

Study Guide

A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift

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Plot Summary

Plot Summary

Modest Proposal is a satirical essay by the 18th century author Jonathan Swift. In the voice of a rich gentleman, largely out of touch with society. It outlines an argument for selling infant children for meat. To do so would reignite Ireland's industries, bringing the country out of its current financial slump.

The author states that Ireland needs a cheap and simple solution to help its impoverished population. The Irish streets are full of woman beggars and many of them have children, which they struggle to feed. Despite these struggles, the children mostly grow up to become thieves.

The author argues that among the 1.5 million people in the country, approximately 120,000 are children who have no use to society. He considers that the mother could sell her child at the age of twelve, but then she would only receive the paltry sum of three pounds. The author states the best solution would be to keep 20,000 of the 120,000 children as breeders and sell the remaining 100,000 for meat.

The beggar women would profit greatly. He calculates that it only costs them two shillings to look after their child in the first year. After that a merchant would buy it for at least ten shillings, leaving the beggar woman with eight shillings. With the modest life that money could afford her, she would soon be fit to join the workforce.

The author states there are six advantages to his idea.

First of all, it would lessen the number of Catholics in the country who the author states are the enemy of the people.

Secondly, the poor people would own something valuable, allowing them to pay their rent and pay for their cattle.

Third of all, there would be a circulation of money from goods manufactured from within the country.

Fourthly, the breeder of the children, the beggar woman, wouldn't have to look after the children after the first year.

The fifth reason is that taverns would become places fitter for gentlemen.

His last and final reason is that the proposal would help marriage. The husband and wife would so happy that they can contribute something valuable that they would treat each other with great respect.

The author claims to have no other interest than to relieve the poor and give pleasure to the rich.

A Modest Proposal

A Modest Proposal Summary and Analysis

The essay begins with Swift describing how the streets are crammed full of female beggars dressed in rags. But what is worse is they often have four to six children with them. At the beginning of a child's life, this is not such a problem since a child can last a year on its mother's milk. Yet as the children grow, it becomes increasingly difficult for the beggar women to support them. Even then, it is to no avail. As soon as the children are old enough, they become criminals. In short, they are no use to society and particularly a society that is going through difficult times.

The author states that in its current state society needs to find a solution that is both cheap and easy.

Swift outlines his argument by showing some of his calculations. He has worked out that a poor mother can feed its child on milk for the first year of its life. After that, the mother can give away her child. Secondly, the author says that Ireland has a population of one and a half million people. Of this total, only 200,000 people could be breeders. However, 30,000 of these breeders are able to maintain their lives of their children. That leaves 170,000 breeders. Of this 170,000 one needs to take away the 50,000 either who miscarry or whose children die of disease. In total, the author states there are 120,000 children in society unable to contribute.

The author says merchants have told him that none of these children is sellable until they are twelve. Even then, they only sell for three pounds and who could possibly live off that?

To help the poor and thus the whole of society, the author proposes that of the 120,000 children 20,000 should be reserved for breeding. Of which there will be one male to every female. The remaining will be sold as meat. This may be difficult to swallow, but the author states a very knowing American has ensured him a well-fed, well-nursed child makes for a delicious dish, whether it is fried, stewed, roasted or boiled.

There are many advantages to his proposal. First of all, child meat will always be in season. Secondly, as the number of Catholic children outnumbers the Protestant children 3 to 1, it would be a good way to lower their numbers.

Perhaps the biggest advantage is financial. The author has already worked out that keeping a child costs only two shillings per annum. Therefore, if a gentleman pays a mother at the very least 10 shillings for her child then she has made a profit of 8 shillings. Enough to live a reasonable life until she bears her next child. Then with enough money to buy wholesome food, she will be strong enough to join the workforce.

The author recalls a worthy friend telling his contingency considered killing the maidens and young men between the age of 12-14 to make up for the lack of venison. They were dying anyway so they would have been doing them a favor. The author rejects his idea. His American friend told him above the age of 12 child's meat is tough from too much exercise. Yet at the same time, he understands his friend's point.

A man called Salmanaar must have put the idea in his head. Once a native of the island of Formosa and now a member of London society, he once wrote a book about how his people sold the children's bodies that they execute for crimes. The author doesn't think it's a bad idea, but thinks if children are that old, why not keep them until they can breed.

Having slightly gone off the point, the author goes back to his main argument, listing the six advantages of his proposal.

First of all, as he stated before, his proposal will significantly lessen the number of Catholics in Irish society. The same people that he claims that are plotting against the country while the protestants are absent fighting in other countries.

Secondly, it gives the poor something valuable to sell. In the current environment they are vulnerable to a landlord's wrath, but a valuable commodity would help them not only to pay the rent but the same people would no longer see them as a waste to society.

Thirdly, the idea would create circulation of money from goods made and manufactured within the country. Ireland would be self-sufficient.

Fourthly, the breeders, the beggar women, will not have to look after their children after the first year.

Fifthly, the taverns would benefit greatly. They would have a delicious new meat that gentlemen would pay vast money to eat.

Finally, the author's proposal would help the sanctuaries of marriage. Knowing that they will profit from their unborn, the mother will take great care of herself and the father will take great care of the mother. There will be no attempted miscarriage or abortions.

The author foresees one objection since it will significantly lower the nation's population. It is a fair point, but he states the advantages of his idea far outweigh any disadvantages. He proposes the idea only for Ireland because he feels it will help the people to love their country and reignite the dwindling industries. The Irish laborers will find a new pride that will reverberate through the whole of Irish society.

The author says that he is happy to take criticism, but that his critics should consider two things. Firstly, his proposal will feed a 100,000 useless and starving people and secondly, a beggar would have preferred if a merchant had bought him or her at the age of one then to have to have gone through severe poverty.

He finishes the essay by stating that he has no other interest than relieving the poor and giving pleasure to the rich.

To understand the essay it is important to understand the author, the setting and some of the terms Swift uses. The author is an Anglo-Irishman who is a member of the Church of Ireland. This means he is a protestant and by extension a supporter of the British crown. The beggars on the streets are the Catholics. At this point the English had control of Ireland. As the predominant religion in England was Church of England and protestant, the Protestants had power in Ireland. In fact as Swift alludes to in the essay the Protestants saw the Catholic as their sworn enemy, so in many ways it was in the Protestants interests to keep so many Catholics in poverty. In these terms, Swift states the beggar children had two choices when they grow up; they can either fight for the Pretender in Spain or sell themselves to the Barbadoes. The Pretender in Spain was the man fighting the present English king for his throne. The Barbadoes were colonists in the West Indies needing slaves to work on the plantations. If they chose neither of these options, the narrator states they would probably become criminals.

Though the essay is a satirical essay, at the beginning the author makes the reader believe he has a serious and important message to make. In these terms, the writer sets it out as one would normally set out an academic essay. After the title, he writes a short hypothesis and to give the essay an authority writes his name as Dr. Jonathan Swift. The first third continues in this vein addressing a very serious issue of Irish poverty, backing up his claims with statistics and what he claims are other authoritative sources such as his American friend.

As the first third of the essay continues, there are hints that the narrator is not the authority that he initially appears to be. For instance, the statistics he throws at his readers, are on close examination, quite ridiculous. After he worked out that there are 120,000 beggars on the streets, he then makes the claim there are only 120,000 children. Surely if the beggars have up to 6 children as he says they have, the number of children would be far greater. Nevertheless, the Swift knows that his authority as a doctor and a writer is enough to make the reader believe that he has a relevant point to make.

When he finally, in the second third, proposes to kill beggar children for food, it comes as such a surprise the reader feels compelled to read on. The reader knows that it is a ridiculous idea, but he or she wonders if Swift is proposing a serious idea or not.

Of course Swift is playing with his audience. He is making a serious point, but the point has more to do with the attitudes of the upper class, particularly the attitudes of the Protestants towards the Catholic, than it has to do with helping the poor and mostly Catholic people.

By the time the reader moves into the final third of the essay, he or she understands that the narrator is completely self-serving. He may talk about helping the poor, but the reason he wants to help them is to make the lives of the upper class more comfortable. While the selling of the children's meat will no doubt, in the context of the author's world, improve the conditions of the poor, these same people will be basically serving the needs of the upper classes. As the author states, they will be more inclined to perform better at work and the atmosphere of places like taverns will be fit for gentlemen.

The second issue the essay addresses is the penchant of the upper classes looking for simple solutions for complicated problems. Satire or not, it is obvious that Irish need to address the problem of poor people in the street, but the people in power, from Swift's point of view in this essay, are looking to solve the problem in a way that benefits the present, but has no benefit for the future.

With the references to the Catholics being the enemy, there is an uneasy feeling throughout the essay of a type of ethnic cleansing. Of course in typical political speak it is married with niceties and other propaganda, but basically the author is talking about genocide. At one point he makes the statement that his proposal will make Ireland more self-sufficient and make the Irish people more proud of their country.

In these terms it could be read as warning of the problems of oppressing one view point (Catholicism) in favor of another (Protestantism) and under the guise that this view point is the country's natural way of being. Of course if you disclude everyone else, then it would receive very little opposition.

Important People

Important People

Children

The author proposes that Irish society begins a trade of selling children for meat. He argues beggar women fill the Irish streets and although they earn some money, they have to spend most of it on their children. The majority of those children grow up to become criminals and a problem to society.

A friend of the author states that he knows children under the age of six who are already proficient in the art of stealing. Abortion in a Catholic society such as Ireland is out of the question.

The author proposes a better idea that would help the economic situation, the parents, and the children where society should breed children for meat. The mother's would not only benefit financially from the sale of their child, but they would become fit enough to work. In addition, their husband would stay at their side, happy in the knowledge they will both profit from the child's birth. Farmers who breed the children could sell a child for a big profit while the laborers that prepare and sell the children for consumption would earn enough to develop a pride in their work. They would no longer look for shortcuts.

In this respect, Swift's satirical piece presents the child as a commodity. To solve problems in a way that benefits capitalist society one needs to ensure society profits from it. In this case, children are the problem and selling them for meat is the solution.

Of course, the author only proposes the sale of poorer children. He claims his children at nine years old are well past their "sell by date" age.

Adults

The author's pamphlet satirically makes the point that in an impoverished capitalist society the present is more important than the future. The adults, made up of laborers, mothers and leaders are the only people who can keep the economy and therefore society running. Therefore, by right, society should preserve and maintain their lives, and not the lives of their children.

According to Swift, the Irish economy is kept down by the children. So why not kill them and sell them for their meat? It would create a new industry and as beggar women will be the first to profit, rid the streets of its homeless. With the money they earn, they may even get themselves fit enough to join the workforce.

When society is again running like a well-oiled machine the happiness of adults will benefit society. Husbands will start taking pride in a national product and children will be killed before they turn into criminals.

Nevertheless there is a hint the author's proposal would benefit the richer adults. He is it seems interested in keeping the status Quo, talking about the only the beggar woman as breeders. Towards the end he states the flesh of poor maidens over the age of twelve is either too tough or due to starvation there is not enough of it. Society may as well also keep them until they are old enough to breed.

The American

The author states that his American friend told him that children, fried, roasted, boiled or grilled, make a wholesome and nutritious dish. The same friend also told him that the meat of schoolboys and young maidens is too tough.

Psalmaazar

The author states that his American was given the idea of eating children by George Psalmanazar, a native of the island Formosa. Psalmanazar was a real person in the 18th century famous as an imposter. He once pretended he came from the island of Formosa, writing a book about the benefits of cannibalism.

Swift's reference to Psalmaazar is intended to ridicule him.

The Pretender in Spain

The Pretender in Spain refers to James Stuart who felt he had claim to the Scottish and English thrones. Swift makes a reference to the Catholics taking advantage of the Protestants' absence and handing the country over to the Pretender.

The Author

Jonathan Swift uses his position as a writer and a doctor to give the essay an authoritative and add bite to the satire. At times, it is difficult to know if his proposal is serious or not.

Objects/Places

Objects/Places

The Streets

The author states female beggars with up to six children crowd the Dublin streets.

Food

The author proposes society kills children for meat. He says a friend of his has stated the meat from children, boiled, stewed or fried, is wholesome and nourishing. One child could feed a party of adults.

The Economy

The author states the sale of human meat will help the floundering economy. Rearing a beggar child for meat will cost only two shillings a year and the farmer could sell the child at for at least ten shillings. The child's mother would not only eight shilling for the child, but she would be fit for work.

Dublin

The author is talking from the perspective of a Dubliner. He computes that Dublin, with its many weddings and Christenings, would eat about 20,000 children a year. The rest of the country would eat 80,000 children.

Ireland

The author proposes the laws for Ireland. In the 18th century, Ireland was under great economic strain.

Barbadoes

The author states beggar children sell themselves to Barbadoes. This refers to colonists in Barbados in the West Indies using slaves for their sugar cane plantations.

Cavan

A gentleman in the Irish town of Cavan told the author children under the age of six are proficient in the art of stealing.

March

The author states a proportion of Roman Catholic children are born nine months after lent. Consequently from March the markets would be full of children's carcasses.

Formosa

Salmanaazor was a native of the island of Formosa. He told the author's friend Formasians sell the carcasses of children they execute. This is a mocking tribute to the famous imposter George Psalmanazar.

Marriage

The author states marriage would benefit greatly from the sale of children. Rather than fear the financial burden their unborn children would place on them, the husband and wife will look forward to its birth. With the knowledge that the child will bring in money the husband will treat his wife with the respect she deserves.

England

The author does not have a high opinion of England. When the author states, "I could name a country that be glad to to eat up our whole nation," he is referring to England.

Themes

Themes

Protestants vs Catholics

Although Jonathan Swift was an active member of the Church of Ireland, meaning he was a protestant, he is scathing towards his own religion. While this essay is not supporting the Catholic faith, it is sympathetic towards the plight of its people.

He begins by stating that it is cruel for mothers to have an abortion. Although at the early stage when he makes this statement, the reader will think he is making a serious point, they will later reread this as irony. If most of the poor are Catholics and society can't afford to look after their children, wouldn't it be beneficial for the mother to have an abortion? He makes the point that is barbaric for a mother to abort her child, but he later underlines this as irony and when he talks about selling the children to raising them like cattle, his point is equally if not more barbaric.

Writing from the perspective of a protestant gentleman, he paints the picture that Irish Protestants are rich hypocrites eager not just to promote their own strand of Christianity, but their own status. At every turn he puts down Catholics in very dramatic ways. For example he suggests that Catholics could easier take advantage of the absence Protestants, fighting abroad for their king, by delivering the kingdom to the very people the Protestants are fighting. He even calls the Catholics "our most dangerous enemies." His biggest argument is that killing poor children for meat would significantly lower the Catholic population.

Yet by the end of the essay it is clear to the reader that his agenda is to preserve the status quo and by doing do preserving his own lifestyle. With his own children over the age of nine and his wife past breeding age, the author's proposal could only benefit his family and himself. Most likely it would be he and friend he would enjoy the taverns and dinner parties that he talks about. The laborers would be, in this respect working for him and his friends.

In conclusion, the proposal is designed to keep Catholic population down and the Protestants in power.

Finding the Simple Solution

The author talks about finding a quick, simple solution to the problem of poverty. His essay does make it sound exceptionally easy. If one subtracts this number of people from that number and then does that at a certain age everything will work fine. Poor people will have disappeared streets, everyone would be in work, and enjoying their work and the rich would be pumping money into the economy. Ireland would become a Utopia.

Unfortunately, this line of thinking is nothing more than a quick fix to benefit the people in the present. It has no thought for the future. How will selling human affect human relations for example? What happens when poverty disappears and the industries are all running well?

The worse aspect of his proposal is that doesn't take human beings and their feelings into consideration. How would a mother feel about society taking away her children?

The presumptions that he makes about people he knows nothing about are ludicrous. For example, the author has no doubt that given the choice poor people would have wanted to have been taken off the streets at the age of one and killed.

The people he uses to back up such ideas are rich Americans and merchants. He has no real grasp of the situation.

Of course the Swift uses the narrator's voice for satirical effect. In this respect the satire works to show that even though the commonsense solution would be for upper echelons of society to provide shelter and education for the poor, they refuse to do so. They are paranoid that they ruin the luxury of their lives. As the author says at one point the Catholics, the majority of people he wants to kill for meat, are the king's worse enemy.

Self-Interest

By the end of the essay, the reader understands the author is acting under self-interest. He doesn't want to rid the streets of poverty because he cares about people in poverty. Instead, he wants to preserve his own lifestyle where he frequents the best taverns and has dinner parties with friends. He tries to claim his proposal will help the poor, but this assumption seems to be made on the basis that anything that promotes the interests of the status quo can only help society in general. On a fundamental level his proposal amounts to ethnic cleansing and genocide. He wants to kill for meat, 100,000 children, a majority of which will be Catholics or the enemy of the state. The other children he claims will only grow up to become criminals.

Of course for people like him, his arguments could be very persuasive. If there was, as we can presume, great poverty in Ireland at that time then people would want a quick fix. If rich and powerful people were the only ones in the position to make these decisions then any solution would most likely benefit them.

The author's proposal would rid them of the nation's enemy and pump money into the economy.

Style

Style

Perspective

Although Jonathan Swift is a protestant, his essay mostly attacks Protestants and supports Catholics. He not supporting Catholic religion however, but criticizing how the Protestants are oppressing the Catholics and seemingly blaming them for the nation's problems. He ironically states that Catholics are the Protestants worse enemy. He even suggests Catholics will take advantage of the Protestants' absence since they are away fighting the war to hand the country over to their enemies.

Swift's suggests that this is all propaganda, but the worse kind. As the poor in those times could neither read nor write, such an essay could only be read by the upper classes and here Swift represents them as ignorant and self-serving. The essay pokes fun at their ignorance, but at the same time making the very serious claim that those same are the only people with the power to change society.

In these terms Swift is stating that the Catholics have become pawns for the English and the people support the English. As the narrator says in the essay, the English would probably eat the Irish population if they had the chance. They will continue to complain about them being on the streets while never once admitting that they were the ones that not only put them there in the first place, but keep them there. Their hypocrisy is to sit in the comfort of their homes and think of ridiculous ideas as the essay's proposal that can only benefit themselves and keep the status quo intact.

Tone

The tone of the essay is ironic. In the beginning, Swift uses an authoritative tone, but as he juxtaposes his tone against ridiculous and self-serving statements, the reader slowly understands that it is a satirical essay. If the reader rereads the essay, he or she can see the irony was there from the start.

Initially, Swift sets up himself as an authoritative figure, printing his hypothesis at the beginning with his name as Dr. Jonathan Swift underneath. One is left in no doubt that this is a man we should be listening to. He keeps this up tone for a while, making interesting points about mothers and their children living on the streets. We know instantly that this is a serious problem and something need to be done.

The author uses this tone to throw statistics at us. Upon first reading the essay, it is difficult to make sense of these statistics, but at the same time, with his strong tone of voice, easy to presume they are important statistics for that time. Reading them more carefully however, the statistics don't make sense, coming across as something a politician would say to make his argument sound important. Obviously Swift is counting that the reader, concerning descriptions about the poor on the streets, will take theses numbers as fact.

It is only when the essay is over a quarter of the way through that we realize the author is proposing the Irish kills its poor children for meat. It would usually sound a ridiculous proposition, but he has used such an authoritative tone of voice that the reader feels compelled to read on.

As the essay becomes increasingly grotesque, the authoritative tone of voice begins to show itself as bitter irony. The reader now knows the ideas are far-fetched, but there is enough truth for it to work as satire against the narrator.

The reader now sees himself and people of his class as self-serving oppressors of the poor. The situation will only improve when they allow it to change.

Structure

In the beginning of the novel, the author uses a conventional essay format without giving away the main premise of the piece, which is to kill children for food.

It begins like an academic paper with the title of the essay and has a short hypothesis underneath. He adds his name Dr. Jonathan Swift at the bottom, lending an authoritative voice. Continuing in this vain, he outlines the principle problem in Ireland of too many beggar women weighed down by four to six children. It is a powerful start and grabs the reader's attention.

He then throws statistics at the reader in an attempt to present him as someone that knows exactly what he is talking about. Rereading what he says these statistics are empty and meaningless, but with the essay format, the reader scans over them, presuming that this information will become more clear and used to back up what will be a solid argument. Hence it comes as a surprise when he proposes that society kills these children for food.

The author uses the essay format to make the reader listen to what is an ignorant, self-serving voice. The next third of the essay is used to show the narrator is as an ignorant person without any grasp of the situation. In fact none of his arguments can be called academic as he uses statements and stories told to him by friends, acquaintances, or friends of friends. Often the reader only has the author's word that the person's word is trustworthy.

The reader is slowly developing the idea that not only is it a satirical essay, but the author is satirizing the upper classes and how they seem incapable of dealing with the poverty in Ireland.

By the time the narrator begins the final and third part of the essay, listing the six advantages of killing children, the reader feels free to thoroughly dislike him and feel sorry for the Catholic people.

Quotes

Quotes

"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 in Spain or sell themselves to the Barbadoes" (p. 2).

"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; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to maintain their own children, but this being granted, there will remain an hundred and seventy breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease withing the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born" (p. 3).

"I have been assured by a 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 fricasie or a ragoust" (p. 4).

"I do therefore humbly offer it to publick consideration, that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, where of 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" (p. 4).

"There are more children born in Roman Catholick countries about nine months after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants, is at least three, 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 among us" (p. 5).

"Those who are more thrifty my flea the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed, will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen" (p. 5).

"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" (p. 7).

"And as to the young labourers, 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 labour, they have not strength to perform it, and thus the country and themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come" (p. 7).

"For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run" (p. 7).

"And the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of own growth and manufacture" (p. 7).

"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 publick, to their annual profit instead of expence" (p. 8).

"I can think of no 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" " (p. 9).

"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" (p. 9).

"I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expence and little trouble, full in our 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 nation without it" (p. 10).

Topics for Discussion

Topics for Discussion

How does the author indirectly criticize Catholicism in his essay?

How does the author indirectly criticize England in his essay?

How does the author propose the sale of children for meat will benefit the economy?

How does the author propose the sale of children for meat will benefit lives of adults?

What does the essay state about how capitalism deals with its problems? Is Swift's complaint about capitalist society still hold weight?

What was happening in Ireland when Swift wrote his essay? How does Swift use satire to communicate express his true feelings of the situation in Ireland?

What structural elements identify the story as satire?

How does Swift use his status as an established author and doctor to satirical effect?