

**Jonathan Swift. (1667 – 1745). ‘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.’ (1729).**

**Introduction** (from *Norton*)

A satirical essay manifesting a brilliant use of irony and parody and at the same time developing a carefully structured logical argument. Gives a sardonic glance at the by then familiar figure of the benevolent humanitarian set out to correct a social evil by means of a theoretically conceived plan.

Elaborates on the metaphor that ‘The English are devouring the Irish’. In a controlled way expresses the author’s pity for the oppressed, populous and hungry Catholic peasants of Ireland and his anger at the behaviour of the English absentee landlords.

**Summary**

The author observes the melancholy spectacle of female beggars with their numerous children in a tow crowding the streets of Dublin and the country in general. He sees no other perspectives for these children but that they are to become thieves or leave their home country. He offers a cheap and easy method of making the children of the poor useful members of the commonwealth.

He develops a precise argument calculating the costs for maintaining a child as it grows and considering the birth rate of those who can support their children and those who cannot do so. He arrives at the number of one hundred and twenty thousand children being annually born to poor parents. While a child can be breast-fed until the age of one, it is unable to support itself by stealing or otherwise until the age of six and is no saleable commodity until the age of twelve. The author proposes that children at the age of one should not starve but on the contrary be used to the feeding of the country.

The author draws his conclusion from discussions with several persons and ensures the reader that young children are fit to make a delicious and wholesome meal. He proposes to offer one hundred thousand children for food and to preserve twenty thousand children for breeding, one fourth of this number being males. One male can then serve four females. The skin of the children sold for feeding can be furthermore used to make gloves for ladies and boots for gentlemen.

What follows is a series of points supporting the scheme as highly beneficial. Firstly, this design will lessen the number of hated Papists. Secondly, the poor tenants will have something to pay their debts with, either the child itself or the profit derived from its sale. Also a new profession of a constant breeder would be created. Breeding mothers would get rid of the charge of keeping their children after the first year and would be fit to work until producing another child. Also husbands beating their wives in pregnancy would stop the violence for fear of the woman’s miscarriage. The scheme will also encourage and support marriages.

(Note: The following part of the essay includes proposals that Swift himself made in various serious pamphlets; the individual points were printed in italics to mark that the author is being no more ironic). As complements to the scheme above, the author suggests that the absentees should be taxed, the country should use goods of its own production only, or that the people should be taught to love their country. In the conclusion, the author hopes for the success of his scheme on behalf of his country and denies having any personal interest in it, his children being too old for sale and his wife past childbearing.

**Works Cited**

Abrams, M. H., ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Vol. 1. NY: Norton, 1999.