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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CANNIBALISM: A SOCIOECONOMIC READING OF JONATHAN SWIFT'S A MODEST PROPOSAL

Abstract. This paper examines Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1999), first published in 1729 as a literary intervention in the economic discourse of early eighteenth-century Ireland. Through its biting satire, Swift exposes the moral bankruptcy of treating poverty as a purely economic problem and critiques the utilitarian rationality that reduces human life to measurable profit and loss. Drawing on socio-economic theory and moral philosophy, the study situates *A Modest Proposal* within the context of mercantilism, colonial dependency, and class hierarchy, arguing that Swift's cannibalistic metaphor functions as an early form of social protest literature. By turning the logic of economic efficiency against itself, Swift not only condemns British exploitation and the commodification of the poor but also anticipates later critiques of capitalist ideology. The paper thus demonstrates how literary satire can operate as a tool of social analysis, bridging the disciplines of economics, ethics, and cultural criticism.

Keywords: Jonathan Swift, satire, political economy, poverty, utilitarianism, moral critique

JEL classification: B11, Z13, I34

Introduction

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1999) remains one of the most striking and unsettling texts in the English canon, not only for its grotesque suggestion that impoverished Irish parents might sell their children as food, but for the precision with which it mimics the rhetoric of economic rationality. Disguised as a reasonable policy recommendation, Swift's satire lays bare the moral emptiness of treating social suffering as a matter of numerical efficiency and cost management. Written at a time

when Ireland was ravaged by poverty and economic dependency under British rule, the pamphlet transforms the language of economic calculation into a vehicle for moral outrage. Beneath its irony lies a profound critique of an emerging utilitarian worldview that valued productivity over humanity.

While *A Modest Proposal* is commonly read as a masterwork of satire, its direct engagement with the economic discourse of early eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland reveals a more complex intellectual intervention. Swift's parody of mercantilist and proto-utilitarian reasoning exposes how abstraction and statistical "reason" can serve to justify exploitation. The "modesty" of his proposal lies in its horrifying logic: once human life is quantified, even cannibalism becomes thinkable within the terms of economic rationality. By exaggerating this logic to its extreme, Swift demonstrates that moral detachment is not a byproduct but a structural condition of such reasoning.

This paper argues that *A Modest Proposal* operates as an early form of socio-economic critique, one that anticipates later concerns articulated by thinkers such as Adam Smith, Polányi Károly (Karl Polanyi), and Amartya Sen regarding the dangers of disembedding the economy from ethical and social responsibility. Through its grotesque literalization of "consumption" and its statistical tone, Swift's text undermines the claim that economics can ever be value-free. By reading the pamphlet through an interdisciplinary lens that combines literary analysis and moral philosophy with economic history, this study aims to demonstrate how satire functions as a mode of social diagnostics—a moral economy articulated through irony.

The analysis that follows situates *A Modest Proposal* within the historical context of eighteenth-century Ireland, examines its rhetorical strategies and use of economic discourse, and considers its enduring relevance to contemporary debates about poverty, welfare, and the ethics of policy-making. Ultimately, Swift's savage irony exposes not only the injustices of his time but also the persistent tension between economic efficiency and human dignity that continues to shape modern social thought.

1. Historical and Economic Context

When Jonathan Swift published *A Modest Proposal* in 1729, Ireland was suffering from one of the most acute social and economic crises in its history. The early eighteenth century witnessed widespread famine, unemployment, and population displacement caused by the exploitative structures of British colonial rule. As an Anglican cleric living in Dublin, Swift was acutely aware of the material deprivation surrounding him and the indifference of the English political elite. His pamphlet therefore emerges not from abstract moral outrage but from direct confrontation with the lived reality of colonial poverty. In this context, *A Modest Proposal* functions as both a social commentary and an indictment of economic policy that treated Irish lives as expendable within the calculus of imperial profit.

The conditions that provoked Swift's satire were shaped largely by *mercantilist* ideology, the dominant economic theory of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Mercantilism regarded national wealth as dependent on the accumulation of precious metals and the maintenance of a favorable balance of trade, encouraging colonial expansion and strict regulation of domestic industry (Magnusson, 2015). Ireland's economic structure under this system was heavily restricted: English legislation such as the Wool Act of 1699 prohibited Irish exports, ensuring that Ireland remained a supplier of cheap raw materials and agricultural produce to England while being denied access to profitable manufacturing markets. This dependency rendered the Irish economy stagnant and the population impoverished, a situation Swift described elsewhere as "a nation of hewers of wood and drawers of water for England" (Swift, 2010).

Simultaneously, the period witnessed the growing influence of *population theory* and utilitarian thinking that sought to measure social welfare in purely quantitative terms. Early economists and political writers like William Petty—whose statistical "political arithmetic" aimed to reduce human life to measurable units—provided Swift with a model of reasoning he would later parody (Petty, 1691). By appropriating Petty's method

of enumeration and applying it grotesquely to the bodies of infants, Swift demonstrates how numerical abstraction erases ethical responsibility. The “modesty” of his proposal lies precisely in this mimicry: it mirrors the tone of state reports that calculated the poor as resources to be managed rather than as citizens to be protected.

The socio-economic landscape of Ireland at the time also reflected deep class and sectarian divisions. The Protestant Ascendancy controlled both land and government, while the majority Catholic population remained dispossessed and disenfranchised. Economic oppression was intertwined with cultural and religious domination, creating what Marx would later term a “metabolic rift” between those who laboured and those who profited from labour’s products (Marx, 1990). Swift, though himself part of the Protestant elite, used his clerical authority and rhetorical skill to expose the cruelty of policies that reduced human beings to instruments of production. His satire thereby transforms economic discourse into a form of moral resistance, insisting that poverty is not a natural condition but the consequence of political and economic design.

Within this framework, *A Modest Proposal* can be seen as Swift’s most radical intervention in debates about Ireland’s economic fate. It engages directly with contemporary pamphlets proposing schemes for alleviating poverty—many of which shared the cold detachment he mocks. Yet unlike those reformers, Swift refuses to treat the poor as an abstract problem to be solved through accounting. His mock-economics transforms rational calculation into moral horror, laying the foundation for what later scholars have called the “moral economy” tradition (Thompson, 1971; Polanyi, 2001). This concept, emphasizing that economic practices must remain embedded in ethical and social values, resonates powerfully with Swift’s insistence that no policy can be just if it disregards human dignity.

Thus, Swift’s historical moment—marked by colonial exploitation, economic reductionism, and social stratification—provides the essential backdrop for understanding the intensity of his satire. *A Modest Proposal* is not merely a product of literary imagination but a critical reflection on

the economic thought of its time. It exposes how systems of trade, governance, and calculation, when divorced from compassion, lead inevitably to moral cannibalism—a metaphorical consumption of the poor that the pamphlet renders literal in order to shock the conscience of its readers.

2. The Satirical Strategy: Cannibalism as Economic Logic

The enduring power of *A Modest Proposal* lies not only in its shocking content but also in the subtlety of its rhetorical design. Swift achieves his most devastating critique by adopting the very discourse he seeks to dismantle—the calculated, ostensibly rational tone of economic policy writing. The pamphlet’s voice is detached, methodical, and filled with numerical precision, mimicking the reports of early economists and social reformers. By employing this bureaucratic register to advance a proposal of cannibalism, Swift collapses the boundary between economic rationality and moral absurdity. His satire demonstrates that when human life is subjected to the calculus of profit and loss, ethical transgression becomes a logical extension of economic thought rather than its perversion.

The narrative persona of *A Modest Proposal* is central to this strategy. The anonymous “projector” speaks with the authority of a policy expert, offering a well-ordered sequence of statistics, arguments, and cost–benefit analyses. Swift’s mastery lies in the precision with which he imitates the style of contemporary economic pamphleteers—writers such as William Petty or Josiah Child—whose “projects” for managing poverty were grounded in quantitative methods. Phrases like “a child just dropt from its dam may be supported by her milk for a solar year with little other nourishment” (Swift, 1999) emulate the tone of a market report rather than a moral treatise. This *deadpan* style, with its feigned objectivity, enacts the very dehumanization it criticizes. The speaker’s composure, his apparent indifference to the monstrous implications of his plan, reflects a chilling alignment between logic and violence—a phenomenon Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer later described as “instrumental reason” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002).

Swift's use of cannibalism as metaphor operates on several levels. On one hand, it literalizes the economic metaphor of "consumption," exposing how capitalist and colonial economies metaphorically devour the laboring poor. On another, it functions as a grotesque inversion of Christian communion, where the ritual of spiritual nourishment becomes a scene of physical exploitation. This double symbolism underscores the moral inversion at the heart of economic thought that prizes efficiency over empathy. Cannibalism thus becomes the ultimate expression of a market without morality—a system in which human relations are governed solely by exchange value.

The pamphlet's structure reinforces this critique. Swift begins with a sympathetic acknowledgment of Ireland's destitution, thereby establishing the illusion of a benevolent reformer. Gradually, this sympathy gives way to absurd economic calculation: he quantifies the number of infants available, the expected profits for mothers, the potential recipes, and even the effect on marriage rates. Each successive paragraph intensifies the dissonance between the horrifying proposal and the coldly rational tone. The reader's moral revulsion thus emerges not from overt outrage but from recognition of reason's complicity in violence. Swift's satire exposes how the rationality of economic discourse, when detached from ethical principles, can normalize atrocity under the guise of policy.

Equally significant is Swift's appropriation of the language of improvement, a central motif in eighteenth-century economic thought. The projector presents his plan as a patriotic contribution to Ireland's prosperity, appealing to the "public good" and national interest. This rhetoric mirrors mercantilist arguments that justified exploitation as a form of rational management. By performing this language to its grotesque conclusion, Swift reveals the hidden cruelty beneath the ideal of "improvement." His Ireland is not improved but consumed; its children become commodities, its families reduced to production units. The pamphlet thus dramatizes the commodification of life—a process that would later become central to Marx's critique of capitalism (Marx, 1990).

From a rhetorical perspective, Swift’s method aligns with what modern theorists describe as immanent critique—a strategy of exposing a system’s contradictions by mimicking its logic. Rather than attacking economic reasoning from outside, Swift inhabits its language so completely that its moral bankruptcy becomes self-evident. This is why the satire’s tone remains disturbingly calm: outrage would release the reader too easily from complicity. Instead, Swift forces readers to experience the seduction of rational argument and then confront its ethical void. The horror arises precisely from how convincing the reasoning sounds.

Finally, the “modesty” of the proposal adds another layer of irony. In eighteenth-century rhetorical conventions, modesty signaled moral restraint and rational self-discipline. By labeling his barbaric suggestion “modest,” Swift underscores how reason itself, when detached from empathy, can cloak brutality in civility. His pamphlet thus operates as an early warning against what later scholars would call the *moral anesthesia of bureaucratic systems*—the transformation of ethical questions into technical ones (Bauman, 2002). Through the dissonance between tone and content, Swift reclaims moral judgment as an essential element of social reasoning, suggesting that without compassion, economics becomes indistinguishable from cannibalism.

3. Poverty, Morality, and the Economics of the Body

At the center of *A Modest Proposal* stands the human body—specifically, the bodies of the poor—re-imagined as economic commodities. Swift’s grotesque literalization of bodily consumption dramatizes the material consequences of abstract economic reasoning. The infant’s body becomes both the object and currency of exchange, its flesh quantified in pounds and shillings, its nutritional and market value calculated with bureaucratic precision. Through this shocking inversion, Swift exposes how political and economic discourse, when stripped of moral awareness, inevitably treats the poor as expendable resources. The body, in Swift’s

satire, is no longer a sacred or inviolable site but a unit of production, consumption, and profit.

This transformation of the human body into an economic object reflects the logic of commodification that underpinned both mercantilist and proto-capitalist thought. In the colonial economy of eighteenth-century Ireland, bodies were already implicated in systems of exploitation—through tenant labor, servitude, and migration. Swift’s cannibalistic metaphor simply renders visible what the economic system had rendered invisible: that survival itself was being bought and sold. As Michel Foucault later observed, modern power operates by managing bodies, transforming them into instruments of production and control (Foucault, 1995). In Swift’s pamphlet, this biopolitical logic reaches its monstrous extreme; the poor do not merely work for the rich—they nourish them.

The satire’s focus on maternal bodies is particularly striking. Swift’s “breeders,” as the narrator calls them, are presented as rational economic agents whose children can be converted into income. This language collapses the distinction between human care and market exchange, between motherhood and manufacture. The sentimental image of maternal nurture, central to eighteenth-century moral philosophy, is reconfigured as a grotesque economic transaction. In doing so, Swift destabilizes both patriarchal and mercantile ideologies: the patriarchal system that confines women to reproductive roles and the mercantile system that profits from their exploitation. His irony thus functions not only as a critique of economic logic but also as an early exposure of gendered economic violence—the way social systems appropriate female and infant bodies as sites of economic regulation.

This emphasis on embodiment also invites reading *A Modest Proposal* through the lens of the *moral economy*, a term later elaborated by E. P. Thompson (1971) and Karl Polanyi (2001). The moral economy insists that economic relations are inseparable from ethical and communal obligations. Swift’s satire anticipates this perspective by insisting that the reduction of people to numbers constitutes a moral catastrophe. His imagined economy of cannibalism represents the endpoint of an ethics eva-

cuated of compassion, where the logic of exchange eclipses the sanctity of life. In this sense, Swift's use of the body becomes a site of moral reclamation: by showing its literal destruction, he calls for the restoration of moral sensibility within economic reasoning.

Furthermore, the economic use of the body in Swift's satire exposes a broader philosophical tension between utilitarianism and human dignity. The pamphlet's narrator operates under the assumption that maximizing aggregate benefit justifies any individual sacrifice—a logic that would later be formalized by Bentham and critiqued by moral philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. By pushing utilitarian reasoning to its grotesque conclusion, Swift forces his readers to confront the ethical limits of efficiency. The commodified infant becomes a symbol of what Amartya Sen (2001) calls the *capability deprivation* of the poor—their reduction to mere instruments in others' welfare calculations. Swift's satire therefore insists that economic welfare cannot be disentangled from moral and human welfare.

The imagery of consumption also gestures toward a spiritual dimension. The perverse parody of the Eucharist—the act of eating as communion—suggests the inversion of Christian charity into social cannibalism. Instead of the symbolic sharing of Christ's body for the salvation of all, Swift's Ireland becomes a society where the rich literally feed upon the poor. This theological inversion underscores that *A Modest Proposal* is not merely economic or political satire but also a profound moral allegory. Swift's clerical background informs this critique: his outrage stems from the recognition that an economy devoid of compassion becomes, in effect, a desecration of the human soul.

In sum, the “economics of the body” in *A Modest Proposal* operates as both metaphor and indictment. The body, dissected into portions and priced for sale, embodies the intersection of moral failure and economic rationality. Swift's cannibalistic imagery exposes the violence of abstraction—the way poverty is transformed into policy, and human suffering into statistics. By confronting his readers with the literal consequences of

such abstraction, Swift reasserts the necessity of an ethical economy, one grounded not in calculation but in conscience.

4. *A Modest Proposal* and the History of Economic Thought

While *A Modest Proposal* is often read as a moral or political pamphlet, it also occupies a significant position in the prehistory of modern economic thought. Swift's satire emerges at a moment when economic discourse was becoming increasingly formalized—when the language of moral philosophy began to give way to that of statistical and fiscal reasoning. In this transitional period, writers such as William Petty and later Adam Smith were articulating the foundations of political economy, seeking to quantify human activity and national prosperity. Swift, however, exposes the dangers of such quantification when divorced from ethical and humanistic considerations. His cannibalistic logic is not a departure from, but rather a radical exaggeration of, contemporary economic reasoning.

4.1. The Proto-Economist as Satiric Persona

The narrator of *A Modest Proposal* assumes the role of what might be called a *proto-economist*, employing the empirical and rational vocabulary of early economic pamphlets. He calculates population statistics, costs of living, and profit margins with an air of scientific detachment. Swift's parody of this voice is directed not at rationality itself but at its moral impoverishment. The narrator's tone mirrors the utilitarian optimism of figures like William Petty, whose *Political Arithmetick* (1690) sought to measure the wealth and strength of nations numerically. Yet Swift's version of "political arithmetic" transforms these calculations into instruments of horror. The result is a form of satirical empiricism, where data-driven reasoning exposes, rather than conceals, the violence inherent in economic abstraction.

This strategy situates Swift within the broader intellectual movement that Foucault (2008) would later describe as the birth of *governmentality*—the art of governing populations through knowledge, statistics, and regulation. The narrator’s obsession with demographic control and productivity exemplifies an early form of biopolitical reasoning. Swift’s irony lies in showing that, once human life is subsumed under economic management, the leap from social planning to cannibalism becomes disturbingly small.

4.2. Political Economy and Moral Failure

In the century following *A Modest Proposal*, the emergence of classical political economy—exemplified by Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* (2000), originally published in 1776—would formalize many of the tendencies Swift satirized. Smith’s notion of the *invisible hand* presupposes a self-regulating market capable of transforming private vice into public benefit. Swift’s text, by contrast, demonstrates the moral and corporeal cost of such reasoning when stripped of compassion. The *Proposal* thus anticipates later critiques of laissez-faire ideology by revealing how economic rationality can legitimize cruelty under the guise of efficiency.

Moreover, Swift’s Ireland provides a historical case study of what Smithian economics would later universalize: a society structured by systemic inequality and dependency. British mercantilist policies had turned Ireland into an extractive economy where the poor were expendable. Swift’s pamphlet makes this system grotesquely literal—proposing to consume the poor as the ultimate export commodity. The satire thereby unmasks the logic of exploitation underpinning colonial capitalism and prefigures Marx’s observation, over a century later, that capitalism “comes into the world dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt” (Marx, 1990, p. 926).

4.3. From Swift to Marx: The Human Cost of Abstraction

Swift's critique of economic abstraction anticipates Marx's analysis of alienation and commodification. Both writers expose how human beings, under certain economic systems, are transformed into instruments of profit. Where Swift envisions the literal consumption of the poor, Marx theorizes the metaphorical consumption of labor power. In each case, the reduction of life to exchange value constitutes the central moral and philosophical problem. Marx's "fetishism of commodities" finds a grotesque antecedent in Swift's culinary imagery: the infant becomes the ultimate fetish, a product whose value obliterates its humanity.

At the same time, Swift's satire diverges from Marx's materialism in its moral and theological orientation. While Marx calls for the transformation of material conditions, Swift demands the restoration of moral conscience. His concern is not the redistribution of wealth but the resacralization of human life within economic discourse. Yet both thinkers converge on a fundamental insight: that an economy without ethical or spiritual foundations inevitably consumes the very people it purports to serve.

4.4. Anticipating Modern Economic Critique

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century economic theorists, from Karl Polanyi to Amartya Sen, have returned to questions that Swift posed in embryonic form. Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* (2001) argued that the disembedding of the economy from social relations leads to moral collapse—a process Swift dramatized through the literal dismemberment of the human body. Similarly, Sen's emphasis on capabilities and ethical development in *Development as Freedom* (2001) echoes Swift's insistence that economic reasoning must be grounded in human welfare, not statistical optimization. Swift's work thus participates in a long intellectual genealogy that unites moral philosophy, political economy, and social justice.

Seen in this light, *A Modest Proposal* becomes more than a satire on eighteenth-century Ireland—it is an enduring reflection on the moral foundations of economic life. Its grotesque logic continues to resonate in an era when the commodification of the human body persists through global labor exploitation, organ trade, and bio-capital. Swift's pamphlet reminds us that economic rationality, when unrestrained by empathy, always risks crossing the line from metaphorical to literal cannibalism.

4.5. Swift's Enduring Economic Vision

By embedding his critique within the idiom of economic calculation, Swift achieves a paradoxical effect: he speaks the language of his adversaries in order to expose its inhumanity. The *Proposal* is not merely a mockery of policy but a visionary interrogation of the moral imagination of economics. It challenges readers to consider the ethical implications of every act of quantification, every policy that treats people as data, and every system that reduces life to profit.

Swift's satire thus occupies a crucial, if unacknowledged, place in the history of economic thought. It stands as a moral counterpoint to the optimism of classical economics and a precursor to modern critiques of neo-liberal rationality. In its fusion of moral philosophy, economic logic, and grotesque imagery, *A Modest Proposal* continues to illuminate the enduring question at the heart of political economy: *what is the value of a human life?*

5. The Rhetoric of Irony and the Ethics of Reading

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* achieves its force not merely through shocking content but through the precision of its rhetorical irony. The essay's surface logic is coherent, systematic, and even persuasive; it is only by recognizing the inversion of moral order beneath that logic that the reader experiences the full impact of the satire. In this sense, the text functions as a *rhetorical trap*: it demands that readers perform the same

act of rational detachment that it seeks to condemn. This dynamic turns the reading process itself into a moral test, implicating the audience in the very economic cruelty the satire exposes.

5.1. Irony as Ethical Mechanism

The anonymous narrator of *A Modest Proposal* presents himself as a benevolent reformer, appealing to the language of compassion and efficiency. Yet every proposal he makes depends on the systematic dehumanization of the Irish poor. The reader, lulled by the familiarity of policy discourse, initially follows his reasoning before the grotesque nature of his conclusions becomes apparent. Swift's brilliance lies in making the reader temporarily inhabit the worldview of the oppressor, thereby transforming comprehension into complicity.

This strategy anticipates what Wayne Booth (1974) would later call the *irony of stable irony*, in which the reader must reconstruct the author's moral stance through the recognition of dissonance between literal and intended meaning. In Swift's case, the moral stance is not simply delivered but must be earned through interpretive effort. The shock of realizing the narrator's inhumanity forces the reader to reclaim their own moral sensibility—a process that transforms satire into a form of ethical pedagogy.

5.2. Irony and the Limits of Rationality

Swift's manipulation of tone also dramatizes the limits of rational discourse when severed from moral feeling. The narrator's flawless logic—supported by demographic data, fiscal reasoning, and cost-benefit analysis—mimics the style of economic pamphlets circulating in early eighteenth-century Ireland. By adopting this form with such fidelity, Swift reveals that the problem lies not in the accuracy of the calculations but in the moral assumptions underlying them. The *Proposal* thus becomes a study in the moral perils of abstraction: reason, untempered by empathy,

can lead to monstrosity while maintaining the appearance of order and benevolence.

This tension resonates with later philosophical critiques of instrumental rationality, particularly in the work of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002), who warned that Enlightenment reason, when detached from ethics, could degenerate into domination. Swift's satire anticipates this insight by demonstrating how "rational" social policy can mask profound violence when grounded in utilitarian logic rather than moral principle.

5.3. The Reader as Participant

Unlike straightforward moral allegory, *A Modest Proposal* refuses to offer the reader a safe position outside the text. The reader is drawn into the logical structure of the narrator's argument and must choose where to draw the line between moral satire and literal reason. In doing so, Swift transforms the reader from passive observer to active participant in ethical judgment. The act of reading becomes an act of conscience.

This rhetorical technique aligns Swift with a broader moral project that views literature as a medium for cultivating empathy through discomfort. The grotesque imagery of cannibalism functions not simply as shock value but as a means of reawakening moral perception dulled by habitual exposure to poverty and suffering. By rendering the unthinkable thinkable, Swift compels his audience to confront the ethical cost of their indifference.

5.4. Irony, Violence, and Compassion

What makes Swift's irony enduringly effective is its capacity to hold violence and compassion in the same frame. The text's monstrous proposal is motivated, ostensibly, by pity: it seeks to relieve the suffering of the poor and the burden of the rich. Yet this counterfeit compassion mirrors the hypocrisy of social reformers who used the language of benevo-

lence to justify coercion. Swift's tone—measured, polite, and disturbingly rational—embodies what Hannah Arendt (2006) later termed the *banality of evil*: the idea that great cruelty can be executed not through passion or hatred but through bureaucratic calm.

Swift's irony thus operates at two levels. On one hand, it exposes the callousness of economic reasoning that treats people as numbers; on the other, it reveals the fragility of moral language in a society where suffering has become normalized. The laughter elicited by the *Proposal* is therefore uneasy and self-directed—a laughter that recognizes complicity rather than superiority.

5.5. The Ethics of Interpretation

If Swift's satire functions as an ethical instrument, its effectiveness depends on the reader's interpretive sensitivity. Misreading the text—taking the narrator's tone at face value—risks reproducing the very moral blindness it condemns. In this respect, *A Modest Proposal* challenges modern readers as much as its original audience: it tests whether we can still discern irony in a culture saturated by irony itself. The ethical dimension of Swift's work lies not in providing moral answers but in reawakening moral questions. It insists that literature's power resides in its ability to make readers think and feel simultaneously, to inhabit contradiction without resolution. In turning the act of reading into an act of ethical engagement, Swift establishes a model for literary responsibility that transcends its historical moment.

5.6. Irony as Moral Witness

Swift's *A Modest Proposal* endures because it transforms satire into a form of moral witness. Through the manipulation of irony, the text exposes the moral bankruptcy of an economic worldview that privileges calculation over compassion, and it forces readers to confront the boundaries of their own empathy. The pamphlet thus stands as both a critique of eigh-

teenth-century social policy and a timeless meditation on the ethics of perception.

In the end, Swift's irony accomplishes what no policy could: it awakens conscience through discomfort. The reader's shock, laughter, and eventual shame mark the stages of a moral education. The *Proposal* does not simply ridicule its targets—it redeems the very capacity for moral feeling that its fictional narrator has lost.

6. Conclusion: The Moral Economy of Satire

Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* endures not only as a landmark of English satire but also as a foundational text in the moral critique of economic rationality. Beneath its grotesque humor lies a systematic deconstruction of the assumptions that underlie both eighteenth-century and modern economic thought—the belief that social well-being can be reduced to questions of efficiency, productivity, and numerical balance. Swift's pamphlet demonstrates, with ruthless clarity, that when human life becomes a unit of calculation, moral catastrophe follows.

Throughout this analysis, it has been argued that *A Modest Proposal* performs a dual function: it reflects the economic realities of its own historical moment while anticipating the ethical dilemmas of contemporary capitalism. By parodying the language of policy, Swift exposes how mercantilist and utilitarian logic normalize exploitation under the guise of improvement. His cannibalistic metaphor literalizes the figurative consumption that defines colonial and capitalist economies, where the bodies of the poor are endlessly converted into sources of wealth for others. The pamphlet's "solution" thus mirrors, rather than invents, the moral inversion already operative in economic discourse.

The relevance of Swift's satire extends far beyond its Irish or eighteenth-century context. In an age of global inequality, precarious labor, and commodified life, his irony remains uncomfortably recognizable. The rhetoric of *rational management* persists in contemporary debates about austerity, migration, and welfare reform, often couched in the language of

necessity or efficiency. Swift's *Proposal* reminds us that such reasoning carries within it the seeds of moral blindness: the transformation of suffering into data, of bodies into costs, and of empathy into inefficiency.

From the perspective of economic and social thought, Swift's work anticipates later critiques by Karl Marx, Karl Polanyi, and Amartya Sen, each of whom insists that an economy cannot be separated from the ethical and social fabric that sustains it. Swift's pamphlet may not offer a material solution, but it performs an indispensable moral function: it restores ethical awareness by confronting readers with their own capacity for indifference. The laughter it provokes is inseparable from shame—the recognition that we, too, can become desensitized to human misery when it is expressed in economic terms.

Ultimately, *A Modest Proposal* remains a paradigmatic example of literature's power to intervene in the social and moral life of its time. Swift's fusion of satire and moral philosophy demonstrates that critique need not abandon wit, and that irony, far from being a mere rhetorical device, can serve as a mode of ethical revelation. By transforming economic logic into moral absurdity, Swift compels his audience to rethink the foundations of political economy itself. His enduring message is simple yet profound: no society that measures value in profit alone can claim to be humane.

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