Questions for ‘A Modest Proposal’ (Answer on own paper)

1. What techniques of irony and satire does Swift draw upon, and how does he use them to his advantage?

2. Where is the boundary between Swift himself and his narrator? If it is a fine line, does the similarity of the two voices matter for the piece or change its effectiveness?

3. How important is context here? How can we, as 21st century readers, begin to understand the true intent of Swift’s piece?

4. How many distinct targets can we identify? Is it too many? Do we find the power of the satire is undermined or strengthened by the widely spread attack?

5. Who is the author talking about when he refers to the country “which would be glad to eat up our whole nation without” preservatives? What is the author really saying?

6. The author urges those opposed to his proposal to consider two important issues: what do these issues primarily concern? What do they reveal about the state of Swift’s Ireland?

7. What does the author’s disinterestedness in his own proposal (due to his lack of children) reveal to the reader?

8. Why does Swift choose to bundle his real suggestions into "A Modest Proposal" instead of stating them outright? Does this make them more effective?

9. This passage is perhaps the most blatant of Swift's criticism in the piece. "Of quitting our animosities and factions . . . of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our shop-keepers . . ." Do you think it's too heavy-handed, or does it fit in well with the rest of his piece?

10. Swift suggests several economic policies here such as a 25% tax and favoring English-made products over imports. Where else in "A Modest Proposal" does he suggest economic reforms?

11. How does Swift transition from his satirical absurdist tone to the serious tone of his real proposals?

12. Is Swift’s advocacy of cannibalism consistent with his condemnation of infanticide? Does this transition hinder or aid the effect of satire?

13. Swift reduces humanity to laborers, breeders, and commodities with monetary worth, yet does he include himself within this dehumanization?

14. Why does Swift propose theft as a viable occupation, and what does that contribute to his satire?

15. Only once in this passage does Swift specify that he writes specifically about the children of the poor, a fact which results in an entirely different socioeconomic reading of the essay. What effect does this subtlety have on the first and subsequent readings?

16. Although his argument is often compelling, why does Swift present an absurd and immoral solution that is not likely to be instituted?
17. Does Swift put too much faith in his audience to be moved to action by satire? Is satire an effective means of societal change?

18. In this passage and elsewhere, Swift's narrator claims that there should be no objection to his proposal. Why? What is the effect of this claim?

19. Why does Swift separate himself from the narrator at the end of the story? How would his audience view the proposal differently if he had not done so?

20. What is achieved by Swift's many details, considering the topic of his proposal? Do you think the proposal would be effective if it were written differently (e.g., with direct, simple sentences)?

21. Why would Swift bother to bring up his friend's approach? How does this digression contribute to Swift's own purpose?

22. What would the average reader know about Swift as an author, and how would this knowledge inform their reading of the essay?

23. As Swift's tone is relatively even, what other tricks of style does he use to cue the reader?

24. Where in this early passage, and throughout the essay, is Swift's oddly whimsical tone interrupted by flashes of the bitterness that must motivate such an ugly satire?

25. Swift's own voice is thickly veiled beneath ludicrousness until the near end (in the part that beings: "but, as to my self, having been wearied out for many years with offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts."), when it surfaces more assertively and the satirical act loosens to manifest more protest than pretense. How do these changes in tone affect the delivery of Swift's message to his audience?

26. Can the almost deceptive narrating voice running through the bulk of Swift's proposal be considered so removed from Swift as to be deemed a character?

27. Is Swift actually advocating any realistic solutions? Is satire a productive means of social change?

28. Besides the fact that eating children is well-established as morally wrong, are there holes in Swift's argument? What does this say about the difference between moral solution and a logical one?

29. Swift speaks of the wealthy English landlords in the third person. What point is he trying to make about them, and if they are not his audience, then who is?