

A Modest Proposal Teaching Guide

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Approaches and Discussion Questions

“A Modest Proposal” as an Introduction to Satire: One of the best known examples of satire in the English-speaking world, “A Modest Proposal” is a traditional introduction to literary satire due to the text’s relatively short length and ease of recognizing the eccentric proposal as tongue-in-cheek.

- **For discussion:** How does Swift’s word choice in the first few paragraphs foreshadow his proposal? What about its title? How do readers know that he’s not serious about his suggestion of cannibalism? What is his purpose in suggesting such a shocking solution to the problem of Ireland’s poverty?
- **For discussion:** What is the purpose of satire? What examples can you think of where satire changed your mind or someone else’s? How can satire backfire or not achieve its intended goal?

Layers of Narration: Throughout the proposal, there are several layers of narration: Swift, the actual author; the text’s narrator, a researcher; and various sources the narrator cites as proof of his argument. Because of this, “A Modest Proposal” is a good way to introduce layered narration and the concept of an unreliable narrator. Though students may not realize it at first, all sources that the narrator references are vague or untrustworthy, and it’s clear that the narrator is too blinded by his love of productivity and efficiency to posit a plausible solution. Disentangling these three layers will help students understand the essay’s structure and better understand Swift’s purpose for writing.

- **For discussion:** How does Swift signal to readers that his narrator is not a credible source? What solutions does Swift posit to alleviate Ireland’s poverty? Why doesn’t Jonathan Swift make these suggestions outright as himself?
- **For discussion:** What is Swift’s opinion of politicians? What about researchers? The poor Irish? How can you infer his opinions from the text?
- **For discussion:** What sources does Swift’s narrator cite? Are these sources meant to be taken seriously? Do we believe that the narrator is as impartial as he claims to be? Why so?

Translating Life to Satirical Critique: Swift was motivated to write his proposal during a time of significant economic, religious, and political strife not only in the British Isles but also throughout Europe. While Ireland suffered great poverty, the rivalry between Protestant England and Catholic Spain was growing. Swift plays on the fears of escalation between these two countries as well as politicians’ desires for quick fixes to deeply rooted issues. Additionally, the patriotic and supposedly “rational” tone he employs throughout lampoons the tendency to see human beings as means to production rather than of inherent worth.

- **For discussion:** How does Swift translate the politics of his time to “A Modest Proposal”? What stance has he taken in the debate between the English and the Irish?
- **For discussion:** How does Swift embody a cold, rational researcher? What vocabulary or style of argumentation does he use?
- **For discussion:** What current events or political debates would be suitable for satire?

Additional Discussion Questions:

- Why does Swift choose to begin his essay with a relatively sympathetic portrayal of Ireland’s poor? How does this signal the argument’s stakes—that is, demonstrate the importance of the essay—and why does it make his suggestion of cannibalism more shocking?
- Who benefits if Swift’s modest proposal is implemented? What does this say about who the audience of the proposal is?
- What instances of irony does the text contain?
- When does the reader realize that Swift is not seriously proposing cannibalism?
- What are the dangers of not recognizing when a text is satirical?

Alternative Approaches to Teaching “A Modest Proposal”

While the main ideas and discussion questions above are typically the focal points of units involving this text, the following suggestions represent alternative readings that may enrich your students’ experiences and understanding of the essay.

- **Focus on a study of the argument’s structure.** Though Swift did not intend his cannibalistic solution be taken seriously, the argument’s structure is an interesting study in building claims and supporting them with evidence. Have students broadly outline the claims made in the text and see how they support or build upon one another. Notice places where Swift’s narrator concedes points or where he addresses potential counterarguments.
- **Focus on satire’s legacy in other media.** Using other sources of satire, have students compare and contrast the techniques used by Swift in “A Modest Proposal” to elicit change from his audience and the approaches employed by more modern examples. Discuss their findings and touch on how satire has changed throughout the centuries and how it adapts to different mediums depending on the author’s aim and cultural context.
 - For a sarcastic take on current events, try the satirical news website *The Onion*. Students will likely appreciate the incisive look at the absurdity of current events and politics.
 - For an satirization of government bureaucracy and romantic views of war, try Stanley Kubrick’s classic film *Dr. Strangelove*. The movie showcases a group of bumbling government officials who try to contain an American airstrike on the Soviet Union that will lead to the end of the world.
 - For a modern take on consumerism and commodification, try an episode of Comedy Central’s *Nathan For You*, which follows comedian Nathan Fielder as he implements outlandish but inventive schemes to help struggling businesses. Fielder uses the same deadpan delivery as Swift.

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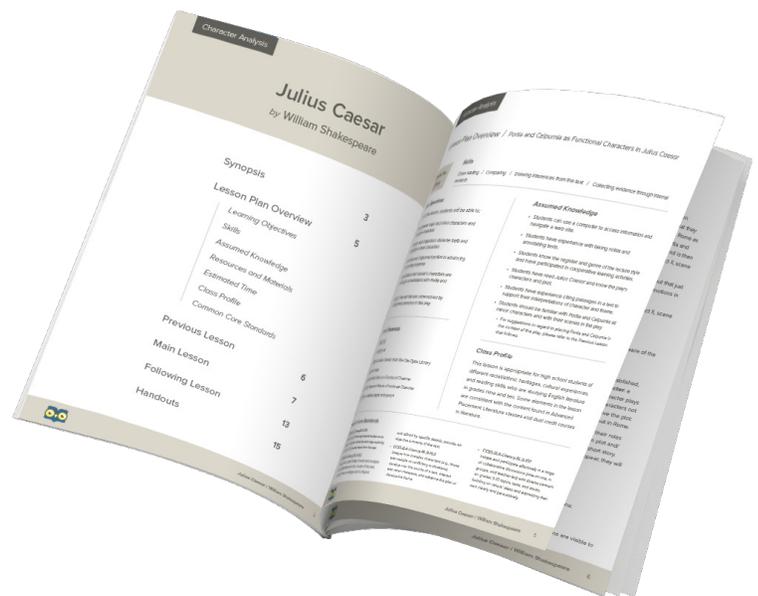
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