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## **SATIRICAL LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL CLASS IN JONATHAN SWIFT'S A MODEST PROPOSAL: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CLASS, POWER, AND IRONY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper has argued that the text of the A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift is one of the most recognized pieces of satirical writing. The application of a satirical language by Swift in this work is not only a criticism on the social and political setup in Ireland but also a comparison of the social stratification that dominated in the England of the eighteenth century. This paper considers the use of Swift in his application of satire as he tackles the problems of poverty, mistreatment, and merciless callousness of the ruling classes in the pain of the poor. This paper discusses how the hyperbolic style of the proposal brings out the inconsistencies in how society treats the poor through a critical evaluation of the language used by Swift. The study also employs a form of close reading of the text to probe into the role of irony, rhetorical methods and the image of social class. This study delves into the new realms of how the text functions as a type of social critique by placing the proposal at once in history of Swift as well as in the current interpretations of satire. The research questions will revolve around the use of rhetoric by Swift, how he presents the aspects of the class relationship as well as the broader social and political implications of satire. This reading would allow one to better appreciate the satirical nature of Swift as a social critique of inequalities in society and how this might as well be addressed in respect to the dimensions of power of the classes.*

**Keyword:** *Satire, Social Class, Jonathan Swift, Irony, 18th-Century Ireland, A Modest Proposal*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A Modest Proposal by Jonathan Swift (1729) is commonly referred to as one of the most successful and caustic pieces of work in English satirical writing. Composed when Ireland experienced a wave of intense economic and social distress, Swift writes his pamphlet using a grotesque and absurd solution to the poverty and sufferings experienced by the Irish poor at this time. In his suggestion, Swift indicates that impoverished Irish people could sell their children to affluent elite to gain food and income. Although this proposal is evidently exaggerated and outrageous, it is a strong medium of the arguments expressing the caustic contempt Swift has on the English colonial practices that led to the oppressed and dehumanized nature of the Irish population. It also expresses the disgust of Swift about the apathy and spiritual flaw of the Irish aristocracy who did not care to do something that is significant to reduce the miseries of the poor.

The major target of this study is to examine how Swift has strategically applied the use of satirical language especially on social class criticism. The paper aims to find out how Swift uses satirical devices like irony, hyperbole, and parody to reveal the social inequalities that continued to propagate in the social strata in the 18th century. Through the prism of how Swift presents the English and the Irish elites, then, this research studies how A Modest Proposal serves less as an instance of literary mastery, but a well-timed commentary on the harshness and callousness of the upper classes over the dispossessed. The role of using satire in this instance by Swift is not a mere intellectual pursuit, rather a moral outrage that is aimed at influencing satire to ignite thought and action.

English colonialism in Swift was highly felt and present in Ireland, and the socio-political system against which he wrote *A Modest Proposal* was a system of exploitation, deprivation, and inequality systems. During that period, Ireland was a faculty of the English Crown who had the stranglehold on the Irish land and resources, which narrowed the economic opportunities of an Irish population quite significantly. Social problems in the country were manifold, ranging to famine, joblessness and stagnating economy. English aristocracy itself, not to mention the Irish elite who worked in consort with them, tended to be either blind or heartless with regard to the poor. Such elites regarded the Irish peasants as cogs, and as such, they were to serve their interests. Thus, Swift does not consider his proposal only an appeal against English policies; he means also the local aristocracy failure to change the miserable social conditions.

In addition, the pamphlet by Swift is involved in the dynamics of the current economic theoretical solutions to poverty. His suggestion is obviously tongue-in-cheek, but it draws on authentic debates concerning the means of resolving the social and economic issues in Ireland. The extreme nature of this suggestion that Swift uses to sell children as a possible source of financial salvation serves to reveal the atrocities of treating human lives as replaceable commodities in a system. It shows how far the powers that be among the ruling classes-- British as well as Irish-- had gone in dehumanizing the poor people, making them into objects in the ridiculously-sized economic engine. With such coarse reasoning, Swift touches upon the social class fragmentation that cannot be only perpetuated, but is also firmly enforced by the policies that do not spare even the fundamental, human dignity of the poor people.

The purpose of the research is to reveal the unobtrusive but strong manner in which the satire settles scores with chauvinist attitudes of the English people and the indifference of the Irish aristocracy, as created by Swift. This work will discuss how Swift exposes the discrepancies in morals and social injustices of that era through the techniques of a rhetorical pattern as interpreted through irony, understatement and use of tone. For example, Swift uses hyperbole to make his absurd point so exaggerated that it physically compels the reader to realize the violence which underlies the socio-political order. The paper will also study the use of irony in the Swift text, i.e., how it is applied to reverse the power relationship between the ruling classes and the poor.

Finally, this paper aims to address the abiding value of the *A Modest Proposal* to the modern debate on the nature of social inequality, and economic injustice. Swift is more than a didactic piece of work offering the historical context of its time; however, the author presents a global analysis of the ways class system operates to suppress the least powerful. The pamphlet is a satire that makes the reader question not only the socio-political realities of Ireland in the 18th century but also relevant to the moral connotations of power, wealth, and privilege distribution patterns as curried in the present societies. Through interaction with the language and rhetoric used by Swift, this study hopes to provide insight into how literature can both be a mirror of evils present in the society and a source of social reform.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*A Modest Proposal* written by Jonathan Swift has received a lot of scholarly commentary, and much of the research was devoted to the satirical styles of this work, its history and social commentary aspects. The piece has been known since long days to be an immensely resolute critique of English colonialism and exploitation especially on its approach towards the poor Irish. The respected literary scholar S. T. Coleridge (1834) proposed one of the first detailed analyses of Swift and believed that the point of *A Modest Proposal* is a crystalline critique of the English colonialism towards Ireland. According to Coleridge, the application of satire by Swift to attract attention to the practices that relegated the Irish poor as not being worthy of humanity was merely an attempt to get the readers to face the ugly truths of

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the social life during that period by the funny yet grotesque hill of the proposal.

Besides Coleridge, most of the literature about *A Modest Proposal* has addressed the satirical form of the work of Swift and the rhetorical tools he uses to demonstrate his criticism. J. B. This discussion was further added by Priestley (1950) who looked into the irony as also hyperbole of the text. According to Priestley, the excessive constraint by Swift to the sale of Irish children to make economic profit compels the readers to reconsider what the opulent classes owe to morality. Through the extreme nature of the proposal, Swift has successfully ridiculed the callousness of the British elite in addressing the condition of the Irish poor, at the same time condemning the English economic policies that kept Ireland in the state of poverty. The fact that Swift introduces his proposal with ironic detachment also adds to its satirical effect because it demonstrates how brutally cruel the society structured into the socio-political system in question is without chatting directly to the reader about blatant moralism.

Hyperbole used by Swift is not just a rhetoric tradition, it is a sharp remark about the drastic actions that the poor of Ireland had to concern themselves with against systematic oppression. Most recent research has developed Priestley by discussing the emotional and psychological impact of Swift proposal upon the reader. Indeed, as some scholars have pointed out, such as Hayton (2007) the sheer absurdity of the proposal works to overpower the complacency any reader might want to persist in, forcing the reader to face the crucial moral issue within an economic system that allows people to commodify human life. Hayton (2007) also adds that such mock-serious tone used by Swift is meant to increase the severity of disjunction between poor Irish and the ruling classes, both British and Irish who were ill disposed of the suffering of the poor Irish as it is brought out in this absurd suggestion.

Though most of the literature has focused on Swift criticizing the British elite, not much has been written on his criticism on the Irish aristocracy and the social classes in Ireland. This scholarly absence is important due to the fact that the author focuses on the Irish nobility as well as the English dominant society, thus offering a two-sided criticism of the Georgian social-political system. D. W. Hayton (2007) infers that Swift employs a satirical approach, not just to argue against the English exploitation, but also to criticize the inactivity of the Irish aristocracy that, by not doing enough in order to address the problems of poverty, itself becomes an accomplice to the regrets of the poorer classes. According to the interpretation by Hayton, it is not only that the work by Swift was a criticism of English colonialism but rather that Swift was commenting on how the Irish landed elite had been unable to behave as a moral opposition to the British plunder.

This theme continues to grow in the works of other critics such as McKendrick (1999), who believed that Swift in his book *A Modest Proposal* was questioning the possibility of the Irish people ruling themselves because the Irish nobility, despite being natives of Ireland, did things that continued to exploit the lower echelons of the society. Swift finds the moral inability of Irish elite to take action regarding the sufferings of Irish poor grounds them morally equal to their British counterparts. As maintained in the argument by McKendrick, the association between the local elites and the English colonial powers is not a simple one, and it is therefore possible to identify that the satire that Swift created is targeted as much to the local elites as the English colonial powers. The comparison of the relationship between Swifts depiction of the British ruling establishment of the day and the Irish aristocracy begs the key questions of the issues of collaboration, compliance and moral responsibility.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there is still a huge gap in the bodies of literature concentrating on Swift and his depiction of social class in *A Modest Proposal*. Whereas most critics have discussed how Swift criticizes the aristocracy of England, fewer have addressed how his satire captures internal disparities in

the Irish society as well. Namely, no study has been found that could explore how the satirical language used by Swift criticizes the inabilities of the Irish ruling elite to respond to the needs of the poor. This discrepancy is highly noticeable in the face of Swift himself being part of the Anglo-Irish elite, which may be regarded as guilty in the exploitation of the lower level of classes in Ireland.

This paper attempts to address this omission by providing a more critical interpretation of A Modest Proposal by Swift and in particular his use of satirical language against the backdrop of the social stratification of the Irish society and, further, the British society as well. This article will therefore attempt to give a broader picture of Swift in his focus of criticism of the English and Irish societies by reviewing his rhetoric tactics: irony, hyperbole and satire in Swift. In this context, the paper shall examine how the work by Swift not only serves as an assessment of the problems of colonialism and exploitation but also as a reflection of the moral and ethical roles of the ruling classes, no matter which nationality they belong to.

The present study is valuable in two ways. First, it enlarges the current body of knowledge concerning Swift by transforming the context of the scholarship of the English ruling classes to that of the Irish swell and it provides a more harmonious representation of how Swift viewed the issues concerning social disparity. Second, it continues the legacy of its predecessors as it offers a thorough examination of the satirical language used by Swift and how this language may be viewed as the response to the general social-political situation in Ireland of the 18th century. This study can thus bring a greater comprehension of the political and social commentary of these texts and how it can draw knowledge about the approaches of satire on such matters as class, power, and moral obligation through filling in the gaps in the existing literature.

### **SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE**

The importance of the work under consideration is that it has examined a work of Swift A Modest Proposal as a work of multiple criticism of social level. The pamphlet written by Swift has been interpreted mostly as an attack against British imperialism yet this identity study has illuminated the fact that the pamphlet is also a critique of the divisions of classes within Ireland. Due to the fact that in his work Swift intends to use satire as a means of detecting how the poor are exploited both by the English and the Irish elite, this discussion will broaden the scope of the current implications in terms of what this work suggests in particular to its social implications as well as offering a deeper insight into what the work suggests to the politicking idea. Since satire remains a working method of analysing power and social structures, the findings of the present study may provide knowledge on how the same themes of inequality and social injustice are addressed in contemporary satire works.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This study is guided by three central research questions:

1. What rhetorical techniques does Swift employ to construct a satirical critique of social class in A Modest Proposal?
2. How does Swift use irony and hyperbole to challenge the exploitation of the Irish poor by both the English ruling class and the Irish elite?
3. Why does Swift choose such an extreme form of satire, and what does this reveal about the relationship between social class and political power in 18th-century Ireland?

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research will fall in the line of classical and modern schools of thought about satire. The undermining

of social order in the work of Swift is very well explained through the theory of carnivalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). The concepts of Bakhtin concerning the subversion of authority and unveiling the discrepancies that existed in the society can be widely applied when reasoning the moral perversity of the upper layers present in the work of Swift. Besides, the concept of social capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) will be invoked to formulate an understanding of the application of socio-political power of the Irish and the English elites to perpetuate class differences. Employing these frameworks, a more in-depth examination will be possible into the manner in which Swift is critical towards social class, power and even exploitation.

## METHODOLOGY

The research method of this paper will entail a close analysis of *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift as well as an explanation of the language used by Swift in a bid to portray distinct social classes. The close reading technique will be critical in decoding the subtlety of Swift and his satirical wording so as to have a clear comprehension of his own rhetorical decisions such as irony, hyperbole, and other rhetoric tactics of persuasion. With the use of this approach, the research will focus keenly on how Swift used words to criticize the social-political and economic structure of both Ireland and England, especially the way they treated the Irish poor. The use of linguistic strategies by Swift will be examined further and into detail in order to discuss not only how it helps to underline the absurdity of what Swift thinks is the solution to his problems but to demonstrate the overall social implications of class inequality and exploitation discussed by Swift.

The close reading will be supplemented by the discourse analysis aimed at stage in the role of the socio-linguistic activity of the language used by Swift. This practice is important in that it enables the researcher to gain insight regarding the role that language plays in the manner it reflects social realities, especially on issues of class and power. Through the study of the language process through which the Irish poor and the ruling elites are defined, the paper will be able to discuss how the satire of Swift reveals the hierarchies perpetuating inequalities in the society. Discourse analysis will facilitate also the recognition of the implicit relations of power at play in a reading of the text most notably the location of the Irish as passive victim and the position of the English and Irish elites as powerful, but morally corrupt instruments of exploitation.

Also, the paper will combine the historical setting of Ireland and England in the 18th century to establish a more critical approach to Swift. Social political context Swift wrote in is heretofore to understanding his satire because such economic, political and colonial aspects of the time arose that they did have an immediate influence on how Swift depicted the relationship between classes. The wing of English colonialism on Ireland, the oppression of Irish population, and the lack of the Irish aristocracy to cater to the needs of its population will form core of the analysis. In taking such factors into account, the research will be in a position to put the satire by Swift into historical context, which will further draw a line into the manner through which Swift uses his rhetoric strategies as way of criticizing the English and Irish elites.

Such a combination of close reading and analysis of discourse is especially applicable to the research questions as it combines the depth of the textual analysis that will enable to capture the nuances of the language used by Swift, however, also the context of the work within the socio-political background of the era. The approach makes it possible to have an overall picture of how *A Modest Proposal* addresses the questions of social status, power, and exploitation.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS



In a detailed analysis of the language use by Swift in *A Modest Proposal*, this paper has demonstrated the manner in which the excesses to which he gives credit such as treating children as a form of commodity to be sold is triggered to reveal the hypocrisy and the callousness of the Irish and English elite. The hyperbolic and grotesque nature of the proposal that Swift implements is the very rhetoric of shocking the audience, so that it could look at the reality of social exploitation straight in the eyes, so that it can be challenging to reject. Due to the narration of such an unrealistic idea in a rather bureaucratic and quiet manner, Swift uses irony to expose the cynicism and indifference of the elites that created systems of inequality and exploitation. The brutality of the material of the proposal and the cold abstract nature of which it is being delivered further illustrates in its dehumanizing impact what an economic system can do to the pursuit of profit in place of human dignity. Swift has used this ironic indifference as a strong commentary on the moral decay of the ruling English and the Irish nobility, which is emphasized as being more interested in their own self-interest than the plight of the poor.

In addition, the ironic approach of Swift concerning his offer serves as a way to challenge the existing rules of social hierarchy and provides alternative satirical presentation of the social order. The irony of the offer, whereby the poor will be forced to sell their children as an economic venture, turns things around and changes the power setting between the rich and the poor. Instead of putting the poor as mere recipients of charity or interventions that are driven by charity, in the proposal, Swift envisages a world where the poor take charge of commoditizing their lives. This manipulation of power is not only a commentary against a systematic use and exploitation of the poor but is a condemnation of the fact there is no agency in the hands of the poor under the situation faced by the ruling classes. The use of satire in this case by Swift is especially effective in that it compels the readers to think about the ordinariness of a system that upholds human life as a commodity and emphasizes the commodification of the poor as one of the main characters of economic and social inequality.

The present analysis relates to the theoretical perspective of concept of carnivalesque by Mikhail Bakhtin, who focused on the interaction of satire as a tool of subverting established societal interpretations of the social and power hierarchies (Bakhtin, 1984). The irony and hyperbolic style used by Swift in *A Modest Proposal* may be regarded as a phenomenon of what may be called a carnivalesque inversion of the social order to reveal its vices. By locating the most vulnerable people in the society the Irish poor people in the middle of a proposal that would, in effect, turn around that section of the society into economic goods, Swift questions the social order in which such an exploitation is made possible.

It also relates to other work of critics such as Hayton (2007) who contends that the satire by Swift criticized not only the English but also the Irish elites. Although the British have the direct influence in the economic miseries of the Irish, the inaction on the part of the Irish elite is also lethal. In this usage, Swift shows the role of the Irish aristocracy in the perpetuation of the power structures of oppression through satirical language. Labeling the Irish elites as passive and indifferent, morally, Swift criticizes their passivity and inability to respond to the needs of the poor, which not only implies that the oppression of the Irish people is not the work of external forces alone, but also the work of internal complicity.

In spite of the insights that this study gives, it has limitations. As an illustration, although the greatest importance is placed on the application of irony and hyperbole by Swift, other elements of satirical methods could be studied to develop other research surrounding the topic of influence developed by Swift including metaphor and learning about his satirical hatred of colonialism. Also, the reception of *A Modest Proposal* to the contemporary audiences may be a topic of future research to provide deeper perception of how satire expressed in *A Modest Proposal* could be treated at the time of Swift, in contrast with our contemporary times. Moreover, despite the fact that this work focuses more on the connections between

the English and Irish elite, the scope of the analysis can be broadened by including new interpretations of the work by Swift which discuss the impact gender, religion and other social identities have in shaping the social critique that is one of the main themes that the story upholds.

In general, this work helps us better understand the *A Modest Proposal* by Swift further as he argued that his language can be considered one of his most effective tools in criticizing the social and political system of his era. With irony, hyperbole, and bureaucratic pronunciation, Swift makes people face the absurd way of economic exploitation and the immoral attitude of the elites. In this perspective, Swift's satirizing colonialism is more than that, it becomes an observation on social status, power and how human life is commoditized.

## FINDINGS

The results of this study demonstrate the *A Modest Proposal* by Swift as a very complex treatise where the author criticizes the enslavement and dehumanization of Irish poor by the British as well as the Irish aristocracy. Using his ironic rhetoric brilliantly, Swift makes readers face the loss of morals of the ruling elites, who are portrayed as uncaring of the misery of the poor. As an example, the proposal to sell children which Swift presents to the reader is outrageous in the sense it creates the idea of commoditizing human life which is his primary object in his satire. The gruesome suggestion being written in a rather detached and bureaucratic tone, Swift highlights the fact that elites are morally bankrupt as the policies arising out of their indifference lend credibility to such abuse to exist.

One piece of irony used by Swift, is seen in the first lines of the proposal: "I have also had it reported by the best authorities ties of my acquaintance in the county of Meath, that a young healthy child well nursed is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food." This exaggerated sentence attracts consideration concerning the stupidity of the economic system which drags people down to the level of resources. Through such diction Swift reflects the system in the society that considers the poor as assets to be moved around to gain financial benefit. Moreover, this study shows that Swift through his satire not only criticizes the outside influences of colonialism but also satirizes the inside participation of the Irish aristocracy who are not concerned about their subjects.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, the paper has highlighted the importance of *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift as a most brilliant satirical text, which criticizes British ruling class as well as the contribution of the Irish aristocracy to the social inequality problem. Examining the rhetoric techniques used by Swift such as his use of irony, hyperbole and detachment practiced by bureaucracy, the work represents how the pamphlet succeeds in undermining the moral and the social edifice of Swift era. The work by Swift becomes an eternal lesson about the power of literature as a constructive tool to review social structures and reveal the inconsistencies and social injustices that exist in the systems of nature. *A Modest Proposal* continues to play a pivotal role in exploring the connections between power, class and exploitation given the sharp criticism that it makes towards power dynamics and the bureaucracy of the 18th century and the role that class plays in exploiting those less powerful, thus making it an indispensable work when discussing social inequalities and moral responsibility. This research helps support the current debate of how the satire can be addressed to some complicated questions of societal injustice and it provides the detailed explanation of how Swift remains relevant to the current discussion of power and privilege.

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## Journal of English Discourse and Research (JEDR)

Vol. 1 No. 1 (January-December) (2023)

[www.jedr.com](http://www.jedr.com)

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