

COMMON CORE

RI 5 Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in his or her argument. **RI 6** Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective. **SL 1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jonathan Swift ...

- had learned to read by the time he was three.
- coined the term *yahoo* to refer to a boorish and ignorant person.
- left much of his fortune to go toward the building of a mental hospital.

(background) St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin

A Modest Proposal

Essay by Jonathan Swift

VIDEO TRAILER



KEYWORD: HML12-620A

Meet the Author

Jonathan Swift 1667–1745

Jonathan Swift has been called the greatest satirist in the English language. His genuine outrage at man's inhumanity to man and his commitment to championing liberty found voice in his biting satire and unflinching criticism of his times. Few writers of the 18th century were as politically and socially influential as Swift.

A Priest with a Pen Jonathan Swift was born of Anglo-Irish parents in Dublin, Ireland. Though his family was not wealthy, Swift attended the prestigious Trinity College. After graduating, he moved to Surrey in England to accept a position as secretary to a retired diplomat. In 1695, Swift was ordained as an Anglican priest and became a full-fledged satirist, with two completed works ready for publication.

Swift was a clergyman and a political writer for the Whig party. His first two satires, *The Battle of the Books* and *A Tale of a Tub*, quickly established his acerbic style.

Whether lampooning modern thinkers and scientists (John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton among them), religious abuses, or humanity at large, Swift raged at the arrogance, phoniness, and shallowness he saw infecting contemporary intellectual and moral life. Though his early publications were anonymous, people began

to recognize his vicious and witty political writing through his contributions to London periodicals such as Richard Steele's and Joseph Addison's *The Spectator*.

When the Whigs lost power to the Tories in 1710, the Tories courted the conservative Swift to join their side. As a man of principle and a strict moralist, however, he ultimately became disenchanted with the compromises and manipulations of politics.

Irish Patriot In 1713, Swift was appointed dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. Though Swift at first felt exiled in Ireland, in time he regained his interest in politics. Angered by the way England tyrannized Ireland, Swift fought back in a series of publications called *The Drapier's Letters*, in which he wrote, "Am I a freeman in England, and do I become a slave in six hours by crossing the channel?" For Irish Catholics and Protestants alike, Swift became a hero. His last major work about Ireland, "A Modest Proposal," is one of the most famous satires ever written.

Gulliver's Success In 1726, Swift anonymously published the masterly satire *Gulliver's Travels*, in which he vents his fury at political corruption and his annoyance with the general worthlessness of human beings. Though Swift aroused controversy, *Gulliver's Travels* turned out to be surprisingly popular, and it remains a classic for readers of all ages.

Author Online

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A Modest Proposal

FOR PREVENTING THE CHILDREN OF POOR PEOPLE IN IRELAND
FROM BEING A BURDEN TO THEIR PARENTS OR COUNTRY,
AND FOR MAKING THEM BENEFICIAL TO THE PUBLIC

Jonathan Swift

BACKGROUND By 1700, Ireland was so completely dominated by England that it seemed like a conquered territory. The Catholic majority could not vote, hold public office, buy land, or receive an education. The repressive policies reduced many Irish people to poverty. When crops failed—as they did for several years during the 1720s—many faced starvation. Jonathan Swift, outraged by the injustice of England’s treatment of Ireland, penned “A Modest Proposal,” using ferocious satire to strike back at those who neglected Ireland’s poor.

It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town¹ or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms.² These mothers, instead of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg **sustenance** for their helpless infants, who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for want³ of work, or leave their dear native country to fight for the Pretender⁴ in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes.⁵

I think it is agreed by all parties that this prodigious number of children in
10 the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom a very great additional grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap, and easy method of making these children sound, useful members of the commonwealth would deserve so well of the public as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation. **A**

Analyze Visuals ►

What impression does the engraving convey about the lives of poor people in the 18th century? Cite details to support your answer.

sustenance (süs'tə-nəns)
n. a means of support or nourishment

A PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

What problem does Swift identify in lines 1–15?

1. **this great town:** Dublin, Ireland.
2. **importuning** (ím'pôr-tōōn'ýng) . . . **alms** (āmz): begging from every passerby for a charitable handout.
3. **want:** lack; need.
4. **Pretender:** James Edward Stuart, who claimed the English throne, from which his now deceased father, James II, had been removed in 1688. Because James II and his son were Roman Catholic, the common people of Ireland were loyal to them.
5. **sell . . . Barbadoes:** To escape poverty, some Irish migrated to the West Indies, obtaining money for their passage by agreeing to work as slaves on plantations there for a set period.



But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only for the children of professed beggars; it is of a much greater extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a certain age who are born of parents in effect as little able to support them as those who demand our charity in the streets.

20 As to my own part, having turned my thoughts for many years upon this important subject, and maturely weighed the several schemes of other projectors,⁶ I have always found them grossly mistaken in their computation. It is true, a child just dropped from its dam⁷ may be supported by her milk for a solar year, with little other nourishment; at most not above the value of two shillings, which the mother may certainly get, or the value in scraps, by her lawful occupation of begging; and it is exactly at one year old that I propose to provide for them in such a manner as instead of being a charge upon their parents or the parish, or wanting food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall on the contrary contribute to the feeding, and partly to the clothing, of many thousands.

30 There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice of women murdering their bastard children, alas, too frequent among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt,⁸ more to avoid the expense than the shame, which would move tears and pity in the most savage and inhuman breast.

The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders; from which number I subtract thirty thousand couples who are able to maintain their own children, although I apprehend there cannot be so many under the present distresses of the kingdom; but this being granted, there will 40 remain an hundred and seventy thousand breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand for those women who miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, how this number shall be reared and provided for, which, as I have already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed. For we can neither employ them in handicraft or agriculture; we neither build houses (I mean in the country) nor cultivate land. They can very seldom pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive at six years old, except where they are of towardly parts;⁹ although I confess they learn the **rudiments** much earlier, during which time 50 they can however be looked upon only as probationers, as I have been informed by a principal gentleman in the county of Cavan, who protested to me that he never knew above one or two instances under the age of six, even in a part of the kingdom so renowned for the quickest proficiency in that art. **B**

I am assured by our merchants that a boy or girl before twelve years old is no salable commodity; and even when they come to this age they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds and half a crown at most on the Exchange; which

Language Coach

Synonyms Words with the same or almost the same meaning are **synonyms**. Which word in line 36 is a synonym for *reckon* (present tense of *reckoned*, line 35)?

rudiment (rŭd' dē-mənt)
n. a basic principle or element

B SATIRE
Reread lines 43–53. What social problem does Swift blame for the widespread thievery in Ireland?

6. **projectors**: persons who propose public projects or plans.

7. **dam** (dām): female parent. The term is used mostly for farm animals.

8. **doubt**: suspect.

9. **are of towardly** (tōrd'lē) **parts**: have a promising talent.

cannot turn to account¹⁰ either to the parents or the kingdom, the charge of nutriment and rags having been at least four times that value.

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not
60 be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.¹¹

I do therefore humbly offer it to public consideration that of the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed, twenty thousand may be reserved for breed,¹² whereof only one fourth part to be males, which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine; and my reason is that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded by our savages, therefore
70 one male will be sufficient to serve four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may at a year old be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump and fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an entertainment for friends; and when the family dines alone, the fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned with a little pepper or salt will be very good boiled on the fourth day, especially in winter. **C**

I have reckoned upon a medium that a child just born will weigh twelve pounds, and in a solar year if tolerably nursed increaseth to twenty-eight pounds.

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords,
80 who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more plentiful in March, and a little before and after. For we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician,¹³ that fish being a prolific¹⁴ diet, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent¹⁵ than at any other season; therefore, reckoning a year after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because the number of popish infants is at least three to one in this kingdom; and therefore it will have one other **collateral** advantage, by lessening the number of Papists¹⁶ among us.

90 I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child (in which list I reckon all cottagers, laborers, and four fifths of the farmers), to be about two shillings per annum, rags included; and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have said, will

C PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 65–76. What is Swift's proposal?

collateral (kə-lăt'ər-əl)
adj. accompanying as a parallel or subordinate factor; related

10. **turn to account:** earn a profit; benefit; prove useful.

11. **fricassee** (frīk'ə-sē') . . . **ragout** (ră-gōō'): types of meat stews.

12. **reserved for breed:** kept for breeding (instead of being slaughtered).

13. **grave . . . physician:** François Rabelais (răb'ə-lă'), a 16th-century French satirist.

14. **prolific:** promoting fertility.

15. **Lent:** Catholics traditionally do not eat meat during Lent, the 40 days leading up to Easter, and instead eat a lot of fish.

16. **popish** (pō'pīsh) . . . **Papists:** hostile or contemptuous terms referring to Roman Catholics.



make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat, when he hath only some particular friend or his own family to dine with him. Thus the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow popular among the tenants; the mother will have eight shillings net profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.

Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flay the carcass; the skin of which artificially dressed will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen. **D**

As to our city of Dublin, shambles¹⁷ may be appointed for this purpose in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife as we do roasting pigs.

A very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose virtues I highly esteem, was lately pleased in discoursing on this matter to offer a refinement upon my scheme. He said that many gentlemen of this kingdom, having of late destroyed their deer, he conceived that the want of venison might be well supplied by the bodies of young lads and maidens, not exceeding fourteen years of age
nor under twelve, so great a number of both sexes in every county being now
ready to starve for want of work and service; and these to be disposed of by their
parents, if alive, or otherwise by their nearest relations. But with due **deference**
to so excellent a friend and so deserving a patriot, I cannot be altogether in his
sentiments; for as to the males, my American acquaintance assured me from

D SATIRE

Understatement is an ironic device that creates emphasis by saying less than is expected or appropriate. In what way are lines 98–100 an example of understatement?

deference (děf'ər-əns) *n.* a yielding or courteous regard toward the opinion, judgment, or wishes of others; respect

17. **shambles**: slaughterhouses.



But in order to justify my friend, he confessed that this expedient was put into his head by the famous Psalmanazar, a native of the island Formosa,¹⁸ who came from thence to London above twenty years ago, and in conversation told my friend that in his country when any young person happened to be put to death, the executioner sold the carcass to persons of quality as a prime dainty; and that in his time the body of a plump girl of fifteen, who was crucified for an attempt to poison the emperor, was sold to his Imperial Majesty's prime minister of state, and other great mandarins of the court, in joints from the gibbet,¹⁹ at four hundred crowns. Neither indeed can I deny that if the same use were made of several plump young girls in this town, who without one single groat²⁰ to their fortunes cannot

What is **ironic** about Swift's concern in lines 117–122 regarding what “some scrupulous people” might think?

expedient (ĭk-spē'dē-ənt)
n. something useful in achieving the desired effect; a convenience; an advantage

20. **groat:** an old British coin worth four pennies.

stir abroad without a chair,²¹ and appear at the playhouse and assemblies in foreign fineries which they never will pay for, the kingdom would not be the worse.

Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about that vast number of poor people who are aged, diseased, or maimed, and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course may be taken to ease the nation of so grievous an **encumbrance**. But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is very well known that they are every day dying and rotting by cold and **famine**,
140 and filth and vermin, as fast as can be reasonably expected. And as to the younger laborers, they are now in almost as hopeful a condition. They cannot get work, and consequently pine away for want of nourishment to a degree that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labor, they have not strength to perform it; and thus the country and themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come.

I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.

For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen the number of
150 Papists, with whom we are yearly overrun, being the principal breeders of the nation as well as our most dangerous enemies; and who stay at home on purpose to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have chosen rather to leave their country than stay at home and pay tithes against their conscience to an Episcopal curate.²²

Secondly, the poorer tenants will have something valuable of their own, which by law may be made liable to distress,²³ and help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being already seized and money a thing unknown.

Thirdly, whereas the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two
160 years old and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation's stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds per annum, besides the profit of a new dish introduced to the tables of all gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom who have any refinement in taste. And the money will circulate among ourselves, the goods being entirely of our own growth and manufacture. **F**

Fourthly, the constant breeders, besides the gain of eight shillings sterling per annum by the sale of their children, will be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.

Fifthly, this food would likewise bring great custom to taverns, where the
170 vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the best receipts²⁴ for dressing it to perfection, and consequently have their houses frequented by all the fine gentlemen, who justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and

encumbrance
(ĕn-kŭm'brəns) *n.*
a burden

famine (făm'ĭn) *n.* a
period in which there
is a severe shortage
of food

**F PROPOSITION AND
SUPPORT**

Why does Swift supply
these cost and profit
calculations?

21. **cannot stir . . . chair:** cannot go outside without using an enclosed chair carried on poles by two men.

22. **Protestants . . . curate** (kyŏŏr'ĭt): Swift is criticizing absentee Anglo-Irish landowners who lived—and spent their income from their property—in England.

23. **distress:** seizure of a person's property for the payment of debts.

24. **receipts:** recipes.

a skillful cook, who understands how to oblige his guests, will contrive to make it as expensive as they please.

Sixthly, this would be a great inducement to marriage, which all wise nations have either encouraged by rewards or enforced by laws and penalties. It would increase the care and tenderness of mothers toward their children, when they were sure of a settlement for life to the poor babes, provided in some sort by the public, to their annual profit instead of expense. We should see an honest emulation among the
180 married women, which of them could bring the fattest child to the market. Men would become as fond of their wives during the time of their pregnancy as they are now of their mares in foal, their cows in calf, or sows when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a miscarriage. **G**

Many other advantages might be enumerated. For instance, the addition of some thousand carcasses in our exportation of barreled beef, the **propagation** of swine's flesh, and improvement in the art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables, which are no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well-grown, fat, yearling child,
190 which roasted whole will make a considerable figure at a lord mayor's feast or any other public entertainment. But this and many others I omit, being studious of brevity. **H**

Supposing that one thousand families in this city would be constant customers for infants' flesh, besides others who might have it at merry meetings, particularly weddings and christenings, I compute that Dublin would take off annually about twenty thousand carcasses, and the rest of the kingdom (where probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper) the remaining eighty thousand.

I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged that the number of people will be thereby much lessened
200 in the kingdom. This I freely own, and it was indeed one principal design in offering it to the world. I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate my remedy for this one individual kingdom of Ireland and for no other that ever was, is, or I think ever can be upon earth. Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound: of using neither clothes nor household furniture except what is of our own growth and manufacture: of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that promote foreign luxury: of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women: of introducing a vein of parsimony,²⁵ prudence, and temperance: of learning to love our country, in the want of which we differ even from Laplanders and
210 the inhabitants of Topinamboo:²⁶ of quitting our animosities and factions, nor acting any longer like the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their city was taken:²⁷ of being a little cautious not to sell our country and conscience for nothing: of teaching landlords to have at least one degree of

G PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

According to Swift in lines 175–184, how would his proposal improve family life?

propagation

(pröp'ə-gā'shən) *n.* the act of reproducing, multiplying, or increasing

H GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 185–191. Notice that Swift uses **nouns** such as *carcasses* and *flesh* to emphasize the dehumanization of the Irish by the English.

25. **parsimony** (pār'sə-mō'nē): frugality; thrift.

26. **Topinamboo** (tōp'ĩ-nām'bōō): an area in Brazil supposedly inhabited by wild savages.

27. **Jews . . . taken:** In A.D. 70, during a Jewish revolt against Roman rule, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, by fighting among themselves, made it easier for the Romans to capture the city.



Detail of *Gin Lane* (1700s), William Hogarth. Engraving. © Art Resource, New York.

mercy toward their tenants: lastly, of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shopkeepers; who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though often and earnestly invited to it. **1**

Therefore I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients,²⁸
 220 till he hath at least some glimpse of hope that there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them in practice.

But as to myself, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal, which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real, of no expense and little trouble, full in our own power, and whereby

1 PROPOSITION AND SUPPORT

Reread lines 198–203. What attitude toward the Irish does Swift reveal in refuting this opposing view?

28. let no man . . . expedients: In his writings, Swift had suggested “other expedients” without success.

we can incur no danger in disobliging England. For this kind of commodity will not bear exportation, the flesh being of too tender a consistence to admit a long continuance in salt, although perhaps I could name a country which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without it.

230 After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinion as to reject any offer proposed by wise men, which shall be found equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before something of that kind shall be advanced in contradiction to my scheme, and offering a better, I desire the author or authors will be pleased maturely to consider two points. First, as things now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for an hundred thousand useless mouths and backs. And secondly, there being a round million of creatures in human figure throughout this kingdom, whose sole subsistence put into a common stock²⁹ would leave them in debt two millions of pounds sterling, adding those who are beggars by profession to the bulk of farmers, cottagers, and laborers, with their wives
240 and children who are beggars in effect; I desire those politicians who dislike my overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an answer, that they will first ask the parents of these mortals whether they would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been sold for food at a year old in the manner I prescribe, and thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes as they have since gone through by the oppression of landlords, the impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of common sustenance, with neither house nor clothes to cover them from the inclemencies of the weather, and the most inevitable prospect of entailing the like or greater miseries upon their breed forever. ❶

I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the least personal interest
250 in endeavoring to promote this necessary work, having no other motive than the public good of my country, by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being nine years old, and my wife past childbearing. ∞

Language Coach

Synonyms *Effectual* is a synonym of *effective* and *efficient*. All three mean “having an effect.” *Effectual* applies to things and refers to hypothetical situations. *Effective* applies to actual results. *Efficient* implies minimum cost and effort. Could Swift’s proposal be called *effective* or *efficient*?

❶ SATIRE

Swift employs biting **sarcasm**, or a mocking and ironic tone, in the final defense of his proposal. Sarcasm is a common feature in **Juvenalian satire** (page 609), which is noted for its harsh and unforgiving tone, and “A Modest Proposal” is a classic of this type of satire. What words sarcastically mock Swift’s supposed critics? What do you think is Swift’s real opinion of his critics?

29. **common stock**: ordinary stock in a company or business venture.