

Chase Rogers

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Professor Charles Tita

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Critique of “A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift

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Part II: Critique of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal”

Satire and Irony are shown in a Modest Proposal, Swift employs a tone to criticize the British government's exploitation of Ireland. The proposal itself to feed on children is an ironic exaggeration, revealing the desperation and absurdity of the economic situation in Ireland even stating that it would solve the abortions. “There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas!” A Modest Proposal also depicts dehumanization. The proposal involves the dehumanization of the poor as well, while treating infants as mere commodities. “But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed beggars: it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age” The infants symbolize the economic burden placed on poor families. By suggesting their sale for consumption, Swift criticizes the dehumanizing effects of poverty and British exploitation. The mention of consuming children serves as a shocking symbol of the extreme measures people might contemplate when subjected to oppressive conditions, illustrating the dire consequences of colonialism. This raises ethical questions about the desperation of the poor and even the rich, as the moral consequences of such extreme proposals.

The reader is prompted to consider just how far individuals will go when faced with injustice. And we as the reader can already tell just how far they might be willing to go due to this passage in the text “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 boiled;” Swift challenges the apathy and exploitation of the elite (higher-class) in addressing societal issues. And exploitation of the elite by suggesting a solution that directly involves them. Very quickly the narrative becomes a mirror reflecting the tensions between Ireland and England, making the dire consequences of colonial exploitation very clear. “The poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to a distress, and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized, and money a thing unknown”

Swift's narrative skillfully engages readers in a thought experiment that explores the limits of moral compromise in the face of economic desperation. The children become symbols

of the economic burden placed on the families in poverty. By suggesting that they be for sale and used for consumption, he criticizes the dehumanizing effects of poverty and the British exploitation of Ireland. This is a sharp political commentary on the exploitation of Ireland by the British government. The outrageous proposal is a means for exposing the systemic injustices inflicted upon the Irish. Through this lens, Swift calls for reform and for justice, urging readers to reconsider the political landscape of the time. The effectiveness of Swift's satire lies in its ability to provoke thought and action. The proposal, though extreme, serves as a powerful critique of the prevailing injustices. "The body of a plump girl of fifteen, who was crucified for an attempt to poison the Emperor, was sold to his imperial majesty's prime minister of state, and other great mandarins of the court in joints from the gibbet, at four hundred crowns"

Swift also makes a very interesting pitch, about how the gentleman of the land have about hunted all the deer and would find, the use of the children very profitable to make boots and gloves and other accessories as it says here in the text from the passage, "Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flea the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen." First of all that was very disrespectful on how in this quote "We should soon see an honest emulation among the married women, which of them could bring the fattest child to the market" The theme to this quote does have a lot of symbolism. The symbols are the emulation of a married woman competing to bring the fattest child to the market and it reflects the drastic consequences of the exploitation of the poor. The next form of symbolism is the thrifty use of a carcass, the flaying of the carcass and using the skin that was once attached to it. To make gloves and summer boots symbolizes the ruthlessness and utilitarian approach to the proposal, the economic motives and lack of empathy in the face of such a dire suggestion.

Another interesting thing he mentions is the use of beef "Many other advantages might be enumerated. For instance, the addition of some thousand carcasses in our exportation of barreled beef: the propagation of swine's flesh, and improvement in the art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables; which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well grown, fat yearly child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure" The mention of the children's carcasses as a delicacy is being compared to that of swine as they are implementing that the whole child would be roasted. And possibly served like bacon implementing that the Irish people are suffering tremendously under the rule of the British. In "A Modest Proposal" the narrator explicitly states that the remedy is calculated for the one individual Kingdom of Ireland and not for any other. The rejection of alternative expedients, such as taxing absentees or using only domestically produced goods, emphasizes the focused nature of the proposal. The theme here suggests a singular and straight to the point solution for the challenges faced by Ireland as stated in the passage "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,” as I continue to read the text I find myself thinking hard about society and how some places still struggle with this kind of matter. Something that stood out to me a lot was “ The poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to a distress, and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized, and money a thing unknown. Thirdly, Whereas the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two years old, and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation's stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds per annum,” As it talks about the seizure of the cattle and corn which is the loss of essential resources and livelihood. It might represent the impact of economic hardships and the struggle for Ireland to meet basic needs. Why are individuals having their cattle and corn seized ? and what Justifies someone taking them from the individuals ?

Swift also goes on to say that “We should soon see an honest emulation<sup>34</sup> among the married women, which of them could bring the fattest child to the market. Men would become as fond of their wives, during the time of their pregnancy, as they are now of their mares in foal, their cows in calf, or sow when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage.” This is interesting because Swift compares animal pregnancy to human pregnancy, specifically mentioning men becoming as fond of their pregnant wives as they are of mares in foal, cows in calf, or sows ready to farrow. It is an interesting comparison that makes us think that the men would treat and view the women differently, instead of kicking and beating the women they would cherish and nurture them, providing them with anything and everything they needed to make sure that they were kept healthy. As they would be viewed as producers of food at that point and not as a mother bearing child. The treatment would be similar to them caring for animals. The change in behavior towards the woman is due to them worrying about the female having a miscarriage.

Another thing that caught my eye was how he asked for change “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. Lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken” the passage urges caution and advises against the sale of the country, and shows that landlords should be taught to show just a bit of mercy towards their tenants, hoping that the relationship between the two becomes better. The passage also calls advocates for instilling honesty and more skill into the shopkeepers, demanding almost more professionalism out of them. It speaks of a need for resolution, calling for someone to take direction and make positive changes that will affect everyone. “ I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich.” Swift is saying my intentions are for the good of the public and the country, with sincerity he claims not to have a personal interest in doing or promoting in anything that he mentioned.

