



Hugvísindasvið

The Satire as a Social Mirror:

Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal in Context

Ritgerð til B.A. prófs í ensku

Bryndís Gunnarsdóttir

Maí, 2009

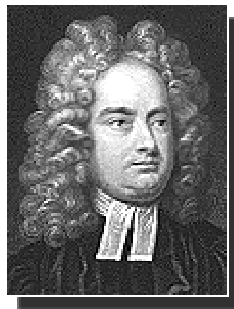
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Summary

The history of Ireland is a history of invasion and oppression, of famine and death, religious persecution and unjust laws. In spite of that, the Irish “soul” has survived; the nation is as Catholic today as it has been for centuries. The English colonist tried hard to suppress and destroy the Catholic religion there, but did not succeed.

Satire has existed for centuries and one of the great eras of satire was England in the eighteenth century. Satirists use laughter and irony to address situations they find unacceptable and even though their solution to the perceived problem can be unrealistic, it often brings to light unjust and unacceptable situations that might otherwise have been ignored.

Jonathan Swift is one of the best satirists of English literature. He is considered a national hero in Ireland, even though he was a devout Anglican and despised Catholicism. He did have sympathy for the Irish Catholics, in spite of his feelings about their faith because he was a man of principle, and had a strong sense of right and wrong. He saw the policies and practices of the English government and the Anglo-Irish landlords as being unjust and, indeed, disastrous to Ireland herself. He made several proposals to change the situation, to make Ireland and the Irish people prosper.

A Modest Proposal is considered to be the best satire ever written. It is a harsh satire, with a grotesque proposal, making the gravity and the hopelessness of the situation of the Irish people crystal clear to anyone who reads it. The famous metaphor, “The English are devouring the Irish”, meant that because of unfair trading practices, too high rent and absentee landlords, the Irish were being starved and slowly destroyed by the English. Swift plays with this metaphor in his essay. I will examine the *Proposal* in this discussion within the context of Irish history and Swift’s attempts to call attention to the Irish situation, demonstrating how effective satire can be as a tool to catch and hold the reader’s attention.

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Introduction

Political satire is a fascinating way of looking at society. The matters and issues politics is concerned with are the ones that concern us all. They are the issues that can help make our lives easier or harder. While studying English I read Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* in an introductory class of English literature and fell in love with it. The manner in which Swift makes his outrageous proposal is a mark of his genius and has made a huge impression on me. Ever since that first reading, I have been a big fan of Swift and his satire, as well as satire in general.

In order to discuss sensitive contemporary social issues many authors use the form of satire. It gives them the freedom to raise questions about serious matters that people may find difficult to discuss because of their serious nature. Discussing issues with humour and irony can take the sharpest sting out of the issue and make it easier to figure out and find a solution to. Satire can also be effective in catching people's attention since it often shocks and stirs things up. Therefore I believe that the use of satire can be helpful when serious social matters and tabus are being discussed.

Because of the strong impression Swift made on me, I decided to take a closer look at his best satire, *A Modest Proposal*. It is considered among the best written satires in the world and Swift himself considered one of the best satirists in the world as well. It is therefore a satire worth a very close look and analysis. To me, the content of the *Proposal*, and the manner in which Swift addresses the problem of the poor, is very appealing, even though his solution to the problem itself is quite grotesque. Swift's writing, his use of language in his descriptions of situations and people, and his imagination, is fantastic. In my discussion I will examine *A Modest Proposal* briefly within the context of Irish history. I believe that it cannot be understood fully without knowledge of the condition of the people, as well as the political reality, in Ireland in the eighteenth century. I will also examine the *Proposal* within the context of Swift's earlier attempts to call attention to the seriousness of the situation in Ireland, demonstrating how much more effective his satire was as a tool to catch and hold his reader's attention.

Irish History

The first accounts of Ireland are to be found in the writings of early Greek historians, from as early as the sixth century. Ireland has been populated since 8000 B.C. and had been successfully invaded and conquered by the Celts in 200 B.C. Ireland is one of the few Middle- and South European countries that were not invaded by the Romans in the period of the Roman Empire (Corráin 2).

It is not known exactly when the Irish became a Christian nation. It is believed that the first missionaries came to Ireland in the fourth and fifth centuries. The most famous of the Irish missionaries is St. Patrick, a British born Christian. He travelled around Ireland, converting the population to Christianity in the first half of the fifth century. There were many other Christian missionaries and the majority of the Irish people were Christians by the year 600 (Corráin 8).

The monasteries formed a foundation for the Irish culture. The tradition in Ireland is that of ecclesiastical scholars, writers, poets, grammarians, and historians. The lawmakers used the Old Testament as the foundation of vernacular laws and Christian influence became deeply rooted in the Irish soul (Corráin 12-13). This Christian influence was also apparent in the relationship between kings and church. There were five to six kings in Ireland who were powerful and who ruled the country. They were backed by the church and the relationship between kings and church was beneficial to both parties (Corráin 26).

Even though the Romans never managed to invade the island, the Irish were subject to numerous invasions in the Middle Ages. The first big invasion of Ireland was the Viking conquest, which began in 795 and continued for two hundred years (Corráin 31). The first raids were quick and small, so called “hit-and-run incidents” where the Vikings appeared and disappeared just as fast. By the 830s the raids had become more intense and in 841 the Vikings made their first settlement in Dublin. For several decades there was relative peace between the Vikings and the Irish, but in 914 the invasions began again and lasted until 950 when the raids of the Vikings finally came to a halt (Corráin 33-34).

The Vikings, or the Ostmen as they called themselves, made a great impression on Ireland as traders. They were great shipmen, had sophisticated ships and boats, not

only for war but also for trade. The Ostmen made the Irish trade flourish and it became extensive and profitable from 950 to the twelfth century (Corráin 37).

The Anglo-Irish Relationship

Even though the kings of Ireland were powerful they had problems with the Dubliners who were of Norse descent and were not keen on being ruled by the Irish kings and church. One of these kings, Dermot MacMurrough, was forced to leave Ireland by the high-king Rory O'Connor who helped the Dubliners fight Dermot when he attacked the city (Simms 55). The relationship between Ireland and England had until this point been peaceful for the most part. The English king, Henry II, was perhaps interested in Ireland, its trading connections and resources, but an English invasion had never been seriously planned.

In 1166, King Dermot went to King Henry and with his assistance managed to crush the revolt of the Irish kings and lords. King Henry then changed his mind and in 1171 fought Dermot and his men, and won. King Henry gave his younger son, John, all rights to Ireland. When John became king of England after the death of his older brother, Richard, Ireland was in fact a part of the English crown (Simms 57-59). Now began the era of the absentee landlords and great hardship for the Irish people. The next few centuries were difficult for Ireland, with decaying defences and incompetent administration as well as plagues and bad harvests (Simms 85-86). England itself was unstable due to conflicts such as the War of the Roses and the Irish were more or less left to fend for themselves (Simms 88).

After the Reformation in England of King Henry VIII, and later Elizabeth I, things began to go sour for the Catholic majority in Ireland. A penal law was established against Catholics, which stated for example, that Catholics were not allowed to vote, to run for office or to own a firearm. The English king, the Catholic James I, did not allow the penal statutes against Catholics in Ireland to be fully enforced and the Catholic clergy took great advantage of this fact, to the disapproval of the Protestant officials (Canny 139).

A rebellion against the Protestant settlers began in Ulster in 1641 and spread all over Ireland. The Catholics attacked Protestants and thousands were killed and made to leave their homes. The stories told of these events were greatly exaggerated by the Protestants and loud cries for revenge were heard from the Protestant populations

(Canny 144). In England, the civil war led to the execution of James I and Oliver Cromwell took power. He was a vigorous Protestant and determined to revenge the supposed massacre of Protestants in Ireland. He proposed a programme that aimed at destroying all Catholic power and influence in Ireland and he was very successful at his work (Canny 145-146).

After King Charles II came into power in England things looked up for the Catholics. He was however not successful in helping and the Protestant land settlements Cromwell had put in place became permanent. Even so, the Catholic Irish had a short time of peace and quiet under the rule of Charles II and James II and this “interim proved crucial for the survival of Catholicism in Ireland” (Canny 149). This Catholic breathing space did not last long and after James II had been expelled from his throne and the Protestant William of Orange and his wife Mary had taken power, the Catholic Irish tried to help James II regain his crown (Canny 150). They were not successful and this defeat sealed the fate of the Catholic landowners and facilitated the penal laws against Catholics. “However, while the political war was lost, the battle for souls had been won. Ireland at the outset of the eighteenth century was English and Protestant in appearance, but still predominantly Catholic in religion” (Canny 153).

Ireland in the Eighteenth Century

Trade was blooming in Ireland in the eighteenth century even though there were tariffs and bans on Irish woollens being sold to England. Foreign trade as well as domestic bloomed but there were difficulties with the fluctuating value of Irish coinage and the ever present threat of war (Foster 170-171). The Anglo-Irish population were the landowners, the clergy and the politicians. Even though they were in league with England, there was a growing disquiet among them because of how Ireland was run and managed by the crown. Swift himself “asked why a free man in England seemed to lose his autonomy by simply crossing the Irish Sea” (Kiberd 297). The Anglo-Irish may not have wanted independence or any power to be given to the Catholics, but they wanted more independence under the crown. They wanted a strong Irish parliament and were growing impatient with the rule of the English in Ireland. They thought of themselves as Irishmen and wanted to be treated by England as equals (Kee 59). The attempt of the Crown to arrange an Irish minting

monopoly, the so-called Wood's halfpence affair in 1722, angered many. Jonathan Swift campaigned fiercely against it in his *Drapier's Letters* and in the end was successful in stopping the fiasco (Foster 167).

In spite of the Anglo-Irish anger towards the Crown for not showing enough interest in Ireland and its affairs, there was little sympathy among them for the native Catholics. Ireland had several different social classes. At the top were the politically powerful Anglo-Irish, the more fluent Protestant landowning minority. At the bottom were the poor Catholic population, involved in farming, service or the textile industry (Canny 159). Several of the Catholics were living in severe poverty and only managed to survive by stealing and/or begging in the streets.

There was a great problem in Ireland with poverty and in fact too many children being born to the lower classes. People were having great difficulty making ends meet and many mothers had to resort to begging. This was a great problem in Swift's view and he had great concern for the poor. There was a rather sarcastic metaphor already existing, one that Swift played upon in the *Proposal*, which goes as follows: "The English are devouring the Irish". It meant that because of unfair trading practices, too high rent and absentee landlords, the Irish were being starved and slowly destroyed by the English.

Satire

Satire existed in ancient Greece, in the Middle ages, and through the centuries until today. One of the great eras of satire was the eighteenth century in England. Great writers such as Swift, Pope, Dryden, Addison, and more, all wrote satire in the form of poems, drama, essays, and criticism (Harmon and Holman 461).

Satire has been defined as “a work or manner that blends a censorious attitude with humor and wit for improving human institutions or humanity”. Satirists use laughter to address situations they find unacceptable and, therefore, in need of change. There are two different types of satire, formal and indirect. In formal satire, the writer usually uses a persona who speaks directly to the reader or to one of the characters in the work. Formal satire has two types. Juvenalian satire is quite bitter and angry, biting harshly at the situation and people that the writer finds corrupt and unacceptable. Horatian satire is more gentle, using laughter to try to change the situation. In indirect satire, the characters of the satire are themselves ridiculed and made fun of (Harmon and Holman 461). There are several forms of indirect satire, the principle one being Menippean, which usually does not have characters but more commonly mental attitudes to deal with (Harmon and Holman 313).

It can be difficult to pinpoint exactly what makes a specific work a satire. The satire can be in the form of a poem, a novel, an essay, and so forth. The satire is therefore not one specific thing in the work, not like different kind of rhyme or the many uses of persona. A work is a satire because of its special character (Sutherland 1). A satirist is a person who finds a specific situation or occurrence to be unjust and unacceptable, and will try with his satire to identify what is wrong with the situation and offer his solution. He is “abnormally sensitive to the gap between what might be and what is” (Sutherland 4) and even though his solution can often be beyond reality, it can bring to light the unjust and the unacceptable. It is not enough, however, for the satirist to bring forth his solution and hope that people will read it and agree. For a satire to be successful the satirist’s point of view must be accepted and agreed upon by the reader, which means that “the art of the satirist ... is an art of persuasion” (Sutherland 5).

It has been called political satire when the satirist uses his art of persuasion to convince the reader about the good of a specific cause, but, in fact, most satire is

political in some form. Even though the cause itself is not purely political, the art of the satirist is to persuade and convince people that his cause is the right one. A good political satire is intelligent and subtle and allows the imagination to run free. It can be misunderstood and is therefore often discarded as rubbish and foolishness. But the fact is that if the satire is looked at more closely and the true message of the satire is understood, it can be a helpful tool when difficult matters are discussed.

Modern Satire

Today, satire is prominent in television shows, political satire especially. There are a number of American television shows that make fun of current social and political issues and make it easier to discuss difficult and serious matters with the use of humour, irony and even sarcasm. Some of the most famous of these shows are *The Colbert Nation* and *The Daily Show*, both on the American television station *Comedy Central*. *The Colbert Nation* is very popular and has been nominated numerous times for the prestigious Emmy awards in America. In his show, Stephen Colbert unmercifully pokes fun at politicians and other dignitaries, at war and atrocities committed around the world, as well as at social matters like racism, sexism and violence.

In Iceland there has been a weekly comedy show that uses satire, irony and humour to discuss the social and political matters each week. This show, *Spaugstofan*, has been on the air for two decades, but it is especially important today, with the hardship the Icelandic people are suffering because of the recent economic recession. Many people are facing unemployment, losing their homes and going bankrupt, and it can be difficult to face the future, and the insecurities and difficulties ahead. *Spaugstofan* is therefore very important in making these very serious and difficult matters seem a little funny and, hopefully, manageable. *Spaugstofan* is not as harsh a satire as *A Modest Proposal*, but still a satire, and as such helpful in discussing serious social matters and perhaps asking questions that need to be asked, like who is to blame and what is the government doing to help the public deal with economic hardship.

Jonathan Swift

In order to understand a man's work one must understand the man. Jonathan Swift was born in Dublin in 1667 of English parents, although his father had died some months before his birth. He was a part of the Anglo-Irish ruling class, educated at Kilkenny School and Trinity College in Dublin. During the Glorious Rebellion in England, Swift, and his fellow Anglo-Irish, were forced to leave Ireland for England, where Swift lived mostly with Sir William Temple, a friend of the new King William of Orange. Swift continued his education and eventually took orders in the Church of England. In 1699 he went back to Ireland as chaplain to the Lord Justice, who was the Earl of Berkeley (Abrams 883).

Swift was a passionate Anglican and he saw the Church as equally important as the Crown. He was quite hostile to anyone who seemed to threaten his church in any way, whether they were Catholics or Dissenters, and even Whig politicians. In spite of his passion for the Church, his career never went further than becoming the Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin in 1713 (Abrams 883). Religion to Swift was a matter of life. He believed in Christian charity and that people should be good to one another. In his sermons to his congregation he preached charity and kindness, and urged people to show Christian charity (Williams 82). He did not believe, though, that humans were good by nature (Abrams 884), and therefore it was important to have a strong church with clear rules, that, when people follow the rules, make it possible for them to be good and kind to others. In *A Modest Proposal*, one can see that his sense of what is right had been trampled on, that the unjust society of Ireland at the time was not a society Swift wanted. It angered him greatly to hear people talk of the riches of Ireland when so many of the Irish people were starving and living in immense poverty (Williams 113) and most certainly contributed to his writings in defense of Ireland and its people.

Swift suffered from Ménier's disease, which affects the inner ear and causes for example nausea and deafness. He spent his last years in misery, and having spent much of his adult life with "the dread of madness" (Williams 19), he died in a mental hospital on October 19, 1745. The money he left behind was used to found a hospital for the mentally ill, St. Patrick's Hospital for Imbeciles, as it was originally called. The hospital still exists today and functions as a psychiatric hospital in Dublin.

Swift and Satire

Swift began to write satire in his twenties. In 1696 or '97 he wrote the satires *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Battle of the Books*. They were published several years later and Swift's reputation as a literary genius began to form. He was indeed a great writer and a fantastic satirist. He was witty, defining a good style of writing as "proper words in proper places". His style is simple and uncomplicated and grows "more tense and controlled the more fierce the indignation that it is called on to express" (Abrams 884). This style can definitely be seen in *A Modest Proposal*, controlled with anger and indignation boiling between the lines.

Some of Swift's satires were published under a pseudonym, such as *The Drapier's Letters*, and he uses the satiric persona quite often to represent certain views. The advantage for Swift in using the persona is that it made him able to express his own views about certain matters that he might not have been otherwise able to do. By using a different persona to make his arguments, he escaped from his "official personality as a Churchman of some rank" (Williams 11) and it made it possible for him to say things that a Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin was not supposed to say. Even so, Williams claims, Swift does not hide behind his different personas, he is ever present and obvious to the reader, although in a subtle way (11).

Throughout his life, Jonathan Swift experienced several disappointments. He decided on the Church as a career, he left the Whig party because of differences of opinion, his career was limited within the Church and he was forced to live in Ireland more or less against his will (Abrams 883). Katherine Williams discusses these disappointments in her book and states that perhaps it was disappointment that made him the great satirist that he was. He was unsure of himself and always afraid of the worst outcome so it would have been easier for him to satirize an issue rather than discussing it straightforwardly (4), the satire being a kind of shield against failure and criticism.

It is true that Swift did not always get what he wanted and he must have been disappointed many times, but I am not convinced that he was taking the easier way by writing satire. In fact, it is very difficult to write a good satire because one must be careful not to cross the line and become vulgar and cruel, or going to far the other way, with too little bite, being simply funny.

Swift and Politics

Swift's political views supposedly changed a great deal during his lifetime. He was "a Whig at the beginning of Queen Anne's reign but a Tory by the end of it". The study of Swift and politics is quite a complicated matter and has been interpreted differently by different biographers (Higgins 1).

The two opposing parties of English politics in the eighteenth century were the Whigs and the Tories. The Whigs believed in a strong Parliament that should have the power to determine the succession to the English throne and they were quite liberal in religious matters. They supported the claim of the Hanoverian Protestant, William of Orange and his wife Queen Anne, to the throne. The Tories, on the other hand, supported the Anglican church and the country gentry. They were not happy about the Hanoverian succession and hoped that the Catholic James Edward, son of King Charles II, would convert to the Anglican Church and the succession of the Stuart kings would continue (United Kingdom 183).

Swift left the Whig party because he felt they did not care enough about the Anglican Church. The Tories were more than happy to have him in their party and he "became the most brilliant political journalist of the day, serving the government of Oxford and Bolingbroke as editor of the party organ, the *Examiner*, and as author of its most powerful articles..." (Abrams 883). Even though he was a Tory for the rest of his life his political views resembled the Whig's views more than the Tories, except on matters concerning the church. At one point, he himself claimed to be a "High-Church Whig" and stated that "there was no real difference between the essential principles of Whig and Tory and that he was moderate and bipartisan" (Higgins 5). Swift did not believe in extremes, and he often preached to his congregation to avoid extremes (Williams 103), and this can be seen in his politics. He was not an extreme man, except maybe when it came to his beloved Anglican Church.

Swift as an Irish Hero

The legend of Swift as an Irish patriot can be seen as quite ironic, given that he lived in Ireland more or less against his own will. He wanted desperately to leave and live in England, but because of political changes there he was forced to stay in Ireland. He was not very happy with his exile and at one time described his condition in Dublin as

being like a “poisoned rat in a hole” (Irish Literature 5). In this discussion, I will focus mostly on Swift’s later years as he began to show support for the Irish poor and wrote pamphlets and letters which have made him known in Ireland as an Irish patriot.

Politics and religion were favorite subjects in his prose, and he wrote many pamphlets and other works to further a specific cause. Swift was indeed an Englishman in Ireland, but he did live in that country and saw many of the corrupt and unjust laws and policies taking place there. Swift had a strong sense of justice and he was angered by the government of Ireland, the way Ireland was slowly being drained of all its wealth and people. He made several appeals to his fellow Anglo-Irish, as well as to the government in England, proposals to help Ireland become richer and to increase justice and patriotism. The Irish tracts, the pamphlets, sermons and letters he wrote in order to bring the serious situation in Ireland to light, are fascinating to read, and they make it clear that Swift did indeed have the interest of the impoverished Irish at heart, as well as of the Anglo-Irish. Even though he did not like the Catholics very much, he disapproved of the abuse they suffered at the hand of the absentee landlords.

In 1720 Swift wrote *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufactures (in Clothes and Furniture of Houses, and Utterly Rejecting and Renouncing Every Thing Wearable that Comes from England)*, trying to bring to light the unjust trade bans on Irish wool and the custom of the Anglo-Irish gentry of not using the Irish linen, wool or anything else manufactured in Ireland. This pamphlet was an attack on the Anglo-Irish as well as on the English, who Swift saw as degraded and corrupt. He states in this pamphlet that everything that comes from England, will be burned and destroyed, “except the people and the coals”. Swift published this piece anonymously and it was well received by the public, but not so well by the authorities. Indeed, the printer of the piece was prosecuted by the authorities, but in spite of their efforts, the public outrage at the prosecution became so great that eventually they were forced to drop the case (Daly 227).

One of Swift’s most famous political satires are the so-called *Drapier’s Letters*, written between 1724 and ‘25. The letters were seven in all: 1) *To the Shop-Keepers, Tradesmen, Farmers, and Common-People of Ireland*; 2) *A Letter to Mr. Harding the Printer, upon Occasion of a Paragraph in his News-Paper of 1 August, Relating to Mr. Wood’s Half-Pence*; 3) *To the Nobility and Gentry of the Kingdom of Ireland: some Observations upon a Paper, call’d, the Report of the Committee of the most Honourable the Privy-Council in England relating to Wood’s Half-Pence*; 4) *To the*

whole People of Ireland, a Word or two to the People of Ireland, a Short Defence of Ireland; 5) *A Letter to the Honourable the Lord Viscount Molesworth, at his House in Brackdenstown, near Swords*; 6) *To the Lord Chancellor Middleton*; and 7) *An Humble Address to both Houses of Parliament* (Daly 25-131). *The Drapier's Letters* is a good example of Swift's use of a satiric persona, as I discussed earlier. He was able to express his views with the aid of the persona without hiding behind it, because everybody seemed to know that it was Swift who was speaking behind the persona of the Drapier, except maybe the authorities.

He wrote those letters under the pseudonym of M. D. Drapier, although it was common knowledge that Drapier was Swift, in order to protest the new copper-coin monopoly given to a Mr. Wood under suspicious circumstances (Abram 883). The manner in which it was introduced was outrageous to the Irish. There was no consultation with the Irish parliament or the Irish government and the "indignation of the country had risen to boiling-point"; Swift simply "gave it a voice" (Daly 25). His letters were successful and the Irish refused the new coin. In spite of an award being offered to anyone who knew of Drapier's true identity, nobody came forward and "Swift is still venerated in Ireland as a national hero" (Abrams 883).

In 1726, Swift sent a letter to Sir Robert Walpole, titled *The Present Miserable State of Ireland*, in which he states that the "Irish trade is, at present, in the most deplorable condition that can be imagined..." (Daly 217). In his view, the main problems were the trading ban on Irish wool, which had been in place for a while, the shortages of land since so much land was used for pasture instead of agriculture, as well as the sky-high rent the impoverished tenants were forced to pay to the absentee landlords. The ban was destroying the textile industry of Ireland, the shortages of land leading to too many people living in towns in wretched conditions, and the high rent was causing great many cottagers to be forced out of their rentals because they could not afford the rent, turning them into beggars (Daly 217-24). In Swift's view, the problem was not with the Irish people but with the Anglo-Irish and the English, and he sums up the English attitudes towards the Irish with this phrase: "We are apt to charge the Irish with laziness, because we seldom find them employed; but then we don't consider they have nothing to do" (Daly 224). He saw the reality of the situation and was angered by the inaction of the government when it did nothing about it.

In *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, written in 1727, Swift discusses the issues that make a country flourish, as well as making it clear that Ireland is quite far from

prosperity. He states several points that must be present for a country to flourish and grow rich, such as good agricultural land, working people, even flow of exports and imports or free trade, the profits of the land being spent at home, and “being governed only by laws made with their own consent; for otherwise they are not a free people” (Daly 164-165). In Swift’s view, none of the points he makes are true of Ireland and therefore it is not flourishing or prospering. “If we flourish, it is against every law of nature and reason: like the thorn of Glastonbury, which blossoms in the midst of winter” (Daly 170).

Swift is obviously angry at the situation that Ireland is in, and is very angry with the English who are bleeding the country dry. He states that half of the income of Ireland is pure profit for England, but at the same time, the country is starving because so much of the income is going out of the country (Daly 169). Swift seems frustrated at the short-sightedness of the English since he at least knows “that, when the hen is starved to death, there will be no more golden eggs” (Daly 172). His solution for Ireland is therefore independence from the English who only seem to care for themselves and treat Ireland worse than any country Swift has ever heard of (Daly 167). This is a very extreme view from Swift, who, as I have stated before, was not an extreme man. But the situation was so serious in his mind, that his customary desire to seek compromise could not be accommodated and therefore he saw no way out for the Irish except an escape from the rule of England.

A Look at A Modest Proposal

A Modest Proposal is in the style of formal Juvenalian satire and Swift uses a persona to make the proposal. The persona is the “humanitarian” who speaks to the readers, trying hard to convince them that his proposal is a good one. It is a harsh satire with ever present irony. Irony is defined as speaking “words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise”, basically saying the opposite of what you mean (Harmon and Holman 277). It gives the effect of great restraint, as in the case of our humanitarian projector.

The humanitarian projector in the *Proposal* is concerned about the welfare of the impoverished Irish public and he presents a solution to poverty and starvation. The situation is very bad and the projector comes up with a solution that he finds to be both humane and economical. Although there is a persona speaking in the *Proposal*, we are aware of Swift’s presence in the satire, his anger at the situation and the inaction of the government (Williams 131-32).

In his book, James Sutherland compares Swift’s approach in the introduction to the proposal to a dentist’s approach, where he begins with some small-talk, introduces the injection and then the numbness begins and we feel nothing as the dentist drills and picks at our teeth (98). This is a very good metaphor as it describes the construction of the *Proposal* very clearly. At first, one thinks the projector is a reasonable humanitarian who has a real solution to the social problems of Ireland. But in fact his solution turns out to be just as painful as the dentist’s, at least in the short term. Perhaps, if one were to turn a blind eye to the grotesque details, the long term effect of the solution might seem as pleasant as the loss of a sore tooth!

The “dentist”, that is, the projector, starts with words of hope in the title. He has a good case, it seems at the onset, of having found a solution to the problem of too many hungry and disadvantaged children, and a way of “making them beneficial to the public” (Swift 1048). The essay continues with rather a sad description of the situation, of beggars, poor children and the dreadful circumstances they live in. One does therefore not expect the harsh proposal put forward in the text. The words, “a child just dropped from its dam”, may though give the reader a fair warning, since it is hardly “normal” to speak of human mothers as if they were mares.

The projector goes on about the problems the country has with these children since the cost of raising them will always be more than the profit they can make under the current circumstances. The parents have no real means of supporting them, and therefore the vicious cycle of begging and poverty continues generation after generation. The reader is indeed left with the feeling that something radical must be done in order to change the situation and the solution suggested by the projector seems quite reasonable, at least within the context of the *Proposal*.

The solution is simple. The projector has it on good authority 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...” (Swift 1049). A reasonable number of children should “be offered to sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom...” (Swift 1050). And as if this were not enough, he then proposes that the skin of the child may also be used, stating that “the skin of which [skilfully] dressed will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen” (Swift 1050).

The solution is utterly grotesque, the cannibalism of babies, but the author of the proposal believes it almost impossible for the reader not to accept it. “I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection” (Swift 1049), states the projector before he comes forward with his cannibalistic proposal. It is indeed the dentist sting, the drill that hits a nerve, that makes itself felt here. But the sting is not as painful as it would be because of the way Swift has anaesthetized the reader with the calmness of the projector’s description of the situation. One almost agrees with the solution, although one has to read the sentence more than once to really understand what he says because of the straightforwardness of his words and calmness of his proposal.

“The English are Devouring the Irish”

The metaphor “The English are devouring the Irish”, is the foundation of Swift’s *Proposal*. He takes this metaphor to the ultimate limit here, stating that since the parents have already been “devoured” by the landlords, why should they not feed on their children as well? The cannibalistic theme was not a new one in Swift’s time, nor was the idea that the Irish were indeed cannibals and savages. The Greek geographer Strabo, as well as some English writers, stated that the Irish were “anthropophagous”,

meaning that they were indeed animals in human form, descended from the Schythians, who were a cannibalistic tribe, believed to be the ancestor of the Irish (Rawson, *God* 79). The “science” behind this claim can be disputed but it was believed by many in Swift’s time. He himself did indeed describe the Irish custom of drinking horse blood with a “blend of pity and disgust” (Rawson, *God* 76) and there was an old idea still alive in England, likening the native Irish to the savages of Africa and the Americas (Rawson, *God* 3). Indeed, Rawson claims, that in *A Modest Proposal* Swift takes this idea of the savage, and cannibalistic Irish, and transfers it to the Anglo-Irish as well (*God* 10). One of the more grotesque images in Swift’s essay is his description of the table “at a lord mayor’s feast” where “a well-grown, fat, yearling child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure” (Swift 1052). This image must have been very shocking to the ruling classes and is without a doubt one of the main reasons the *Proposal* had such a great and shocking effect on the readers.

There is a great deal of horror and sadness in this work: The extreme poverty that the Irish suffered and the unfair and unjust policies which made it impossible for them to better their situation. In the *Proposal* there is also some mention of the old and the sick and the projector callously dismisses them as a problem since “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” (Swift 1051). There was no reason to do anything about them since they were already dying a slow and painful death! The satire makes known to others the extreme situation those people faced everyday and gave the idea that the Irish nation was being devoured “by its inhumane rulers and [that it was] a people so brutalized and savage that they would be prepared to sell and eat their children” (Higgins 191). One can only imagine the hardship the poor went through on a daily basis, simply trying to get by.

The Projector’s Arguments

In the *Proposal*, the projector makes several arguments in favour of his case. He speaks of these arguments with extreme distance and a cold economic view. The ever present irony is strong here, and while reading this one does almost accept the arguments as making complete sense, in terms of pure logic.

The first one of the projector's arguments is that eating children, and therefore keeping their number down, will reduce the number of Catholics. This argument would also be Swift's, meaning that Swift himself was a devout Anglican and would have wanted to reduce the number of Catholics, although, not with such inhumane measures. The Irish Catholics had supported the cause of the Pretender who was the son of the Catholic English king, James II, and claimed the English crown against William of Orange after the Glorious Rebellion (Klee 49). Since the Catholics in Ireland were "the principle breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies" (Swift 1051) it would make sense to limit their numbers in Ireland.

The second advantage of this proposal, according to the projector, is that it would give the poor something of value to sell, give them an income that they could keep stable by continuing to produce babies. The poor were in a bad situation in Ireland, being forced to pay sky high rent and being drowned in debt they could not pay. With a steady income, they would be able to pay their rent, pay their debt and keep their cattle and corn, making a decent living.

The third and fourth arguments are that the nation itself, as well as the parents, would save a great deal of money since it is quite expensive to raise and feed children. The burden of raising the children after the first year would thereby be lifted. Most of the native Irish lived in extreme poverty so any scheme that would save them money and make their living conditions more bearable was worth taking a close look at. It would have made perfect economical sense to give the people something of value to sell, since they had nothing at all at the present situation.

The fifth argument is that the taverns and "restaurants" of the area would see an increase in business since their owners would all want to serve the best meat on the market. This has the potential of being a very good economical prospect for those businesses. The Irish gentry, as well as noble travellers to Ireland would want this new and amazing delicacy, and the cooks would make it their mission to create as perfect and expensive a meal as possible. Other economical advantages to the proposal, the projector states in less detail, although he states that the export of beef will grow immensely if his proposal were realized.

Swift's Real Proposals

Even though Swift was a member of the ruling class, with strong commitments to the Crown and Church, he did speak about the injustice of the Irish society, often using the satirical persona as a front. As I discussed earlier, Swift himself had made several proposals to help the Irish poor and make the country rich and prosperous, but his proposals were discarded. Nobody who could do something about the situation listened or had any interest in doing anything to improve matters. Thus Swift turned to the satirical form to make his proposals, and it made his appeals even stronger because the fact is that the Catholic majority was by and large being treated even worse than cattle, even though nobody among the ruling classes wanted to admit it or change the situation.

In *A Modest Proposal* Swift states his own proposals for helping Ireland, but his persona dismisses them as being irrelevant and unimportant, as Swift's peers had done in real life. The proposals Swift himself makes are, to name a few, that the absentee landlords should be taxed; that the Irish should only use clothes and furniture made in Ireland; that foreign luxury materials should be rejected; that patriotism needs to be increased; that the Irish need to stop quarreling among themselves; that the Irish need to stop selling their country and conscience for little or no price; that the landlords need to learn to show at least a little mercy towards their tenants; and that the shop-keepers need to price their goods fairly (Swift 1052-53).

These are proposals Swift himself had made in his earlier essays, in letters and pamphlets, as I have noted before. *A Modest Proposal* is therefore full of true irony, making the projector's proposal of cannibalism appear more reasonable than Swift's own proposals, that were quite reasonable and sensible. A big part of Swift's satiric genius is grounded in his method of taking the ills of his society and making them clear to all through his use of irony and "part of Swift's irony is that prevailing values are so inhumane, that a gentle and moderate man will take all the horror for granted" (Rawson, *Gulliver* 40). Therefore his cannibalistic proposal does not at all seem barbaric but simply quite reasonable and practical. Swift is quite hard on his fellow Irishmen in this work, condemning them for overtaxing their tenants and being absent most of the time. He does indeed put most of the blame for the bad situation in Ireland on the absentee landlords and the laws and regulations made in England which allowed this abuse of Ireland.

The *Proposal* was published at a time when the Irish people were begging and starving, their lives as miserable as can be. Swift was horrified by the situation and had indeed tried before to make the graveness of the situation known. In the *Proposal* he uses satire and sarcasm with great restraint and purpose. Daly claims that no other of his work “has been more grievously misunderstood” (240), and one can easily understand why. It must have been very shocking for people to read such an essay, and readers unaware of the style of satire would have found it easy to misunderstand.

A Modest Proposal has been called the greatest satirical essay of all times and claims made that in “the prose satire of the eighteenth century, Swift has no equal...” (Sutherland 100). Those are very big words but with a thorough reading of the essay it is clear to me that those words are true.

Conclusion

The Irish have had their share of hardship and oppression throughout the centuries. In spite of that, or maybe because of it, they have come through it as a strong and independent nation. The Anglo-Irish relationship has not been beneficial to the Irish and through the centuries there has been much animosity between the two nations, England and Ireland, mostly because of the difference in religion.

Jonathan Swift is an unlikely Irish hero. An Anglican clerk of English descent and a self-proclaimed exile in Ireland, one would not think of him as a hero for the Catholic Irish. But his campaign in the latter part of his professional life, to help the case of the impoverished Irish Catholics and to right the injustice in Irish society, has indeed made his legacy strong and long lasting. He is remembered as a humanitarian and a benefactor of the poor.

Satire is a good way to approach sensitive and serious social matters. Political satire is the ultimate form of satire and Swift's *A Modest Proposal* the best. The use of satire can indeed be helpful when serious social matters and tabus are being discussed since the humour and irony make the issues seem easier to tackle.

As one understands the background to Swift's *Proposal*, and reads it in the context of Anglo-Irish history, one also understands why it is considered as important as it is. Swift had an amazing ability to write satire and he made the plight of the poor even more visible in England as well as in Ireland. He was horrified at the condition the Irish poor were forced to live in and made several attempts to bring the graveness of the situation to light. In his use of the metaphor, "the English are devouring the Irish", and method of giving seemingly reasonable economic justifications to his grotesque proposal of cannibalism, Swift makes a masterpiece. After studying the *Proposal* and the political and historical context in which it was written, I do agree more strongly than before with the statement that *A Modest Proposal* is the best written satire in the world and that Swift is the greatest satirist.

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