

# **“A Modest Proposal”: A Discussion Guide**

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## **Preface**

This brief document contains the text of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal,” as well as a number of question and answers about this satire. I hope that this brief discussion guide will help teachers as they introduce their students to satire.

**Note:** I have numbered the paragraphs in “A Modest Proposal” to make it easy to refer to sections of the satire.

## “A Modest Proposal”

**By Jonathan Swift**

### Section 1

1. 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. These mothers instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for the Pretender<sup>1</sup> in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbados.

2. I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth, would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.

3. 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, who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them, as those who demand our charity in the streets.

4. 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. It is true, a child just dropped from its dam<sup>2</sup>, may be supported by her milk, for a solar year,<sup>3</sup> with little other nourishment: at most not above the value of two shillings, which the mother may certainly get, or the value in scraps, by her lawful occupation of begging; and it is exactly at one year old that I propose to provide for them in such a

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<sup>1</sup> Pretender: James Francis Edward Stuart (1688-1766) was a Catholic who was the son of King James II of England and Ireland and VII of Scotland (1633-1701). He claimed (that is, according to non-supporters, pretended to) the thrones of England, Ireland, and Scotland. James Stuart is known as the Old Pretender, while his son, Bonnie Prince Charles (1720-1788), is known as the Young Pretender.

<sup>2</sup> A dam is the mother of a domestic animal, especially livestock that is used as food.

<sup>3</sup> Solar year: An ordinary year—the time it takes for Earth to orbit once around the Sun.

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 clothing of many thousands.

5. 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! too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt, more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast.

6. The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders<sup>4</sup>; from which number I subtract thirty thousand 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 an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, How this number shall be reared, and provided for? which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed. For we can neither employ them in handicraft or agriculture; we neither build houses (I mean in the country), nor cultivate land: they can very seldom pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive at six years old; except where they are of towardly parts, although I confess they learn the rudiments much earlier; during which time they can, however, be properly looked upon only as probationers: As I have been informed by a principal gentleman in the county of Cavan, who protested to me, that he never knew above one or two instances under the age of six, even in a part of the kingdom so renowned for the quickest proficiency in that art.

7. 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 three pounds, or three pounds and half a crown at most, on the exchange; which cannot turn to account either to the parents or kingdom, the charge of nutriments and rags having been at least four times that value.

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<sup>4</sup> “Breeders” is a word used mainly for livestock. Farmers increase their herds and flocks by breeding their animals.

## Section 2

8. I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

9. 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; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee<sup>5</sup>, or a ragout<sup>6</sup>.

10. I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand 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, and my reason is, that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages; therefore, one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune, through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter.

11. I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh 12 pounds, and in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, increase to 28 pounds.

12. I grant 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.

13. Infants' flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March, and a little before and after; for we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that fish being a prolific diet, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants, is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists<sup>7</sup> among us.

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<sup>5</sup> A fricassee is pieces of meat served in its own gravy.

<sup>6</sup> A ragout is a well-seasoned meat-and-vegetable stew.

<sup>7</sup> "Papists" is an insulting term for Catholics.

14. I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child (in which list I reckon all cottagers, laborers, and four-fifths of the farmers) to be about two shillings per annum, rags included; and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat, when he hath only some particular friend, or his own family to dine with him. Thus the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among his tenants, the mother will have eight shillings neat profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.

15. Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flay the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.

16. As to our City of Dublin, shambles<sup>8</sup> may be appointed for this purpose, in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs.

17. A very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem, was lately pleased, in discoursing on this matter, to offer a refinement upon my scheme. He said, that many gentlemen of this kingdom, having of late destroyed their deer, he conceived that the want of venison might be well supplied by the bodies of young lads and maidens, not exceeding fourteen years of age, nor under twelve; so great a number of both sexes in every country being now ready to starve for want of work and service: And these to be disposed of by their parents if alive, or otherwise by their nearest relations. But with due deference to so excellent a friend, and so deserving a patriot, I cannot be altogether in his sentiments; for as to the males, my American acquaintance assured me from frequent experience, that their flesh was generally tough and lean, like that of our schoolboys, by continual exercise, and their taste disagreeable, and to fatten them would not answer the charge. Then as to the females, it would, I think, with humble submission, be a loss to the public, because they soon would become breeders themselves: And besides, it is not improbable that some scrupulous people might be apt to censure such a practice (although indeed very unjustly), as a little bordering upon cruelty, which, I confess, hath always been with me the strongest objection against any project, how well soever intended.

18. But in order to justify my friend, he confessed, that this expedient was put into his head by the famous Salmanaazor, a native of the island Formosa, who came from thence to London,

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<sup>8</sup> A shambles is a slaughterhouse where animals are killed and butchered.

above twenty years ago, and in conversation told my friend, that in his country, when any young person happened to be put to death, the executioner sold the carcass to persons of quality, as a prime dainty; and that, in his time, 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<sup>9</sup> of the court in joints from the gibbet<sup>10</sup>, at four hundred crowns. Neither indeed can I deny, that if the same use were made of several plump young girls in this town, who without one single groat<sup>11</sup> to their fortunes, cannot stir abroad without a chair,<sup>12</sup> and appear at a playhouse and assemblies in foreign fineries which they never will pay for; the kingdom would not be the worse.

19. Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or maimed; and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken, to ease the nation of so grievous an incumbrance. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known, that they are every day dying, and rotting, by cold and famine, and filth, and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected. And as to the young laborers, they are now in almost as hopeful a condition. They cannot get work, and consequently pine away from want of nourishment, to a degree, that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labor, they have not strength to perform it, and thus the country and themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come.

### Section 3

20. I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.

21. 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 with a design to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have

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<sup>9</sup> A mandarin is an important government bureaucrat or public official of imperial China.

<sup>10</sup> A gibbet is a public place where criminals are hanged and their bodies displayed as a warning to other people.

<sup>11</sup> A groat is a coin of little worth: fourpence.

<sup>12</sup> A chair is a covered sedan chair that is carried by two bearers who grasp two poles. Look up "sedan chair" in Google Images for illustrations. Swift is pointing out that some Irish women without much money are wasting it on luxuries. It's like being almost broke but taking an expensive taxi instead of taking an inexpensive bus.

chosen rather to leave their country, than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an episcopal<sup>13</sup> curate.

22. Secondly, 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.

23. 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, besides the profit of a new dish, introduced to the tables of all gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom, who have any refinement in taste. And the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture.

24. Fourthly, the constant breeders, besides the gain of eight shillings sterling per annum by the sale of their children, will be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.

25. Fifthly, this food would likewise bring great custom to taverns, where the vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the best receipts for dressing it to perfection; and consequently have their houses frequented by all the fine gentlemen, who justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and a skillful cook, who understands how to oblige his guests, will contrive to make it as expensive as they please.

26. Sixthly, this would be a great inducement to marriage, which all wise nations have either encouraged by rewards, or enforced by laws and penalties. It would increase the care and tenderness of mothers towards their children, when they were sure of a settlement for life to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the public, to their annual profit instead of expense. We should soon see an honest emulation 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<sup>14</sup>; nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage.

27. 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

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<sup>13</sup> The term "episcopal" refers to church administration.

<sup>14</sup> The term "farrow" refers to an animal's giving birth.

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 at a Lord Mayor's feast, or any other public entertainment. But this, and many others, I omit, being studious of brevity.

28. Supposing that one thousand families in this city, would be constant customers for infants' flesh, besides others who might have it at merry meetings, particularly at weddings and christenings, I compute that Dublin would take off annually about twenty thousand carcasses; and the rest of the kingdom (where probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper) the remaining eighty thousand.

#### **Section 4**

29. I can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom. This I freely own, and 'twas indeed one principal design in offering it to the world. I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one individual Kingdom of Ireland, and for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon Earth. Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing our absentees at five shillings 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<sup>15</sup>, 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. Lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it.

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<sup>15</sup> The word "parsimony" means frugality—not spending money unnecessarily.

30. Therefore I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, 'till he hath at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice.

31. But, as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expense and little trouble, full in our own power, and whereby we can incur no danger in disobliging England. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

32. After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinion, as to reject any offer, proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before something of that kind shall be advanced in contradiction to my scheme, and offering a better, I desire the author or authors will be pleased maturely to consider two points. First, as things now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for a hundred thousand useless mouths and backs. And secondly, there being a round million of creatures in humane figure throughout this kingdom, whose whole subsistence put into a common stock, would leave them in debt two million of pounds sterling, adding those who are beggars by profession, to the bulk of farmers, cottagers and laborers, with their wives and children, who are beggars in effect; I desire those politicians who dislike my overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an answer, that they will first ask the parents of these mortals, whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old, in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes, as they have since gone through, by the oppression of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of common sustenance, with neither house nor clothes to cover them from the inclemencies of the weather, and the most inevitable prospect of entailing the like, or greater miseries, upon their breed for ever.

33. 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. I have no children, by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past child-bearing.

## Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal"

### A Discussion Guide

#### • What is satire?

Here are a number of definitions of "satire" from the WWW:

.The literary art of ridiculing a folly or vice in order to expose or correct it. The object of satire is usually some human frailty; people, institutions, ideas, and things are all fair game for satirists. Satire evokes attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn, or indignation toward its faulty subject in the hope of somehow improving it.

Source: [http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary\\_p.htm](http://www.bedfordstmartins.com/literature/bedlit/glossary_p.htm)

In satire, human or individual weaknesses or shortcomings are shown by means of ridicule, derision, irony, or other methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement. Although satire is usually meant to be funny, the purpose of satire is not primarily humour in itself so much as an attack on something of which the author strongly disapproves.

Source: <http://www.hjk-steinfeld.de/index.php?id=446>

.A literary technique in which ideas, customs, behaviors or institutions are ridiculed for the purpose of improving society.

Source: <http://www.northwestern.k12.oh.us/curriculum/documents/glossary.doc>

#### • What is irony?

Here are a couple of definitions of "irony" from the WWW:

Irony is an implied discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. ... [V]erbal irony is when an author says one thing and means something else.

Source: [http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit\\_terms/irony.html](http://www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/irony.html)

Irony is a literary or rhetorical device, in which there is an incongruity or discordance between what a speaker or writer says and what he or she means, or what is generally understood.

Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irony>

#### • Write a brief biography of Jonathan Swift.

On November 30, 1667, Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin, Ireland.

He attended Trinity College in Ireland, but at age 22, he moved to England, where he served as a secretary to Sir William Temple, a government diplomat.

In 1713, he was appointed Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland.

Swift began writing early, and he is most famous for his satires *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and "A Modest Proposal" (1729).

He was friends with Alexander Pope, translator of Homer and the author of satiric verse, and John Gay, who is best known for *The Beggar's Opera*.

On 9 October 1745, Swift died. He left most of his money to Dublin for the founding of a hospital for people who are mentally ill. In 1757, the hospital, then called St. Patrick's Hospital for Imbeciles, opened.

**• Write a short summary of "A Modest Proposal." What is Swift doing in this satirical essay?**

"A Modest Proposal" was a pamphlet, given away free and containing a proposal to solve an important problem. Its full title is "A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to their Parents, or the Country, and for Making them Beneficial to the Public."

Of course, it is a satire. A sign of intelligence is the ability to recognize satire.

In "A Modest Proposal," Swift's narrator says that he wants to find a way to solve the poverty of the Irish. Many, many Irish, mostly Catholic, are beggars and thieves because of their poverty. The ruling class of Ireland was Protestant.

Swift's narrator proposes breeding the poor and using their young children as meat. By selling their children to the rich to serve as meat for their meals, the poor adults of Ireland will have fewer mouths to feed and will have money in their pockets. This will greatly reduce the number of poor in Ireland and the remaining Irish citizens will be financially much better off. (At this time, no safety net existed for the poor. People really did starve to death in Ireland.)

Swift's narrator lists many, many benefits of his proposal. For example, husbands will not beat their wives because they will fear their wives' miscarrying and thus losing an infant that can be sold for money.

**• What is the context of "A Modest Proposal"? What was Ireland like in the 1720s? ("A Modest Proposal" was published in 1729.)**

In 1707, the Kingdom of Scotland and the Kingdom of England became the United Kingdom. Ireland was not a part of the United Kingdom at that time.

England imposed trade restrictions on Ireland that contributed to the country's poverty.

The main characteristic of Ireland at the time that Swift wrote "A Modest Proposal" was the poverty of so many of its Catholic citizens.

Much of Ireland's land was owned by absentee landlords (they lived outside of Ireland) who treated their tenants poorly and exported much of Ireland's food and wealth.

**• What persona does Swift adopt for this essay? What kind of person is speaking?**

A persona is a character who tells a story. The persona can be very much different from the author of the work of literature.

Swift's narrator does not suffer from poverty, but is instead a member of the upper class.

Swift's narrator claims to have good motivations. He wishes to reduce the great amount of poverty in Ireland.

Swift's narrator is logical. He clearly enumerates the advantages of his proposal.

Swift's narrator, of course, is a device for Swift to get his satire across. The narrator proposes an inhumane proposal to reduce the poverty of many Irish citizens. However, Swift's real proposals for dealing with the problem are also enumerated in "A Modest Proposal."

The tone that Swift's narrator uses throughout "A Modest Proposal" is calm and rational. The times when emotion breaks out in the proposal are when Swift makes a direct attack on evil people:

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

31. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country [England] which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

**• Who is being satirized in this essay? Does Swift have criticisms of the Irish people as well as of the absentee English landlords?**

Swift criticizes both the absentee English landlords and the Irish people themselves.

The absentee English landlords owned, of course, much fertile farmland in Ireland, and they exported the best food, including meat and grain, leaving the Irish to live mainly on potatoes.

However, Swift also greatly criticizes the Irish themselves. In Section 4 of "A Modest Proposal," he lists many actions that the Irish could take—but have failed to take—to help themselves.

**• Jonathan Swift's "Modest Proposal" follows the classic organization of a proposal written to solve a problem.**

This is a classic organization of a proposal written to solve a problem:

## Section 1

- Introduction
- Description of the Problem and Background Information

## Section 2

- Description of the Proposed Solution

## Section 3

- Benefits of the Proposed Solution

## Section 4

- Rebuttal of an Objection to the Proposed Solution
- Why Other Solutions Will Not Work
- Conclusion

Of course, the reader is aware that Swift is being satiric in his “Modest Proposal.” The solutions that the narrator says will not work in Section 4 are actually the solutions that Swift recommends.

## SECTION 1

**• Which background information does Swift provide in Section 1, and how does Swift describe the problem in Section 1?**

Paragraph 1: Swift’s narrator presents a picture of the many beggars in Ireland at the time:

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. These mothers instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for the Pretender<sup>16</sup> in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbados.

These beggars are unable to support themselves, and so they engage in such activities as thieving.

Paragraph 2: Swift’s narrator says that a solution ought to be found for this problem.

Paragraph 3: Swift’s narrator says that his proposed solution will help many poor people with infants, not just those who are begging in the streets.

Paragraph 4: Swift’s narrator says that his proposed solution will result in infants of one year old not being a burden to their families, but instead contributing to “many thousands”:

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<sup>16</sup> Pretender: James Francis Edward Stuart (1688-1766) was a Catholic who was the son of King James II of England and Ireland and VII of Scotland (1633-1701). He claimed (that is, according to non-supporters, pretended to) the thrones of England, Ireland, and Scotland. James Stuart is known as the Old Pretender, while his son, Bonnie Prince Charles (1720-1788), is known as the Young Pretender.

[...] it is exactly at one year old that 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 clothing of many thousands.

Paragraph 5: Swift's narrator says that an additional advantage of his proposal is to reduce the number of abortions and of infanticides in Ireland.

Paragraph 6: Swift's narrator estimates the number of poor children in Ireland born each year, and he again states the problem: How are poor parents going to be able to provide for these children?:

There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, How this number shall be reared, and provided for?

Paragraph 7: Swift's narrator says that a 12-year-old child cannot be sold for much, and certainly not for as much as it has taken to feed and clothe the child for 12 years.

## SECTION 2

**• What is the satirical, ironic solution to the problem? What are the narrator's arguments for using Irish children for food?**

Paragraph 8: Swift's narrator says that he will offer his solution to the problem, and he says that he is confident that no one can object to his solution.

Paragraph 9: Swift's narrator says that an American whom he knows has assured him that a one-year-old infant is excellent food.

Paragraph 10: Swift's narrator recommends that most of the one-year-old children of poor Irish mothers be used as food, with just a fraction being allowed to grow to maturity so that they can have children to raise to be sold and butchered at one year of age. As we do with animals, we can use one male to fertilize more than one female:

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one fourth part to be males [...].

Paragraph 11: Swift's narrator uses facts and figures in his arguments. A newly born infant will weigh 12 pounds, and an infant at one year of age will weigh 28 pounds. (Swift's narrator is incorrect when he says that a newly born infant will weigh 12 pounds. that is a very large infant, and poor mothers would be unlikely to be able to consume enough food to have an infant that large. Poor mothers are likely to give birth to undernourished and smaller-than-average infants.)

Paragraph 12: Swift's narrator acknowledges that the flesh of infants will be expensive, and he suggests that the rich landlords of Ireland would be likely to be the ones to purchase the flesh. In a savage criticism, Swift himself says that these landlords have already (metaphorically) devoured the parents:

I grant 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.

Paragraph 13: Swift's narrator points out that the flesh of infants will be in season year-round, but especially in the spring, in March, because during Lent Catholics eat fish instead of meat, and fish makes women fertile, according to Swift's narrator. Swift's narrator is prejudiced against the Catholics, and to him one advantage of his proposal is that it will lessen the number of Catholics in Ireland:

[...] therefore it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists<sup>17</sup> among us.

Paragraph 14: Swift's narrator calculates the probable cost of rearing an infant to one year of age and the probable price paid for a one-year-old child to be butchered. The result is a profit for the mother and an increase in the popularity of a landlord who is a good customer:

Thus the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among his tenants, the mother will have eight shillings neat profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.

Paragraph 15: Swift's narrator says that infants may be used for more than food. A thrifty person may skin the corpse of the infants and make clothing from the skin. (The Nazis occasionally did this with the skin of Jews during the Holocaust.)

Paragraph 16: Swift's narrator says that in Dublin slaughterhouses can be set up to butcher the infants. However, he acknowledges the advantages of butchering the children in one's own home, as the meat will be fresher.

Paragraph 17: Swift's narrator says that a suggestion has been made to use older children as food. Swift's narrator does not think that that is a good idea because the females will soon become breeders, and in any case the flesh of older children is disagreeable. Only the flesh of one-year-old infants is delightful. Besides, some people may think that it is cruel to butcher older children. (All too often, the narrator says, critics reject sensible proposals on account of supposed cruelty.)

Paragraph 18: Swift's narrator says that to be fair to the person who suggested butchering older children that that person had heard that such an action was done in Formosa. Swift himself en-

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<sup>17</sup> "Papists" is an insulting term for Catholics.

gages in savage satire when he says that such an action when done to certain people would improve Ireland:

Neither indeed can I deny, that if the same use were made of several plump young girls in this town, who without one single groat<sup>18</sup> to their fortunes, cannot stir abroad without a chair,<sup>19</sup> and appear at a playhouse and assemblies in foreign fineries which they never will pay for; the kingdom would not be the worse.

Paragraph 19: What about the “aged, diseased, or maimed”? Swift’s narrator says that nobody need worry about them, as they are dying off anyway.

Note: This is a satire, of course, Swift is not arguing that the poor people of Ireland actually raise their children to one year of age and then sell them to be butchered. Knowing that, the reader has to figure out what Swift is actually arguing: What are the solutions that Swift thinks will solve or help solve the problem of poverty in Ireland?

### SECTION 3

#### • What are the ironic, satirical benefits of the solution to the problem?

In Section 3, Swift’s narrator details the benefits of his proposal to solve the problem.

Paragraph 20: Swift’s narrator announces that he will now list the benefits that will follow if his proposal is implemented.

Paragraph 21: Swift’s narrator says that a major advantage is that his proposal will lessen the number of Catholics in Ireland.

Paragraph 22: Swift’s narrator says that the poor people will have something valuable that they own, and that therefore the poor people can use to pay their debts to their landlords.

Paragraph 23: Swift’s narrator says that implementing his proposal will lead to a healthy economy in Ireland and to a new kind of food.

Paragraph 24: Swift’s narrator says that because parents will sell their children at one year of age to be butchered, the parents will be relieved of the cost of feeding and clothing their children after the children have reached one year of age.

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<sup>18</sup> A groat is a coin of little worth: fourpence.

<sup>19</sup> A chair is a covered sedan chair that is carried by two bearers who grasp two poles. Look up “sedan chair” in Google Images for illustrations. Swift is pointing out that some Irish women without much money are wasting it on luxuries. It’s like being almost broke but taking an expensive taxi instead of taking an inexpensive bus.

Paragraph 25: Swift's narrator says that the flesh of infants will be a popular dish at taverns, and that a good cook will be able to make the flesh especially delicious, and therefore the taverns will be able to charge more for it.

Paragraph 26: Swift's narrator says that marriage will become more common as marriage will lead to breeding for profit. Parents will value and take care of their infants so that they reach one year of age and can be sold. Husbands will value and not beat their wives because they would not want to cause miscarriages or do anything to lessen their wives' value as breeders.

Paragraph 27: Swift's narrator says that more Irish beef can be exported. The Irish, including landlords living in Ireland, will eat the flesh of infants, as it is too delicate and tender to be exported. (See also Paragraph 31.)

Paragraph 28: Swift's narrator says that in Ireland 100,000 infants can be sold to be butchered per year. Of them, 20,000 infants would come from Dublin.

#### **SECTION 4**

##### **• How does the narrator of “A Modest Proposal” rebut an objection?**

Paragraph 29, 1<sup>st</sup> part: An objection to the proposal of Swift's narrator is that his proposal will reduce in a drastic reduction of the population of Ireland. Swift's narrator acknowledges that this is true, but he says that that is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

##### **• Does Swift make any serious proposals for relief of the situation?**

Swift makes many serious proposals to solve the problem of poverty in Ireland. All of these solutions are rejected by Swift's narrator, but Swift himself favors them.

Paragraph 29, 2<sup>nd</sup> part: In this paragraph are Swift's actual recommendations for solving the problem of poverty in Ireland. In Swift's own words, his solutions consist

- “Of taxing our absentees [absentee landlords] at five shillings 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<sup>20</sup>, prudence and temperance:”

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<sup>20</sup> The word “parsimony” means frugality—not spending money unnecessarily.

- “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.”
- “Lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it.”

Here is a summary of Swift’s real recommendations:

- Absentee landlords have been exporting wealth out of Ireland. By taxing these absentee landlords, Ireland can keep much of that wealth in Ireland.
- By buying only goods manufactured in Ireland, Irish citizens can help to make the Irish economy healthy.
- By rejecting “foreign luxury,” Irish citizens will help to keep their money in Ireland. They will also be more frugal and better money managers.
- If the morality of Irish women should improve, and they were to do such things as marry instead of having children out of wedlock, Irish families and society would improve.
- If Irish citizens have “Parsimony, Prudence, and Temperance,” they will be better managers of their money and their lives. (Management is important. Some people lead good lives on little money, while other people lead miserable lives although they spend much money.)
- Irish citizens need to abandon bad factionalism. Strife between Catholics and Protestants and between rich and poor is a bad thing.
- Irish need to refuse “to sell our Country and Consciences for nothing.” Too much wealth flows out of the country with the Irish getting little in return.
- Landlords need to stop taking advantage of their tenants and need to treat them fairly.
- Merchants need to stop taking advantage of their customers and need to treat them fairly.

Paragraph 30: Swift's narrator says that he rejects all these proposed solutions since there is little or no chance of their ever being implemented in real life.

Paragraph 31: Swift's narrator says that he is happy to have come upon a new way to solve these problems. Again, Swift breaks out into savage satire with a condemnation of England:

For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

Paragraph 32: Swift's narrator says that he not only believes that his proposal will solve the problem of the poor in Ireland, but that the poor people themselves will be in favor of it. Critics of his proposal should

[...] ask the parents of these mortals, whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old, in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes, as they have since gone through, [...]

Swift's narrator does say that he is willing to consider other proposals, but only if they solve or help solve the problems that his proposal solves:

1. How to feed and clothe 100,000 "useless mouths and backs."
2. How to solve the poverty of the Irish people, many of whom, Swift's narrator says, would prefer to have been sold to be butchered at one year of age than to live the lives they have now.

• **How does Swift end "A Modest Proposal"?**

One way of criticizing the proposer of a solution to a problem is to say that the proposer will benefit from the proposed solution.

Paragraph 33: Swift's narrator says that he will not be able to benefit from his solution because his youngest child is nine years old, which is too old to be butchered, and because his wife is too old to bear any more children who could be sold to be butchered.

### **Anecdotes: “A Modest Proposal” and Jonathan Swift**

- Jonathan Swift was fiercely loved by the people of Ireland after publishing such satiric works on their behalf as “A Modest Proposal,” in which he ironically suggested that the Irish sell their children as meat and give the landlords the first choice of buying the children, as the landlords seemed to have the best right, having already “devoured” the children’s parents. Once Archbishop Boulton admonished Dean Swift for inciting the Irish to rebellion. Dean Swift replied, “If I were but to lift my finger, they would tear you to pieces.”

- Satirist Jonathan Swift did not suffer fools gladly. He opposed astrology, and he disliked astrologers. When an astrologer named Partridge started publishing annual almanacs of prediction, Mr. Swift invented the persona of “famous astrologer Isaac Bikerstaff” and in 1707 published his own almanac—in which he predicted the death of Partridge on March 29, 1708. When March 29 arrived, Mr. Swift printed and distributed a news report he had written on the “illness and demise” of Partridge, although Partridge was still alive and well. After reading of Partridge’s death in the report, the church sexton visited Partridge’s house to find out about funeral arrangements. Partridge’s friends stared at him in the street and told him that he looked exactly like one of their deceased friends. People referred to Partridge’s wife as the “widow Partridge.” When Partridge tried to publish another almanac, his publishers tried to stop an “imposter” from using Partridge’s name. Eventually, Partridge published a pamphlet to prove that he was still alive, but even so six years passed before he was able to publish another almanac.

- Jonathan Swift once travelled with a lazy servant. One night, he gave his boots to the lazy servant to clean and shine, but the next morning they were still dirty. When Dean Swift asked for an explanation, the lazy servant said that he had not cleaned them because Dean Swift was going to ride again today, and what was the use of cleaning them if they were just going to get dirty again. Hearing that, Dean Swift told the servant to get ready immediately to continue their journey. The servant protested, “But I haven’t eaten breakfast yet!” Dean Swift responded, “What is the use of feeding you breakfast if you are just going to get hungry again?” After that, Dean Swift had his boots cleaned and shined each night, and the servant ate breakfast each morning.

- Jonathan Swift had a bad habit of not tipping. Once, a boy delivered a package to Dean Swift. Because he knew that he would not receive a tip, the delivery boy’s manners were abrupt. Dean Swift told the boy that he needed to learn some manners, and so for educational purposes he told the boy to pretend to be Dean Swift while he pretended to be the delivery boy. Dean Swift then said, “Sir, Mr. Brown has sent you this package of fruit and begs you to accept it.” The delivery boy said, “Tell Mr. Brown that I accept the package with great thanks, and here’s half a crown for yourself.” Having learned his lesson, Dean Swift smiled, then gave the delivery boy half a crown.

- Jonathan Swift was walking along a narrow pathway when he met a young man who stood in the middle of the pathway. The young man sneered at Dean Swift and said, “I never get out of the way of fools.” Dean Swift replied, “I always do” and walked around the young man.

- For many years, England exploited Ireland. Lord Carteret's wife once stated to Jonathan Swift that she liked the air of Ireland. Dean Swift immediately fell to his knees and begged her, "For God's sake, madam, don't say so in England, for if you do they will certainly tax it."

- When Jonathan Swift died, he left £10,000 to be used for the founding of an Irish Hospital for Idiots and Lunatics. That was his final joke. As he had written earlier:

He gave the little wealth he had  
To build a house for fools and mad,  
And shew'd by one satiric touch,  
No nation wanted it so much.

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