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A Modest Proposal

Jonathan Swift · *1729 · original English text (Project Gutenberg #1080)*

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, to see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by children in rags. The hosted text is Swift's original English, 1729, Project Gutenberg #1080, a short complete satire. For older students (11–12). Teach with gravity. This is not a real proposal.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

How should a school read a "proposal" that pretends to solve Irish poverty by eating children, without ever treating the plan as advice, and without missing the anger under the calm voice?

"It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in"

The opening

Swift, in a calm projector's voice, describes the beggars of Dublin and then offers, as a modest public scheme, that poor Irish children be sold as food. The essay is a satire of cruelty, of cold calculation, and of English policy toward a starving Ireland. It is not a real proposal and not a joke to be admired for shock only. Teach the suffering first, then the ironic voice, with gravity, for grades 11–12. Keep "cabbin-doors," "publick," and the rest of this file's spelling.

KEY CHARACTERS

The projector (the speaker)
The calm, helpful voice that offers the scheme; not to be taken as Swift's advice

The poor of Ireland
The mothers and children in rags at the cabbin-doors, whose suffering is the essay's first fact

The "publick" the speaker addresses
The audience whose calculations and policies the satire is meant to shame

A MELANCHOLY OBJECT

> *"It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in"*
>
> The opening

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

A Melancholy Object

THE OPENING

The streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors are crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, importuning every passenger for an alms. The mothers cannot work for an honest livelihood. This is the scene the projector pretends to solve.

- The first sentence is exact. Keep "cabbin-doors."
- Teach the poverty first, as a real grief, before the ironic plan.
- This is Swift, 1729, PG #1080, a short complete essay. For grades 11–12.
- Gravity from the first paragraph.

> *"It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in"*
>
> The opening

02

A Projector's Voice

THE PERSONA

The speaker is calm, helpful, and full of public spirit. He writes as a man with a scheme. The voice is the satire's instrument. Students must learn to hear the distance between Swift and this speaker.

- Do not treat the speaker as Swift's own advice.
- The title itself, A Modest Proposal, is already ironic.
- Teach irony as a moral tool, not as a trick only.
- 11–12.

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03

The Proposal, So Called

THE TURN

He says he has been assured by a very knowing American 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 will equally serve in a fricasee or a ragoust. Then he offers it to publick consideration.

- This is the turn. Teach it as satire, never as a plan, never as a recipe, never as a joke to be repeated for shock.
- Keep "fricasee," "ragoust," and "publick" as printed.
- Gravity. Do not put the kitchen language on a worksheet as if it were content to be enjoyed.
- The target is a cruelty already in the policy and the talk of the time.

> *"I have been assured by a very 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"*
>
> The turn

04

What the Satire Is For

THE ARGUMENT UNDER THE PLAN

The essay is anger under a calm voice: against a way of treating the Irish poor as a problem to be calculated, and against those who would rather invent a monstrous scheme than practice justice and mercy. Finish the essay, including the quieter alternatives the speaker pretends to dismiss.

- Name Ireland, and the poverty, and the policy. Do not leave the satire floating as a mere grotesque.
- This is not a manual, and not a horror tale.
- Teach mercy and justice as the virtues the irony defends.
- Catalogue 11–12.

> *"I have been assured by a very 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"*
>
> The turn

05

This File

THE EDITION

Original English, PG #1080, short and complete. The title also names the purpose: for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden, and for making them beneficial to the publick. That official language is part of the joke, and part of the accusation.

- Keep the 1729 spelling.
- Never present the proposal as advice.
- Gravity throughout.
- The opening melancholy object is the right first quotation.

> *"It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in"*
>
> The opening

A Real Grief · An Ironic Voice · Justice and Mercy · A Nation's Poor · Anger under Calm

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The essay opens: "It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex." Keep "cabbin-doors."
2. This is Swift, 1729, PG #1080, a short complete satire. For grades 11–12. Gravity. This is not a real proposal, not a recipe, and not a joke for shock.
3. Teach the poverty first, then the ironic projector's voice. Students must hear the distance between Swift and the speaker.
4. The turn ("I have been assured by a very knowing American...") must never be taught as advice. Keep "fricasee," "ragoust," and "publick."
5. The satire defends justice and mercy toward the Irish poor, and accuses a cruel calculus. Finish the essay. Do not leave it floating as a mere grotesque.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text (Project Gutenberg #1080), Project Gutenberg #1080, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/a-modest-proposal/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.