Understanding Satire:
Analyzing *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift

Note: the complete text of *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift can be found online at: [http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/modest.html](http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/modest.html)

**About A Modest Proposal**
*A Modest Proposal* was written by Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), who is well-known as the author of the satirical political fantasy, *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift published the *Modest Proposal* in 1729 as a pamphlet (a kind of essay in an unbound booklet). At this time, and for many years afterward, Ireland (not an independent country) was far poorer than England. Most people born there were Roman Catholics and employed as agricultural laborers or tenant farmers. The landlords (landowners) were paid from the produce of the land, at rates which the workers could rarely afford. Members of the ruling class were usually Protestants. Many of them were not born in Ireland, nor did they live there permanently. If the laborers lost their work, there would always be other poor people to take it up. There was no social security system and starvation was as common as in the Third World today. Swift knows, in writing the *Proposal*, that in living memory, Irish people had been driven to cannibalism.

This assignment requires you to read and explain the Proposal, comment on Swift's writing methods, and make a judgment and personal response to it. Respond to these questions in writing (typed); number your responses—don’t write an essay.

1. **Introduce the Proposal**
   First you should briefly introduce the Proposal: in a paragraph, outline what it is about and when and why it appeared. You may use the information at the start of the handout for this.

2. **What problem does Swift seek to solve?**
   Next, you should outline the problem for which Swift proposes a solution: What is it? Who (if anyone) causes it? Why is it so hard to solve?

3. **The Proposal in detail**
   Now you need to explain the Proposal. You may use Swift's words sometimes, but should also explain or summarize in your own words. Try not to make judgments here (you will do so later). This will probably be the longest section of your response. Look at the different parts of Swift's proposal.

4. **Swift's ambiguity**
   Five paragraphs from the end of the pamphlet (this section begins, “I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised…”) Swift dismisses some alternative solutions to the problem of poverty. He lists them, but does not explain them in detail.
See if you can work out what any of them are. Write in each case whether the solution here would be better than the Modest Proposal. This part of the Proposal is ambiguous - we cannot be sure of Swift's real intention. On the surface he is dismissing alternatives to his scheme - but we can see that they may be quite good ideas. Do you think that he really wants the reader to dismiss these ideas?

5. The reader's response
At this point it will be helpful to explain the reader's response (what Swift expects, anyway) first to the Proposal and then to the other solutions which Swift dismisses. You must write about Swift's use of irony: what he says literally (surface meaning) is quite different from what he really believes (deep or underlying meaning) and the reader is (you are) expected to see this.

6. Swift's real targets
Who, if anyone, is (or are) really to blame for the state of Ireland? See if you can find those whom Swift casts as the villains of the piece. Give your reasons.