



## A Modest Proposal

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The essay begins innocently by establishing the speaker as a concerned citizen genuinely sympathetic to the Irish poor, whose suffering he describes in moving detail. Most readers no doubt find the voice of this speaker strikingly familiar: Like a politician, social scientist, or committee chairperson, he presents himself as sensitive, knowledgeable, and confident in his ability to resolve a serious problem by rational analysis.

The reader's confidence in the speaker vanishes quickly after the first few paragraphs, however, as Swift engineers one of the most shocking moments in all of English literature. The modest proposal, humbly presented and drafted at great length, argues for the many advantages of the Irish people raising their children as food to be sold at great profit to the landlords throughout the kingdom. Far from being horrified by this suggestion, as the reader surely is, the speaker continues to imagine himself as a disinterested patriot offering his countrymen a practical and almost miraculously effective way to reduce poverty, overpopulation, and an unfavorable balance of trade with England.

The most powerfully ironic aspect of this essay is rather obvious. The modest proposal is of course anything but modest: It is savage, frightening, perhaps even insane. But other subtle ironies and satiric targets may be overlooked if the speaker is simply dismissed as an extravagant madman. Most important, Swift characterizes him as rational and calculating in order to show that these qualities are dangerous when taken to an extreme: People who rely on speculative reason to solve problems may end up thinking the unthinkable rather than following what should be more natural and humane impulses of common sense and compassion, and those who treat humans as numbers rather than as living beings--recall how often the speaker in the essay computes and quantifies--are only one short step away from making it easier to murder them.

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