
A Modest Proposal: As A Political Manifesto Of Jonathan Swift

Jonathan Swift was a 17th century Anglo-Irish poet, clerk, and political pamphleteer, best known for his prose of fiction, such as the Gulliver's Travels, the Battle of the Books, and Tale of a tub. Swift is famously considered to be one of the best satirists in History, a sarcastic and ironic style of writing that he used to uncover the hypocrisy of society, politics, and human nature in general. As stated by many 'His style which generally consists of the most naked and simple terms, is strong, clear, and expressive: familiar without vulgarity or meanness; and beautiful, without affection or ornament' Read (1998). The best example to showcase his exclusive style of writing is in his pamphlet "A Modest proposal". In this pamphlet, Swift's focus is less on the mechanics of language, and more on the irony and sarcastic tone of his satire. He uses these tools to propose an effective yet outrageous cure to elevate the Irish people from their economic ruin.

When the pamphlet was published in 1729, Ireland was sunk deep in colonial rule. The colony saw patterns of aristocracy and feudalism where people suffered from income inequality, lack of resources, and poor living standards. Swift, using his satirical expression, built a strong argument for fixing the economic disparity of Ireland by selling the meat of babies from low income communities while ironically calling his proposal 'modest', deliberately understating the cruelty of his approach.

Before proposing his main idea, Swift carefully built his argument by explaining the background, objectives, and benefits of his proposal. He describes the living conditions of the economically underprivileged people of Ireland as "deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance". His intentions are "far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed beggars", but for all those who cannot afford to raise their children on their own. According to him, selling young children off as slaves is not profitable for parents since they spend more on their nutrition and rags than they earn by selling their children as slaves. He then proposes to sell the flesh of the hundred and twenty thousand one-year old infants of underprivileged families born each year, as meat for anyone who can afford them since "a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food". Such an act, according to his analysis, would have important economic and social advantages: mothers will be paid for raising their infants, there would be a reduction in the ever-increasing population of Ireland, exploited tenants would be able to pay their rents, women will no longer feel the need for abortion and serve as better mothers, men will act as responsible husbands to protect their wives, and there will be less cases of domestic violence for fear of miscarriages. After appearing to legitimize this absurd proposition, Swift addresses those who may disagree with him to only come forward with alternatives "[un]till he [has] at least some glimpse of hope, that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them into practice". He urges fellow authors to consider two points before contradicting him: how do they plan on feeding the starving population, and ask those people who are buried under debt, who cannot buy rags or food for their children, that would they rather have been sold off as meat in a manner that Swift has proposed in order to avoid the hardships they have suffered. In his conclusion, he reiterates that this proposal is merely a solution to the problems of the Irish people in the absence of any other, and that he has no personal interest in selling children for

meat since he has nothing to gain out of such inducement.

In this essay, Swift's use of satire has served him well in the following ways: it has allowed him to engage with his audience before proposing his main idea by creating an almost believable and pragmatic argument that could change the economic conditions of the Irish people, enhanced by his appeal to pathos, while at the same time giving him the opportunity to call out the ruling elite, the Stuart Protestants, for their unfair practices that had led to the Irish struggle.

Swift's chose his words carefully while describing the living conditions of the poor to prepare us for his outrageous proposal. He deliberately led his audience to believe two things: that his idea was empathetic in nature, and that similar practices already existed. While emphasizing on the importance of coming up with a viable solution for the empowerment of the poor, Swift states that whoever comes up with a fair, cheap, and easy method for elevating people from poverty "would deserve so well of the public, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation." He champions his good intentions for everyone suffering and "[all] those who demand our charity in the streets." Furthermore, by describing how mothers can only provide free nourishment for their children up until the age of breast feeding, and giving rhetorical evidence of as many as one hundred and twenty thousand children that parents are unable to provide for, Swift deepens his appeal for keeping the good of the society at heart, giving his audience even more reason to believe a proposal he is yet to unveil. Apart from ironically coming off as empathetic, Swift used his satire to highlight an already common practice amongst elite. It was a common practice in colonies to enslave children and ship them off to Britain to be used as necessary, therefore the idea of "making these children sound and useful members of the common-wealth" was not foreign. When he talked about the enslavement of 12-13 year old girls and boys being an unprofitable transaction for parents who spend more on their sustenance over the years, he did not mean to disregard slavery as an undesirable act, in fact, it was to gain the appeal of aristocrats who benefited most from the slave trade and would find interesting the idea of having a proposal that was even more profitable than slavery. It is a mix of these two appeals, empathy and familiarity, that makes his argument believable and pragmatic.

Having established his grounds, Swift proposes the of butchering one-year old infants and selling their meat to whomever wishes to buy them as a solution to solving the economic crisis of Ireland, a proposal so modest he "hope[s] will not be liable to the least objection." He goes into to explain his proposal using rhetorical analysis of how such an act could be practically possible and eventually beneficial. He starts off with a method to ensure the breeding of such marketable infants by setting aside twenty thousand of them for further breeding, one-fourth of whom would be male "which is more than we allow to sheep", deliberately drawing a relationship between the treatment of animals to the treatment of humans in the country. In an unapologetic take on the ruthless elite, he believes these infants would be perfect for landlords, considering they've already devoured the livelihood of the children's parents. Majority of Irish being Roman Catholic were looked down upon by, for such people did not adhere to the teachings of the Church of England. They were consequently called papists, an anti-Catholic slur, and this was used by Swift when he said "it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the number of Papists among us" to highlight the deep-rooted racism among the elite. He justified the selling of the infant's carcass as an additional income for the parents, by giving evidence of how there was already a market for them amongst the imperials who would buy the carcass of executed children, most of them being poor. This, among many others, was how he underscored the duplicity of all those who would object him.

After explaining the ground work for his proposal, he uses his satire to reiterate its unparalleled benefits: the reduction in Papist population who posed a “threat” to the racist Protestants, the tenant’s ability to pay rent by selling their children since their exploitation meant that money was a thing unknown to them, and in the ever so patriarchal society women would learn to be better mothers while husbands would become more caring husbands as to not harm their potential breadwinner.

In the end, Swift leaves no stone unturned in his effort to uncover the pretence of anyone who finds his proposal objectional. He urges his audience that unless they have any hope of taxing the ruling elite, consuming local goods, stop them from importing luxuries, or refraining them from their extravagant lifestyle, they should not object his proposal since it “can incur no danger in disobliging England”. His loathing for England is evident when he relates an infant’s flesh to all of Ireland and calls England a country willing to devour Ireland without the need for salt to keep it fresh. In his very last attempt to shame his aristocratic audience, Swift encourages them to ask the people in question whether they would prefer to have been sold in the manner he proposed than to suffer the predicaments of their miserable lives.

This masterpiece of satire appeals to the emotions of both those who Swift meant to uplift and those he meant to insult. His proposal is worthy of acknowledgement for its coherence and technique. Considering Swift was anything but serious about his proposal, he managed to portray himself as the most eager contender for fixing Ireland’s economic problems, and it is this style of writing that won him the title of being a master of prose.