Historical Analysis Of Jonathan Swift's A Modest Proposal

Jonathan Swift is one of the best satirists of English literature. His Juvenalian satirical essay, A Modest Proposal is considered the best satirical work of all time. It is an austere essay, with a preposterous proposition, making the enormity of the desperate situation the Irish nation was in crystal clear to anyone who reads it. Through the context of Ireland's social, cultural, and political difficulties at the time, Swift's attempts to call attention to the Irish plight exhibits how satire can be an effective instrument to capture and retain the reader's attention.

One of the greatest eras for satire was England during the Age of Enlightenment. Satire had existed for centuries prior to the eighteenth century, but it was during this time it grew in popularity amongst Enlightenment writers and audiences. The satirists during this period aimed to mock the accepted standards of thought and old-fashioned virtues by addressing the shortcomings of society. Satirists use laughter and irony to address social problems and situations they find inadmissible, though their solutions to the perceived issues are, almost always, impractical and unrealistic. Juvenalian satires, such as A Modest Proposal, expose the superficiality and moral corruptions of society in Britain using keen observations and nimble thoughts.

Swift began writing satire in his twenties. He was indeed an admirable writer and brilliant satirist. He was intelligent and witty, describing a good writing style as "proper words in proper places". His style is simple and straightforward, growing "more intense and controlled the more fierce the indignation that it is called to express" (Abrams 884). This style can definitely be seen throughout A Modest Proposal, controlled with rage and fury bubbling between the lines.

Swift's political views purportedly changed numerous times over his lifetime. He was a "Whig at the beginning of Queen Anne's reign and a Tory by the end of it". The two opposing political parties in England were the Whigs and the Tories. The Whigs believed in a strong Parliament that should have the power to regulate the succession to the English sovereignty and they were quite liberal in religious affairs. The Tories, on the other hand, supported the Anglican Church and the country gentry. Swift left the Whig party due to his belief that they did not care enough about the Anglican Church. Even though he was a Tory the rest of his life, his political views aligned more with the Whig party than the Tories.

The history of Ireland is a narrative of oppression and invasion, of starvation and disease, religious suppression and unjust laws. By the time A Modest Proposal was published in 1729, Ireland had been under English rule for over 500 years. In the early 1600s, the English sovereignty employed a small Protestant aristocracy with controlling a largely Catholic population. The English colonists tried hard to overpower and destroy the Catholic religion there but did not succeed. Swift was a member of the Anglo-Irish governing class and therefore and allegiances to both England and Ireland. In the 1700s, Swift became politically involved in Irish causes, specifically England's exploitation of Ireland and religious suppression.

Trade was roaring in Ireland in the eighteenth century despite tariffs and bans on Irish woollens being sold to England. Foreign trade as well as domestic,, blossomed but there were difficulties with the fluctuating worth of Irish coinage and the ever-present threat of war (Foster 170-171).

In spite of the Anglo-Irish resentment towards the Crown for not exhibiting enough interest in Ireland and its affairs, there was little compassion amongst them for the native Catholics.

Ireland herself had several different social classes with too many children being born to the lower classes at the time. Several of the Catholics were living in severe poverty and only managed to survive by begging and stealing. People were struggling to make ends meet and many mothers resorted to begging on the streets. Ireland was extremely poor and dangerously overpopulated land, kept poor and debilitated by English authority. Extant beggary was exacerbated by trade restrictions imposed by England. This was an immense issue in Swift's view and he had great compassion for the needy. A Modest Proposal was written in response to deteriorated economic circumstances in Ireland and Swift's perceptions of the passivity of the Irish people. Swift made multiple appeals and proposals to the Irish Parliament to tax landlords, fund Irish labour, and adopt modern agricultural techniques, but he was consistently disregarded. His essay was a frustrated travesty of these serious proposals to correct the inefficient Irish authority, impassive Irish community, and the exploitative English government.

The metaphor "the English are devouring the Irish", is the groundwork for Swift's A Modest Proposal. He takes this metaphor to the extreme here, stating that since the parents have already been "devoured" by the landlords, why should they not consume their offspring as well? The cannibalistic theme was not a fresh one by Swift's time, nor was the belief that the Irish were indeed cannibals and inhuman. During Swift's period, some English writers and the Greek geographer Strabo believed the Irish were descended from a cannibalistic tribe and stated they were indeed animals in human form. One of the grizzlier images in Swift's essay is that of the table "at a lord mayor's feast" where "a well-grown, fat, yearling child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure" (Swift 1052).

There is an abundance of gloom and sorrow in this work as it perfectly describes the extreme poverty the Irish experienced and the dishonest and unequal policies which made it hopeless for them to improve their position. In Swift's essay, there is also some mention of the aged and ill and the projector hardheartedly dismisses them as a problem since "it is very well known that they are dying every day and rotting by cold and famine, and filth and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected" (Swift 1051). There was no reason to do anything about them since they were already dying. The satire makes known to others the extreme situations those people faced every day and gave the notion that the Irish people were being consumed "by it inhumane rulers and [that it was] a people so brutalized and savage that they would be prepared to sell and eat their children." (Higgins 191).

Swift is clearly enraged at the condition Ireland is in and is very angry with England for bleeding the country dry. He states that the profit of Ireland is pure benefit for England, but at the same time, the country is famished since so much of its income is travelling out of the county (Daly 169). Swift seems frustrated at the short-sightedness of the English since he at least recognizes "that, when the hen is starved to death, there will be no more golden eggs" (Daly 172). His solution for Ireland is therefore freedom from the English who seem to only care for themselves and treat Ireland worse than any country Swift has ever heard of (Daly 167). This is a very extreme view shift for Swift who was not an extreme man. The situation, however, is so serious in his mind that his customary desire to search for compromise could not be accommodated and therefore he saw no way out for the Irish people except an escape from the control of England.

A Modest Proposal was published during a period where the Irish nation was starving and

begging. Swift, horrified by the situations, had indeed tried before to make the graveness of the Irish people's plight understood. In A Modest Proposal, he uses sarcasm and satire with great restraint and intention. Daly claims that no other of his work "has been more grievously misunderstood" (240), and one can easily comprehend why. It was a shock for people to read such an essay, and readers ignorant of the style of satire could have found it easy to misinterpret.

The Irish have had their share of hardship and cruelty throughout the centuries. In spite of that, or perhaps even because of it, they have emerged as a solid and self-reliant nation. The Anglo-Irish relationship, however, has not been profitable to the Irish and through the centuries there has been much opposition between the two nations, England and Ireland, mostly due to the variation in religion. That is what makes Jonathan Swift such an unlikely Irish hero, An Anglican clerk of English descent and a self-proclaimed exile in Ireland, one would not imagine him as a hero for the Catholic Irish. Nevertheless, his crusade during the latter part of his professional life, to aide the cause of the impoverished Irish Catholics and to right the unfairness in Irish society, has indeed made his legacy valid and long lasting.

As one comprehends the background to Swift's A Modest Proposal, and understands it in the context of Anglo-Irish history, one also comprehends why it is considered as significant as it is. Swift had an incredible skill to compose satire and he made the plight of the poor even more apparent in England as well as in Ireland. He was horrified at the circumstances the Irish people were constrained to live in and made several efforts to bring the graveness of the condition to light. In his application of the metaphor, "the English are devouring the Irish", and way of giving seemingly rational economic justifications to his ludicrous proposal of cannibalism, Swift creates a masterpiece.