

A Modest Proposal

Essay by Jonathan Swift

How can we fight INJUSTICE?

A Contemporary Injustice:

Methods of Publicizing It:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Most Effective Method:

An old proverb says, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” In many situations a well-reasoned argument is more effective than physical force. Clergyman and political writer Jonathan Swift used his pen to expose injustice in society. Today, people still fight injustice with words—in speeches, newspapers, and on the Internet.

DISCUSS With a small group, think of a contemporary example of injustice. It might be a local, national, or global issue. Discuss three methods that might be used to publicize the injustice. Then rate how effective each method is likely to be in leading to a solution. Use the space to the left to take notes.

Text Analysis: Satire

Satire is a type of writing that ridicules people’s behavior or society’s institutions for the purpose of bringing about a change. Jonathan Swift used satire to comment on specific political and cultural issues that concerned and angered him. The chart below explains three techniques a satirist may use.

Satirical Techniques	Meaning	Example
verbal irony	a statement that says the opposite of what it means	Papists [are] the principal breeders in our country as well as our most dangerous enemies.
sarcasm	the use of a mocking tone	Let no man talk to me of . . . unreasonable solutions, such as teaching landlords to have at least one degree of mercy toward their tenants.
overstatement	the use of deliberate exaggeration; presenting an outrageous or shocking idea as if it were rational	Infant’s flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March, and a little before and after.

As you read “A Modest Proposal,” notice how Jonathan Swift uses satirical techniques to comment on society.

Reading Skill: Identify Proposition and Support

“A Modest Proposal” is written like a serious problem-solution essay.

- It clearly identifies a **problem** and its causes.
- It proposes a **solution** to the problem—Swift’s **proposition**—and explains how to implement it.
- It gives **support** for the proposed solution in the form of reasons and evidence.
- It notes **other possible solutions** and argues against them.

As you read, note the problem Swift identifies, the solution he proposes, and the evidence he uses to support his proposition.

Vocabulary in Context

Note: Words are listed in the order in which they appear in the essay.

sustenance (sŭs'tə-nəns) *n.* a means of support or nourishment
*Without regular **sustenance**, the body cannot function.*

rudiment (rŭd'ə-mənt) *n.* a basic principle or element
*Our nation's Constitution is based on the **rudiment** of equality.*

collateral (kə-lăt'er-əl) *adj.* accompanying as a parallel or subordinate factor; related
*A **collateral** benefit of exercise is feeling good.*

deference (dĕf'er-əns) *n.* a yielding or courteous regard toward the opinion, judgement, or wishes of others; respect
*A good listener politely shows **deference** to others' viewpoints.*

expedient (ĭk-spĕ'dĕ-ənt) *n.* something useful in achieving the desired effect
*Having a tent is an **expedient** that makes camping enjoyable.*

encumbrance (ĕn-kŭm'brəns) *n.* a burden
*Felix never felt that babysitting was an **encumbrance**.*

famine (fām'ĭn) *n.* a period in which there is a severe shortage of food
*A drought caused the **famine** in East Africa.*

propagation (prŏp'ə-gā'shən) *n.* the act of reproducing, multiplying, or increasing
***Propagation** is necessary in order for the human race to survive.*

SET A PURPOSE FOR READING

Read *A Modest Proposal* to learn how Swift ridicules his society's treatment of its less fortunate members.

A Modest Proposal

FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND
FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY,
AND FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC

Essay by **JONATHAN SWIFT**



BACKGROUND In the late 1720s, Ireland suffered from several years of poor harvests. Farmers had trouble paying the rents demanded by their English landlords. Many children and adults were forced to beg or starve. Most of the money collected by the landlords was sent to England; very little was spent in Ireland on locally produced goods. In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift pretends to be an economic planner who suggests a shocking solution to the problem. Watch for the sharp contrast between Swift’s direct, logical style and the outrageous proposal he describes.

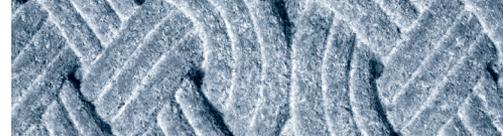
It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town¹ or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms.² These mothers, 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 want³ of work, or leave their dear native country to fight for the Pretender⁴ in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes.⁵ **A**

sustenance (sŭs'tə-nəns)
n. a means of support or nourishment

A PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 1–10. Underline the problem that poor mothers have. Circle three things that Swift says happen to poor children as they grow up.

- this great town:** Dublin, Ireland.
- importuning** (im'pôr-tōon'ing) . . . **alms** (ämz): begging from every passerby for a charitable handout.
- want:** lack; need.
- Pretender:** James Edward Stuart, who claimed the English throne, from which his now deceased father, James II, had been removed in 1688. Because James II and his son were Roman Catholic, the common people of Ireland were loyal to them.
- sell . . . Barbadoes:** To escape poverty, some Irish migrated to the West Indies, obtaining money for their passage by agreeing to work as slaves on plantations there for a set period.



80 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,¹² 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

90 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. **D**

I have reckoned upon a medium that a child just born will weigh twelve pounds, and in a solar year if tolerably nursed increaseth to twenty-eight pounds.

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very

100 proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children. **E**

Infant's 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,¹³ that fish being a prolific¹⁴ diet, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent¹⁵ than at any other season; therefore, reckoning a year 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

110 other **collateral** advantage, by lessening the number of Papists¹⁶ among us.

12. **reserved for breed:** kept for breeding (instead of being slaughtered).

13. **grave . . . physician:** François Rabelais (răb'ə-lā'), a 16th-century French satirist.

14. **prolific:** promoting fertility.

15. **Lent:** Catholics traditionally do not eat meat during Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter, and instead eat a lot of fish.

16. **popish** (pō'pīsh) . . . **Papists:** hostile or contemptuous terms referring to Roman Catholics.

D PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 80–95. What is Swift's shocking proposition in these lines? Underline the details that support this proposition.

E SATIRE

Reread lines 99–101. What aspect of society does Swift ridicule in these lines? What satirical technique does he employ?

collateral (kə-lăt'ər-əl) *adj.*
 accompanying as a parallel or subordinate factor; related

F SATIRE

Reread lines 112–125. Circle examples of **overstatement** in these lines. What does Swift's satire reveal about his attitude toward the rich?

deference (dĕf'ər-əns) *n.* a yielding or courteous regard toward the opinion, judgment, or wishes of others; respect

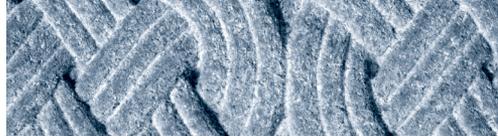
I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child (in which list I reckon all cottagers, laborers, and four fifths of the farmers), to be about two shillings per annum, rags included; and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, 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
 120 the tenants; the mother will have eight shillings net profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.

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. **F**

As to our city of Dublin, shambles¹⁷ 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
 130 we do roasting pigs.

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 county being now ready to starve for want of work and service; and these to be disposed of by their parents, if alive, or otherwise
 140 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

17. **shambles**: slaughterhouses.



some scrupulous people might be apt to censure such a practice
150 (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. G

But in order to justify my friend, he confessed that this
expedient was put into his head by the famous Psalmanazar, a
native of the island Formosa,¹⁸ who came from thence to London
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,
160 who was crucified for an attempt to poison the emperor, was
sold to his Imperial Majesty's prime minister of state, and other
great mandarins of the court, in joints from the gibbet,¹⁹ 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 groat²⁰ to their fortunes cannot stir abroad without
a chair,²¹ and appear at the playhouse and assemblies in foreign
fineries which they never will pay for, the kingdom would not be
the worse.

Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern
170 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
encumbrance. 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 younger laborers, they are
now in almost as hopeful a condition. They cannot get work,
and consequently pine away for want of nourishment to a degree
that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labor,
180 they have not strength to perform it; and thus the country and
themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come.

18. **Psalmanazar** (säl'mə-nāz'ər) . . . **Formosa** (fôr-mō'sə): a French imposter in London who called himself George Psalmanazar and pretended to be from Formosa (now Taiwan), where, he said, cannibalism was practiced.

19. **gibbet** (jīb'īt): gallows.

20. **groat**: an old British coin worth four pennies.

21. **cannot stir** . . . **chair**: cannot go outside without using an enclosed chair carried on poles by two men.

G SATIRE

Reread lines 146–152. What is **ironic** about Swift's concern regarding what some "scrupulous people" might think?

expedient (ĭk-spē'dē-ənt)
n. something useful in achieving the desired effect; a convenience; an advantage

encumbrance (ēn-kŭm'brəns)
n. a burden

Why are aged, diseased, and maimed poor people less of an **encumbrance** than poor children?

famine (fām'ĭn) *n.* a period in which there is a severe shortage of food

H PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 182–204. Circle the words or phrases that Swift uses to introduce the first four advantages of his plan. Then complete the chart.

Problem	
<i>Too many poor children in Ireland</i>	
↓	
Proposition	
<i>Feed children to the wealthy.</i>	
↓	
Support	
1.	_____

2.	_____

3.	_____

4.	_____

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.

For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly overrun, being the principal breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies; and who stay at home on purpose to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of
 190 so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an Episcopal curate.²²

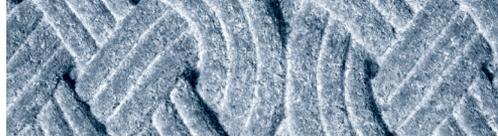
Secondly, the poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to distress,²³ and help to pay their landlord’s rent, their corn and cattle being already seized and money a thing unknown.

Thirdly, whereas the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two years old and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation’s stock will
 200 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. **H**



22. **Protestants . . . curate** (kyōōr'īt): Swift is criticizing absentee Anglo-Irish landowners who lived—and spent their income from their property—in England.

23. **distress**: seizure of a person’s property for the payment of debts.



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.

Fifthly, this food would likewise bring great custom to taverns, where the vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the
210 best receipts²⁴ 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.

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 toward their children, when they were sure of a settlement for life to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the
220 public, to their annual profit instead of expense. We should 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 sows when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage. ❶

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
230 art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables, which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well-grown, fat, yearling 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. ❷

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 weddings and christenings, I compute that Dublin would take off annually about twenty
240 thousand carcasses, and the rest of the kingdom (where probably

❶ PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 215–226. According to Swift, how would his proposal improve family life?

propagation (prɒp'ə-gā'shən)
n. the act of reproducing, multiplying, or increasing

❷ SATIRE

How is the speaker's claim for brevity an example of irony?

24. **receipts:** recipes.

Text Analysis: Satire

Jonathan Swift used his wit to express powerful criticism against the political and cultural injustices of his time. Complete the chart below to show how he used satirical techniques to make his points.

Satirical Techniques	Example
verbal irony: a statement that says the opposite of what it means	a statement about the rich: a statement about the poor:
sarcasm: a mocking tone	a statement about landlords:
overstatement: the use of deliberate exaggeration; presenting an outrageous or shocking idea as if it were rational	a statement about his “modest” proposal:

Review the notes you took while reading and the completed chart above. What did Jonathan Swift *really* think about Ireland’s rich, its poor, and the huge gap between their ways of life?

Reading Skill: Identify Proposition and Support

Regardless of your emotional response to Swift’s “modest proposal,” how well do you think he supported his proposition? Use the notes you took while reading to complete the chart below.

Problem:
Swift’s proposal:
Support
Benefits for the poor: _____ _____
Benefits for the rich: _____ _____
Culinary (food-related) benefits: _____ _____
Benefits for family life: _____ _____
Benefits for Ireland: _____ _____

How can we fight INJUSTICE?

Reread your ideas in response to this question on page 174. Based on Swift’s satirical response to the poverty in Ireland, do you think satire is an effective means of fighting injustice? Why or why not?

Vocabulary Practice

Write **S** (synonym) or **A** (antonym) next to each pair of words.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. propagation/reduction _____ | 5. encumbrance/advantage _____ |
| 2. collateral/accompanying _____ | 6. expedient/convenience _____ |
| 3. famine/feast _____ | 7. rudiment/foundation _____ |
| 4. deference/contempt _____ | 8. sustenance/nourishment _____ |

Academic Vocabulary in Writing

affect

challenge

consent

final

respond

Think about how a food shortage might **affect** our society today. How would we **respond** to such a disaster? Use at least two of the Academic Vocabulary words in your explanation. Definitions of these words are on page 157.

Assessment Practice

DIRECTIONS Use “A Modest Proposal” to answer questions 1–6.

- Swift’s essay sharply criticizes —
 - poor people’s inability to improve their circumstances
 - rich people’s treatment and perception of the poor
 - the population explosion that threatened Ireland’s stability
 - society’s tendency to ignore its problems
- In lines 193–196, what is Swift criticizing?
 - people who travel outside of Ireland
 - the inhabitants of Topinamboo
 - the attitudes of the rich
 - common practices that hurt Ireland
- Which line is an example of overstatement?
 - I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child . . .*
 - The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half . . .*
 - The fine gentlemen, who justly value themselves upon their knowledge of good eating . . .*
 - . . . utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury . . .*
- Which line is an example of sarcasm?
 - I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject.*
 - there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent . . .*
 - . . . landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.*
 - I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar’s child.*
- Swift calls poor women “breeders” to show that —
 - poor women bear enormous burdens
 - rich women have better medical care
 - poor women are dehumanized
 - poverty is a problem everywhere
- Which idea below is *not* a benefit Swift mentions to support his proposal to use Irish babies as food?
 - keep the poor from multiplying
 - help the poor to prosper
 - add to Ireland’s culinary diversity
 - reduce the number of Papists