

## Analyzing "A Modest Proposal"

### Pre-reading cartoon analysis:

The British Neoclassical period was known for its social criticism and utilized satire as one of its major literary forms; however, the tradition of satire begun by Neoclassical writers continues today. Analyze the contemporary cartoon below, and discuss, in a well-developed paragraph, this modern satire. What is the cartoon's criticism about American society, how is it an effective satire, and what devices does the artist use to reveal his message?



Luckovich, Mike. "Brad and Angelina" cartoon. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* 12 Jan. 2006.

### Background Notes on Author:

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), born to upper-class English parents but raised in Ireland, wrote "A Modest Proposal" in 1729. At that time, England ruled Ireland, and English tyrannical policies ruined the Irish economy. In this satire, Swift creates a **narrator** to speak for him, a British government finance official who proposes the outrageous idea of selling Irish babies for food to solve the problem of Ireland's failing economy and widespread poverty—forcing his rich English readers to look at the harsh truths about their mistreatment of the Irish poor.

### Rhetorical Strategies in "A Modest Proposal"

Though the Neoclassical writers advocate logic over emotion, in creating "A Modest Proposal," Swift employs all three **rhetorical strategies** (*ethos, logos, pathos*) in his satirical argument. For each rhetorical strategy, choose one example from "A Modest Proposal" and explain how the passage appeals to the reader's ethics, logic, and/or emotions.

### Satirical Literary Elements

1. What is the purpose of the satire? What social ill is the author attempting to reform?
2. What is humorous about the title? Consider the adjective the narrator uses to describe his proposal.
3. How is Swift's choice of a finance official as the narrator of his satire effective? Provide examples of the expert knowledge the narrator uses to support his proposal.
4. Summarize the main points of the finance official's plan. What specific benefits will the sale of babies provide for the Irish poor and for the British rich?
5. **Verbal irony** allows an author to distinguish his or her own attitudes from those of the fictional speaker. In "A Modest Proposal," the speaker is earnest and straightforward while Swift is bitter and sarcastic. How does Swift achieve this irony?
6. What precise adjectives describe the **tone** of the satire? What specific textual detail leads you to this interpretation?
7. Effective satire employs **hyperbole** and/or **understatement** to emphasize the need for social reform. Locate several examples of these literary devices and explain their effect.