

## Type of Work

The essay was originally printed in the form of a pamphlet. At the time of its publication, 1729, a pamphlet was a short work that took a stand on a political, religious, or social issue—or any other issue of public interest. A typical pamphlet had no binding, although it sometimes had a paper cover. Writers of pamphlets, called pamphleteers, played a significant role in inflaming or resolving many of the great controversies in Europe in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, as well as in the political debate leading up to the American Revolution.

## Purpose

Jonathan Swift wrote “A Modest Proposal” to call attention to abuses inflicted on Irish Catholics by well-to-do English Protestants. Swift was a Protestant, but he was also a native of Ireland, having been born in Dublin of English parents. He believed England was exploiting and oppressing Ireland.

Many Irishmen worked farms owned by Englishmen who charged high rents—so high that the Irish were frequently unable to pay them. Consequently, many Irish farming families continually lived on the edge of starvation.

In “A Modest Proposal,” Swift satirises the English landlords with outrageous humour, proposing that Irish infants be sold as food at age one, when they are plump and healthy, to give the Irish a new source of income and the English a new food product to bolster their economy and eliminate a social problem. He says his proposal, if adopted, would also result in a reduction in the number of Catholics in Ireland, since most Irish infants—almost all of whom were baptized Catholic—would end up in stews and other dishes instead of growing up to go to Catholic churches. Here, he is satirising the prejudice of Protestants toward Catholics.

Swift also satirises the Irish themselves in his essay, for too many of them had accepted abuse stoically rather than taking action on their own behalf.

## Historical Background

Over the centuries, England gradually gained a foothold in Ireland. In 1541, the parliament in Dublin recognised England’s Henry VIII, a Protestant, as King of Ireland. In spite of repeated uprisings by Irish Catholics, English Protestants acquired more and more estates in Ireland. By 1703, they owned all but ten percent of the land. Meanwhile, legislation was enacted that severely limited the rights of the Irish to hold government office, purchase real estate, get an education, and advance themselves in other ways. As a result, many Irish fled to foreign lands, including America. Most of those who remained in Ireland lived in poverty, facing disease, starvation, and prejudice. It was this Ireland—an Ireland of the tyrannized and the downtrodden—that Jonathan Swift attempted to focus attention on in “A Modest Proposal” in 1720.