaring blind spot regarding the reprehensible act of eating children, but he is perfectly ready to make judgments about the incidental moral benefits and consequences of his proposal. The proposer himself is not the main target of Swift's angry satire, though he becomes the vehicle for some biting parodies on methods of social thought.

The proposal draws attention to the self-degradation of the nation as a whole by illustrating it in shockingly literal ways. The idea of fattening up a starving population in order to feed the rich casts a grim judgment on the nature of social relations in Ireland. The language that likens people to livestock becomes even more prevalent in this part of the proposal. The breeding metaphor underscores the economic pragmatism that underlies the idea. It also works to frame a critique of the domestic values in Irish Catholic families, who regard marriage and family with so little sanctity that they effectively make breeding animals of themselves. Swift draws on the long-standing perception among the English and the Anglo-Irish ruling classes of the Irish as a barbaric people. Swift neither confirms nor negates this assumption altogether. He indicts the Irish Catholics for the extent to which they dehumanize themselves through their baseness and lack of self-respect. He also, however, admonishes those who would accuse the poor for their inhumane lack of compassion. And, he critiques the barbarism of a mode of social thought that takes economic profitability as its sole standard.

With the introduction of the idea of cannibalism, a number of associated insinuations come into play. Swift cultivates an analogy between eating people and other ways in which people, or a nation, can be devoured. The British oppression amounts to a kind of voracious consumption of all things Irish--humans devouring humans in a cannibalism of injustice and inhumanity. But Ireland's complicity in its own oppression translates the guilt of cannibalism to a narrower national scale; this is not just humans being cruel to other humans, but a nation consuming itself and its own resources. Swift's aside about the fact that wealthy Irish landlords have already "devoured" most of the poor parents voices a protest against their exploitation of the peasants.

One of Swift's techniques is to let abstract ideas resonate in multiple ways. The word "profit," for example, refers at various points to economics, morality, and personal indulgence. When Swift looks at who stands to profit from the sale of infant flesh, he includes not only the family that earns the eight shillings, but also the landowner who will earn a certain social status by serving such a delicacy, and the nation that will obtain relief from some of its most pressing problems. In this way, Swift keeps reminding his reader of the different value systems that bear on Ireland's social and political problems.

Paragraphs 20-28

Summary

"I have too long digressed," says Swift, and so he continues to enumerate the advantages of his proposal. It will reduce the number of "Papists" (Catholics), who form the majority of the poor population and who tend to have large families. He identifies the Catholics as the enemies of the nation--or of its wealthy Anglo contingent--accusing Irish Catholics of subversive political activity, while contrasting them with the many Protestants who have left the country rather than be forced to "pay Tithes against their Conscience."



The proposal also means that poor tenants, once their children become a valuable commodity, will be better able to pay off their debts to their landlords. The arrangement will be good for the national economy, turning what had been a liability into part of the national product--not to mention the added national benefit of a new dish. In addition, the parents of these now-marketable children will reap a profit beyond just the eight-shilling sale price, since they will be relieved of the expense of caring for the children after the first year. The new food will undoubtedly improve business in taverns. The proposal will have the moral benefits of encouraging marriage and increasing mothers' love for their children. It will also likely spur a healthy competition among parents as to who can "bring the fattest Child to the Market," as well as reducing domestic violence, at least during the time of pregnancy, "for fear of a Miscarriage." An indirect consequence of eating children's flesh will be an increase in exportation of beef, and well as a rising standard for other meats, which "are in no way comparable in Taste, or Magnificence, to a well-grown fat yearling Child." Swift speculates that one fifth of the "carcasses" will be consumed in London, and the rest elsewhere in Ireland.

proposal/solutions

Commentary

The author identifies himself as a member of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, who were predominantly Anglican. His picture of embattled Anglicans forced to leave the country is an ironic one, however. Swift is denouncing the practice of absenteeism among Irish landlords, who often governed their estates from abroad, thus funneling all the fruits of Irish peasant labor out of the Irish economy and into the English coffers. The proposer's allegiance is to the interests of the wealthy, and it is at the upper classes that Swift aims his sharpest barbs. Swift's contempt for the irresponsibility, greed, and moral indifference of the wealthy is matched only by his disgust at the utter failure of Ireland's political leaders. Swift begins moving away from the faux-economics of child-breeding in order to hone in on the realities of Ireland's economic crisis. Many of the arguments the proposer advances here have to do with the very real problem of building a viable Irish national economy. Swift reveals that his objection is not so much with the basic mercantilist idea that the people are the most valuable ★

tone shift

resources of a nation, but rather with Ireland's failure to value that resource in any meaningful and nationally constructive way.

People are important!

Swift also elaborates on his critique of domestic mores among the Irish poor. The fact that they need an economic inducement to marry, to love their children and spouses, and to refrain from domestic violence are obvious strikes against them--although probably against the bigotry of the proposer as well since, for Swift, there are multiple sides to every story.

Paragraphs 29-33

Summary

The author now anticipates an objection to his proposal--that it will too drastically reduce the national population. He admits this, reminding the reader that such a reduction was in fact one of the goals. The proposal, he emphasizes, is calculated specifically with respect to Ireland and its circumstances, and is not meant to be applicable to other kingdoms. He offers a catalogue of the various remedies others have suggested: taxing absentee landowners, buying only domestically-manufactured goods, rejecting "foreign luxury," reforming the morality of Irish women, instilling "Parsimony, Prudence, and Temperance" in the people, as well as a healthy patriotism, abandoning factionalism and internal strife, refusing "to sell our Country and Consciences for nothing," encouraging landlords to treat their tenants justly, and enforcing honest practice among merchants. The author disdains these measures as naive and unrealistic. He tells of his own weariness after years of struggling with such impracticable ideas, and his final relief and excitement at hitting upon his current proposal, which "hath something solid and real, of no Expence, and little Trouble," and which will not run the risk of angering England. It will have nothing to do with England, in fact, since the flesh of human infants is too delicate to withstand exportation. He hints that there might be a country that would be eager "to eat up our whole Nation," even without preservatives.



Swift insists that he is not unwilling to hear alternative proposals, if they are "equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual." They should also be sure to consider the two urgent issues that his own proposal addresses so thoroughly. First, it must indicate how 100,000 "useless Mouths and Backs" are to be fed and clothed. And second, it must address the extreme poverty of the vast majority of the Irish population, whose misery is so great that they would "think it a great Happiness to have been sold for Food at a Year old." Swift reinforces that he has only the "publick Good" in mind with this proposal for "advancing our Trade, providing for Infants, relieving the Poor, and giving some Pleasure to the Rich." He is himself entirely disinterested, having no children.

Commentary

The author's account of his long and exhausting years of wrestling with Ireland's problems might be taken as Swift's own. His catalogue of supposedly unrealistic alternative solutions marks a turning point in the pamphlet and a break in the satire. The ideas the proposer rejects represent measures that Swift himself had spent a great deal of energy advocating, to exasperatingly little effect. They are a set of steps by which the Irish might

Counterargument

Swift

hope to break out of their cycle of victimization without the need for England's cooperation. Swift's is a program of civic-minded, patriotic, and principled behavior designed to effect change from the inside. The audience is confronted with the fact that there are real and practicable solutions to Ireland's national discomposure, in which they themselves, in their greed and self-indulgence, are culpable.

In emphasizing that this remedy is designed only for Ireland, [Swift is calling attention to the extremity of his country's backwardness, as an index of how bad things have gotten.] The author's statement that much of the population would have been better off dead is exaggerated, perhaps, but not ironic; it is meant as testimony to the dire national consequences of such rampant civic neglect. Only in Ireland, he seems to say, could a policy of cannibalism possibly be considered a social improvement.

The author's closing statement offers a last scathing indictment of the ethic of convenience and personal gain. We are urged to believe in his disinterestedness not because of his moral standards or his high-mindedness, but because he happens not to be susceptible to the particular fiscal temptation that might compromise his position. The manner of his assertion here reminds us that the author's unquestioned assumption throughout the entire proposal is that anyone with children would in fact be perfectly willing to sell them. This declaration also undercuts, once again, the separation between the level-headed, wealthy, Protestant author and the Catholic masses. What unites the unruly and unscrupulous mob with the social planner is the fact that their priorities are basically economic.)

Context

Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin in 1667. His father died before he was born, leaving the family with relatively modest means. Nevertheless, as a member of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, Swift received the best education Ireland could offer. As a young man, he worked as private secretary to Sir William Temple, a retired Whig diplomat, at Moor Park in southern England. During his ten years in this position, Swift took advantage of Temple's vast library to round out his education and immersed himself in the politics and opinions of this prominent intellectual. Swift took orders in the Anglican Church in 1694, and he was named dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1713. For many years he worked, anxiously and unsuccessfully, to secure himself a permanent appointment in England; during this period he considered his life in Ireland a kind of exile. Shutting back and forth between Ireland and England with some regularity, he became increasingly embroiled in English politics. He also established himself in the literary circle that included Addison and Steele. Later, he changed both political and literary loyalties and befriended Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot, who would be his lifelong friends.



Swift's Ireland was a country that had been effectively controlled by England for nearly 500 years. The Stuarts had established a Protestant governing aristocracy amid the country's relatively poor Catholic population. Denied union with England in 1707 (when Scotland was granted it), Ireland continued to suffer under English trade restrictions and found the authority of its own Parliament in Dublin severely limited. Swift, though born a member of Ireland's colonial ruling class, came to be known as one of the greatest of Irish patriots. He, however, considered himself more English than Irish, and his loyalty to Ireland was often ambivalent in spite of his staunch support for certain Irish causes. The complicated nature of his own relationship with England may

have left him particularly sympathetic to the injustices and exploitation Ireland suffered at the hand of its more powerful neighbor.

Particularly in the 1720s, Swift became vehemently engaged in Irish politics. He reacted to the debilitating effects of English commercial and political injustices in a large body of pamphlets, essays, and satirical works, including the perennially popular *Gulliver's Travels*. *A Modest Proposal*, published in 1729 in response to worsening conditions in Ireland, is perhaps the severest and most scathing of all Swift's pamphlets. The tract did not shock or outrage contemporary readers as Swift must have intended; its economics was taken as a great joke, its more incisive critiques ignored. Although Swift's disgust with the state of the nation continued to increase, *A Modest Proposal* was the last of his essays about Ireland. Swift wrote mostly poetry in the later years of his life, and he died in 1745.