

Swift's Proposals

A Modest Proposal is a political polemic on the condition of Ireland - Behind the satire, Swift wanted to convey a serious message about how England and the rich upper class Anglo-Irishmen were impoverishing and degrading the poor people of Ireland. To fix this problem of starvation, death, and poverty in Ireland, Swift adopts the persona of the Proposer, proposing that they practice cannibalism. He “humbly offers it to public consideration to [...] render [the children] plump, and fat for a good table.” Swift uses the language of food preparation: “stewed, roasted baked, or boiled; and I will make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust.” He even gives passing epicurean comments in a blasé manner: “seasoned with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter,” and is “assured by a very knowing American” that a young baby is very delicious. His proposal is very obviously ridiculous, but it was meant to make the upper class Anglo-Irish Protestants who were reading his proposals squirm and realize how they were treating these peasants. Swift highlights how backward Ireland is - only Ireland is suited to such drastic measures “I calculate my remedy for this one individual Kingdom of Ireland, and for no other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon Earth.” It is very incisive that only in Ireland could cannibalism by a social improvement - pointed remark that the following methods of social thought are reasonable. His *real* proposals are to:

1. Taxing absentees at five shillings a pound
2. Only using goods of own growth and manufacture, not of foreign luxury
3. Curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in women
4. Introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and temperance
5. Learning to love our country, quitting animosities and factions
6. Teaching landlords to have a degree of mercy towards their tenants
7. Putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers

He appears to whitewash his proposal by blackwashing the rest, putting his a cut above the other solutions. The Proposer declares: “let no man talk to me of other expedients,” although these were the actual measures Swift had tried to advocate - lists out the numerous ways - numerous ways in which they had failed. There was a lack of a sincere attempt at putting these measures into practice.

The Proposer vs. Swift

We have to understand that A Modest Proposal is a satirical work, and therefore there is a dichotomy between ‘The Proposer’ that is presenting the argument, and Swift’s real intentions. Despite adopting an offhand tone throughout the proposal, the Proposer starts off the proposal with reasonable arguments, appealing to the common sense of his readers - he even appears sympathetic and seems to harbor a social conscience - “It is of melancholy object” ... But later when he progresses to propose eating children, it is very clear that there is no morality or conscience at all, despite the self-righteous tone - highlights the superficiality and hypocrisy of the Anglo-Irish upper class.

Swift had a strong sense of humanity and spoke up against the injustice even if it would hinder his political career - if he had been less honest, he may have risen to a position of higher power. Swift wanted to bring across the hypocrisy and the superficiality of many of the reformers. The ridiculous and somewhat pompous proposals were meant to shed light on the disregard and hypocrisy of the readers themselves, which were mostly the

English and the Anglo- Irish upper classes, to make them become aware of their own misgivings and to make them squirm. When The Proposer speaks of women as “breeders”, Swift is trying to say that the upper class men treated the peasants like cattle, considering them alongside “sheep, black cattle, or swine”; although they may not use such terms, they were as good as doing that. Swift makes them see how they view these people: they only ever viewed them as commodities, things that made them money.

English/ Upper class Anglo-Irish absentee Landlords

Towards the end of the proposal, Swift assures that he is “not so violently bent upon [his] own opinion” and would be happy to accept a proposal by “wise men” which will be just as “cheap, easy and effectual.” He is trying to call attention to the fact that these proclaimed “wise men” have yet to come up with a solution, and to urge them to care about the condition of Ireland .

He also makes very pointed remarks about the superficiality of the landlords, saying: “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.” His remarks are very ironic and satirical - firstly, he says that these landlords care only about image, and indulge in things because they were expensive and were therefore “very proper”. He also brings across that the landlords were draining the common Irish peasants - they were very aptly “devouring” them. Even if these peasants had a good year, they had to pay ridiculous sums to their landlords for renting their land and were barely able to make ends meet. They had to resort to stealing and cheating because they *had no other choice*.

Swift also says this of England: “perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to eat up our whole nation.” Again, Swift plays on words - “eat” or “devour” - the English were devouring the nation of Ireland.

The Peasants of Ireland/ Catholics

Swift makes us believe that he is condemning them; instead, he is telling us what they are reduced to. He even says in the first paragraph: “these mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced [...] to beg sustenance” - it is not of free choice. These peasants have to beg and steal because they have no other choice; similarly, shopkeepers had to cheat and could not “ever be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing.” However, they had to do this because they were exploited by everybody else - at the end of the proposal, Swift says, “those politicians who dislike my overture [...] first as the parents of these mortals” whether they would have liked to be sold for food at age one years old. Saying that they would rather have died than to have to go through what they are facing now is a condemning and forthright indictment of the oppressors that have failed to recognize the tremendous pity of their predicament - everybody exploited them. That death was preferable highlights the depravity and unfairness of the system.

Many people thought the Irish to be fools. Although Swift becomes a voice for the peasants of Ireland, he was also very aware of the faults of the Irish themselves and initially even despised the Irish people (Swift himself was an Irishman by birth but not necessarily by nature, having spent much of his life in England). They were thieving, abusing their

wives, having more and more children, and letting their oppressors take advantage of them. However, in Swift's view, this was no justification for the English rulers to treat them so badly.

The peasants were mostly Catholics, and were constantly at odds with the Anglo-Irish, that were mostly Anglicans like Swift himself. There was a real sense of distaste for the Catholics - they kept having more and more children (could not use contraception), and the religious groups were quite disparaging towards one another. "there are more children born in Roman Catholick countries about nine months after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish infants." "Collateral advantage by lessening the number of Papists among us." The word "collateral", is very sterile, military-like, as if these infants could be easily disregarded - simply a side effect that benefits the upper classes because they couldn't care less about these infants. Also, the Proposer also portrays them as being traitors to the nation "deisgn[ing] tp deliver the Kingdom to the Pretender."

This is contrasted with "good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country, than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an episcopal curate." These landlords were escaping their taxes; Swift is very sarcastic - if anybody was a traitor, it was them. They were funneling the fruit of Irish labour into England, very scheming and corrupt.

The Blame

I think Swift does not blame one specific group/ party for the condition of Ireland: to him, everybody is responsible for Ireland's lamentable state. The Irish peasants, for not standing up for themselves and letting the English and the upper class dominate them; the English and the upper class Anglo-Irish for having no concern for the Irish peasants, for "devouring" them and oppressing them.

Also there was a lot of tension between the religious groups - the Catholics and the Protestants. Hence, the situation was quite complex; a lot of animosity due to differences in religion.

The Drapier's Letters

In itself, the issue that a Drapier's Letters addressed was a trivial matter - there was a need for small change coins in Ireland, and over and over again the Irish had asked if they could establish their own mint, to issue coins the same standard and quality as those used in England, but their petitions were disregarded. The King instead granted individuals, in particular William Wood, to mint coins. The Irish noticed that different batches of coins were of different quality and of much less weight than the patent called for, and although the coin was not as inferior as first thought, it showed that the English parliament never had shown much consideration for the Irish or their rights.

It was a matter Swift appreciated because it appealed to everyone - in writing The Drapier's Letters, he raised a 'certain spirit' among the Irish people, and for the first time a spirit of nationalism was breathed into an almost denationalized people and there as some sort of unity as the Irish became more vocal about their opinions. It was an issue Swift latched onto so he could rile them up until they would finally do something about it.