TEACHING THE CULTURE OF LIFE:

A Modest Proposal
by Jonathan Swift (1729)

Use this high school lesson in a history class or English Literature class. After reading *A Modest Proposal* and the Life Theme, spend the last 20–25 minutes of class time discussing it with the students.

**Teacher/parent note**
Before reading, remind students that *A Modest Proposal* is satire and is not meant to be taken literally. Encourage students to think about what kinds of social problems Jonathan Swift was writing about and responding to in this political essay.

**What is satire?**
Satire is prose that seeks to point out and expose mistakes, problems, or vices with an ironic tone. As with *A Modest Proposal*, satire can be quite shocking or humorous. *A Modest Proposal* uses the techniques of irony and parody to present a message of social justice and reform to the reader.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**
One of the greatest English satirists of the 18th century, Jonathan Swift is best known for *Gulliver’s Travels* and his satirical essays and poems. Born in Ireland in 1667, Swift was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and eventually became an Anglican minister for the Church of Ireland. Swift was a prominent figure in the literary circles of his time, befriending well-known essayist Alexander Pope, with whom he developed a great friendship. Throughout his life, Swift suffered from Ménière’s syndrome, nausea, and vertigo, which contributed to rumors that he was mentally unstable.

**Words to know**

**Ironic**—words or phrases which imply an opposite meaning to the literal meaning expressed. Swift, a master of irony, uses this technique by proposing cannibalism as a solution to the poverty of the Irish.

**Parody**—mockery and criticism through imitation of literary form, writing style, or genre characteristics. *A Modest Proposal* parodies the traditional form and structure of an 18th century political tract printed in large quantities for distribution to people on the street.

**Satire**—literature which criticizes a person, institution, society, or object by making it look ridiculous. Swift uses the literary techniques of irony and parody in *A Modest Proposal*. 
Untiring in his support for the poor and disadvantaged, especially the Irish people as they sought their independence from England, Swift produced a weekly periodical, Intelligencer, in which he published his political essays, including *A Modest Proposal*, which he wrote in 1729. He died in 1745.

**STORY SUMMARY**

In the beginning of the essay, Jonathan Swift describes the poverty that exists in big cities. Mothers have no control over their children who run around the streets in rags; the criminal classes are expanding with the growing population; and the excess population is becoming a burden on the rest of Ireland. The excess children, Swift declares, are the problem—and the sooner we make them useful members to society, the sooner we solve all the problems of poverty, crime, and famine. Swift claims that his scheme will also prevent voluntary abortions for women who cannot afford to care for their children.

After such an introduction, Swift outrageously proposes the breeding and raising of children up to a year old for feasting. He continues with care costs, feeding costs, and the benefit to society of having a readily available source of nutritious meat. He further asserts that Roman Catholics are more plentiful and delicious than the average citizen because of their diet of fish. Rather than hunt for venison, Swift proposes that wealthy gentlemen hunt young boys and girls, who are still tender and good for eating. Swift declares that he puts forth his modest proposal out of a desire to do public good and reluctantly admits that he and his family will not be able to profit from such a scheme, as his children are already grown and his wife is beyond childbearing age.

**LIFE THEME: ABORTION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

*A Modest Proposal* offers a satirical solution to the problems of society by using classic 18th century logic: If poverty is caused by having too many people, by all means, get rid of the people. Better still, put them to good use and raise them as livestock for food. With such a proposal, Swift uses his literary genius to shock his audience into action. It is clear from Swift’s words that poverty, homelessness, and other problems were creeping into Irish society, yet the wealthier classes remained indifferent to the suffering around them and failed to solve—or attempt to solve—these societal problems. The Protestant upper class saw unwanted people, such as the poor and Roman Catholics, as the ultimate cause of society’s problems. The solution? Eliminate them. But we know from history that people are not the problem.

At first glance, Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* seems ludicrous, outrageous, and ridiculous. Who would ever want to eat children? To ask a similar question in modern times, who would ever want to kill innocent children or even accuse them of being the cause of society’s problems? Due to the pressures of the culture of death, more than 3,500 babies die every day through abortion in America. Since 1973, over 55 million babies have been killed through abortion, yet clearly eliminating people through abortion or preventing them from being born through contraception has not improved society.

As incredible as it may seem, Swift’s proposal is actually playing out in more gruesome ways in our society today. Repeatedly, Planned Parenthood and the abortion industry have been caught selling organs and tissue samples from aborted preborn children to be used in scientific research and commercial product development. Selling human tissues and organs (as opposed to just recovering costs) is not ethical under any circumstances, nor is it legal. And the selling of human organs is a felony which could result in heavy fines and a prison sentence. The abortion industry wants to make a profit, not only through the abortion procedure itself, but also on the "medical waste"—the bodies of thousands of innocent preborn children—by selling body parts and embryonic stem cells for research and commercial...
purposes. The economics of this situation are gruesome. Planned Parenthood obtains the organs and tissue for free. Remember, the abortion itself is paid for by a fee paid by the mother or other party. Women pay anywhere from $400 up to $1500 to have the abortion done, so Planned Parenthood already makes a profit from the abortion. When abortion providers turn around and sell those organs and tissue for $30, $50, or even $100 per specimen for research and commercial purposes, they are left with a tidy sum. Let’s look at the numbers. If approximately 3,000 abortions are performed each day in the United States and abortion providers sold only one organ or tissue sample from just 10 percent of those babies for $50, they could rake in over $5 million in a single year. To Planned Parenthood, it would seem that these innocent children are unwanted anyway, so why not use their bodies to make money? Human trafficking can be a very nice side gig when you’re killing babies for a living. This all seems a bit unreal, like something out of a horror film, but it’s happening.

Swift mentions the breeding of humans like animals, and argues that his solution is better than simply reducing the breeding of humans, like a farmer might do with his herd of cattle. That way, children born to poorer families will be wanted and treated with loving care until their turn at the stockyards. Similarly, with the contraceptive mentality of today’s world, humans have been reduced to herds of animals, unable to control their actions or desires. Birth control is seen as a way to reduce the population—and when contraception fails, the natural follow-up is abortion. Both contraception and abortion focus on eradicating human beings, denying God as the Creator and Author of Life. This contraceptive mentality extends to the elderly and disabled, who are seen as burdensome or lacking in value. When the disrespect for human life is in the foundation of society, breaking apart the family, then it can easily spread to the rest of society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of social problems does Swift reference in his descriptions of the country and what does he see as the cause of these problems?
   Some examples include: extreme poverty, criminal classes, rapid population growth with no infrastructure or system to deal with more people, abortion, etc. Swift asserts that there are too many children and no resources to deal with them. As a result, society is overrun, crime is high, and there are thousands of poor people without a sustainable lifestyle.

2. What is Swift’s “modest” proposal and why is it so shocking?
   There is nothing “modest” about Swift’s proposal. He proposes that instead of stopping the poor from having children, babies should be sold to rich families because they are a nutritious source of protein to eat. The idea of cannibalism sounds appalling, particularly as Swift calculates the cost of such a transaction and indicates how much money the country could save. Swift’s proposal is shocking, even to liberal-minded people, because cannibalism is not a solution to world poverty. As we know, eliminating people does not eliminate problems.

3. What social problems do we face today and what is the modern response to Swift’s “modest proposal”?
   Today there is rampant poverty, famine, inadequate access to water, lack of education, and sickness all over the world. But none of these problems is directly caused by humans.
   Proponents of overpopulation do not see a problem with killing an innocent child before he is born—but if you mentioned cooking a one year old child and eating him, any sensible population control advocate would say that you are crazy. But what’s the difference? Cannibalism aside, what is the difference between
killing a seven-month-old preborn child and a killing a newborn? To the pro-lifer, there is no difference as both lives have dignity, deserve respect, and have the right to life. It’s simple. But to the abortion advocate, a seven-month-old child still nestled in his mother’s womb is merely a fetus, even though fetus is simply a stage in human development, much like the terms infant, toddler, and teenager.

4. Why are abortion and contraception not solutions to the problems of crime and poverty?
Both abortion and contraception seek to limit the number of people in the world rather than strike at the root of the problem, which, depending on the region where poverty is a problem, could be lowering taxes, raising the minimum wage, requiring companies to hire more full-time employees who have families to support, more benefits for working mothers so that they can earn a living and spend more time with their children, etc. Eliminating people does not eliminate their problems.

ACTIVITY: WRITING SATIRE
Find a specific problem in today’s society (such as abortion, euthanasia, pollution, violent crime, famine, lack of clean water, disease, etc). Copy the style of Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal by sharing your own ludicrous solution to a societal problem. Essays should be no longer than one or two pages to imitate Swift’s publication in a pamphlet.

FURTHER RESEARCH
Visit Overpopulationisamyth.com for a series of informative videos on population growth. The world isn’t overpopulated.

Read “Abortion Body Parts: Not Just for Medical Research” by Aaron Klein on WND.com. This article describes various uses of aborted fetal stem cell lines.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


