**CHY4U Unit 2, Activity 1: Context for Jonathan Swift’s A Modest Proposal**

“Religion was once again an issue when James II became king of England in 1685.  Because he was Catholic, he did not gain favor with the Protestant community in Ireland, and was eventually seceded by the Protestant William of Orange.  With William’s gain of the throne, multiple penal laws were put into place which took rights away from the Catholics. These laws significantly decreased the Catholics’ ability to own property, gain a good education, and protect themselves with weapons. “

<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/~smith24m/classweb/world_politics/History.html>

Taken from *The British Empire in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapter V.) by Edgar Sanderson (1898)

After the surrender of Limerick in 1691, the treaty which promised religious freedom to the Catholics was grossly violated, and they were made subject to the action of severe "penal laws", passed in the Irish parliament, an assembly composed of Protestant lords, and of members returned for boroughs controlled by the crown or by patrons or by close corporations, and for counties dominated in election affairs by great proprietors of land. Catholics were not permitted to keep school; to go beyond seas, or to send others thither, for education in the Romish religion. Intermarriage with Protestants was disallowed, in case of the possession of an estate in Ireland. Children of mixed marriages were always to be brought up in the Protestant faith.

A "Papist" could not be guardian to any child, nor hold land, nor possess arms. He could not hold a commission in the army or navy, or be a private soldier. No Catholic could hold any office of honour or emolument in the state, or be a member of any corporation, or vote for members of the Commons, or, if he were a peer, sit or vote in the Lords. Almost all these personal disabilities were equally enforced by law against any Protestant who married a Catholic wife. It was a felony, with transportation, to teach the Catholic religion, and treason, as a capital offence, to convert a Protestant to the Catholic faith. The legislation devised for the Irish Catholics in that evil time was described by Burke as "a machine as well fitted for the oppression, impoverishment, and degradation of a people, and the debasement in them of human nature itself, as ever proceeded from the perverted ingenuity of man".

LibraryIreland: Irish Books Online, <http://www.libraryireland.com/articles/Eighteenth-Century-Ireland/Irish-Penal-Laws.php>

## "A Modest Proposal": An Introduction by [David Cody](http://www.victorianweb.org/misc/dc.html), Associate Professor of English, Hartwick College

Swift's motives for writing "A Modest Proposal" …, which appeared in 1729, were complex. He felt, for his own part, that he had been exiled to Ireland when he would have much preferred to have been in England, and his personal sense of the wrongs he had received at the hands of the English only intensified the anger he felt at the way England mistreated Ireland. Though he was most concerned with the plight of his own class, the relatively prosperous Anglo-Irish who were members of the Church of Ireland, rather than that of the Irish Presbytarians of Ulster or that of the Roman Catholics who made up the largest, and the poorest, segment of the Irish population, he spoke, in the end, for the country as a whole. He lived in an Ireland which was a colony, politically, militarily, and economically dependent upon England. It was manifestly in England's interest to keep things as they were: a weak Ireland could not threaten England, and the measures which kept it weak were profitable for the English. As a result Ireland was a desperately poor country, overpopulated, full, as Swift said, of beggars, wracked periodically by famine, heavily taxed, and with no say at all in its own affairs. England controlled the Irish legislature. English absentee landlords owned most of the land which was worth owning. Irish manufacturies were deliberately crippled so that they could not compete with those in England.

Swift was enraged at the passivity of the Irish people, who had become so habituated to the situation that they seemed incapable of making any effort to change it. The Irish Parliament ignored numerous proposals which Swift made in earnest — proposals to tax absentee landlords, to encourage Irish industries, to improve the land, agricultural techniques, and the quality of manufactured goods — which would have begun to rectify things.

"A Modest Proposal," then, is at once a disgusted parody of Swift's own serious proposals, as well as those of less disinterested "projectors," and a savage indictment both of the exploitive English and of the exploited Irish. Rhetorically, it is enormously sophisticated; requiring that we accept and reject its central premise at one and the same time. In it Swift owes a debt to Defoe's "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters": behind the role-playing, behind the semblance of quietly realistic humanitarianism and calm reasonableness lies a savage indignation directed at the exploiter as well as an implicit compassion for the exploited. Behind the "Modest Proposer," that is, stands an enraged and sardonic Swift, asking both sides whether the whole matter is not merely a question of degree; a question of the extent to which a human being — the manipulator or the manipulated — can be dehumanized. Once the process of dehumanization gets underway, as it obviously is, in a country in which no one — not even the unfortunates themselves — seems to mind or object to the fact that tens of thousands of human beings starve to death each year, where can one calmly, sanely, and logically draw the line and say thus far and no farther? "A Modest Proposal" is a manifestation of Swift's sense of anger and frustration, and as such it is merely the most savage, the most brutal, the most heavily ironic, of the numerous tracts which he produced during the early eighteenth century in an attempt to shame England and to shock Ireland out of its lethargic state. It is a ghastly masterpiece, cunningly devised, horribly plausible, deviously manipulative: it remains for the reader to come to terms with it, to comprehend it, and to determine the extent to which, oddly enough, it might be relevant in our own world.

Victorian Web, <http://www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/swift/proposal1.html>