Jonathan Swift
(1667-1745)
A Modest Proposal
What is this, and what’s its purpose?

• This is a social satire essay.
• Swift wrote this in order to make people aware of the abusive tactics that rich English landowners used against poor Irish Catholic peasants.
• He thought that England was “exploiting and oppressing Ireland.”
The Situation

• Many Irishmen worked on farms owned by rich English landowners who charged them outrageous rents – at a rate that they could not afford. Frequently, the peasants could not pay their rental rates and try to feed their families at the same time.

• As a result, many of these Irish families constantly lived in danger of starvation.

• The English Protestants viewed these Irish peasants as “dirty, immoral Catholics” who did nothing but procreate and cause trouble.
How Swift pokes fun at those mean English landowners

- Swift proposes a VERY outrageous solution to the famine troubles plaguing the Irish.
- When you figure out what his solution is, you will know that the title of this essay is also ironic.
- Throughout the essay, Swift makes fun of the English’s view of the Irish Catholics by appearing to degrade them and say horrible things about them. In reality, he is exposing how bigoted and horrible the English were against an otherwise hardworking people.
The Proposal

- Miserable condition of the Irish poor
  - “...cabin doors crowed with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms.”
Premise

• “I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.”
Premise

• creates validity
  – everyone agrees with the premise
Premise

“and it is exactly at one year old that I propose to provide for them in such a manner as instead of being a charge upon their parents or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall on the contrary contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing, of many thousands.”
Premise

• Wins over the reader
  – Alleges he has found a way to allow the poor to give to the country
  – Seems like a good idea, until we hear exactly how the poor will be able to feed and clothe people
The Solution

• “I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.”
  – Ironic
  • hopes people will not be offended by his comments
  – Irish children?
The Solution

“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 boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.”
The Solution

• Shocking tone
  – Reader now realizes exactly what he is proposing

• The American
  – An “American” was a stock figure used to suggest barbaric, uncultured behavior

• Stereotype
Justification--#1

• Lessen the number of Papists
  – Papists= Catholics
  – considered as the principle breeders of the nation
  – considered to be “our most dangerous enemies”
Justification--#1

• Mocks the Protestants, many of whom left for England yet still control property in Ireland
Justification--#2

• The poor will have something to call their own
  – by law, landlords were able to seize property for payments of debt
  – therefore, this doesn’t benefit the poor but rather the rich
• mocking tone
Justification--#3

• Improvement of the Irish economy
  – if there are less children to care for, less money will be needed
  – Irish money will stay in Ireland because everything is home grown
Justification--#4

• The mothers of the children (called “breeders” by Swift) will no longer have to support the children after the first year, therefore saving money.
Justification--#5

• “Fine gentlemen” will be able to demonstrate their knowledge of good cooking and fine food.
  – Social commentary by Swift
  • “Fine gentlemen” would eat babies, literally doing what they had been figuratively doing for years
Justification--#6

• Promotes family values
  – If people are being paid to produce babies and then sell them for food, more people would want to get married and have babies
  – Men would not beat their wives because they would not want to harm their unborn children (their future profits).
Conclusion

• Functions as his motivation behind the proposal
  – “I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past childbearing.”
Conclusion

• Suggests the public good is his only motive
• He has no children young enough to sell and his wife is too old to produce any more kids, therefore he has nothing to personally gain from this proposal.
Political Commentary/Satire

• “I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.”
The land owners (mostly the Anglo-Irish Protestant ruling class, whose members spent most of their time and their money in England), most of whom live in England, have destroyed Ireland by devouring the parents—they might as well devour the children.
Political Commentary/Satire

- These “absentee landlords” sublet their estates to middlemen who squeezed exorbitant rents out of the tenant farmers or evicted them to turn the land to more profitable use for grazing cattle.
Political Commentary/Satire

• As a largely Catholic country whose people were sympathetic to the exiled Stuart royal family, Ireland was a potential source of political trouble for the English government, which found it wise to keep the country poor and economically dependent.
“Real” Proposal (italics on page 588)

- Urges the Irish to boycott English goods and to promote native industry by consuming only domestic products, especially clothing.
Discussion Questions

• Please copy these questions into your notebook leaving space to write your answers.
  – If you are unsure of your ability to answer these questions, leave room for additional notes…
Reading Questions

• What is the “problem” that is supposedly causing so much trouble in Ireland?

• What are some of the nasty stereotypes about Irish Catholics that Swift makes fun of here?

• What is Swift’s “solution” to the starvation of the Irish people?

• What are some of the things that Swift suggests in order to carry out this “modest proposal?”

• List the “benefits” of his plan, as Swift states in his essay.

• At the end of his essay, Swift attempts to put the reader “at ease” by giving us the main reason as to why we should follow his plan and believe that he has everyone’s best interest at heart. What is that reason?