CAPITOLO

7

Swift and the Art of Satire

"Satire is a sort of glass wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own." — Jonathan Swift, The Battle of the Books, "The Preface of the Author" (1704)

OBIETTIVI

1. I can describe Ireland under English rule in Swift's lifetime: the Penal Laws, absentee landlords and poverty.
2. I can outline Swift's life and works and explain the four voyages of *Gulliver's Travels* and the irony of *A Modest Proposal*.
3. I can distinguish Horatian from Juvenalian satire and recognise an unreliable narrator and sustained verbal irony.
4. I can use the mandative subjunctive, fixed subjunctives and formal unreal structures (*as if* + *were*, *If … were to*, *But for*).
5. I can recognise and use irony and understatement in conversation and write a short satirical piece with a persona.

INDICE DEL CAPITOLO

7.1 History and Society: Ireland in Swift's Lifetime 2
7.2 Literature: Swift and the Art of Satire 5
7.3 Texts: Eggs, Cucumbers and Children 9
7.4 Language: the Subjunctive and Formal Unreal Structures 14
7.5 Skills: Irony, Understatement and the Satirical Piece 18
7.6 Connections: Journeys to Impossible Places 23

English 4 · Parte II · Reason and Satire · versione 1.0
Capitolo 7: Swift and the Art of Satire · pagine 223–254 del volume completo · estratto per lo studio

In October 1726 a London bookseller published the travels of a ship's surgeon called Lemuel Gulliver. The book had no author's name on it, and it described, with the calm precision of a sailor's log, an empire of people six inches tall, a kingdom of giants, a flying island and a country ruled by wise horses. Within weeks everyone was reading it. Readers laughed, recognised politicians, argued about who had written it — and one Irish bishop, Swift reported, declared that the book was full of improbable lies and that he hardly believed a word of it.

The author was **Jonathan Swift**, an Irish clergyman, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, and often called the greatest satirist in the English language. This chapter follows Swift between his two islands: the Ireland he lived in and could not change, and the imaginary islands where he could turn the world upside down. You will see how satire can laugh gently or wound deeply, how an author can hide behind a narrator he does not trust, and why a very calm voice can be the most savage of all. In the Language section you will meet the formal grammar of proposals and impossible situations — the *subjunctive* — which Swift's "modest proposer" uses so politely.

7.1 History and Society: Ireland in Swift's Lifetime

Swift was born in Dublin in 1667 and died there in 1745. In those eighty years Ireland passed through a war, a new settlement of land and religion, and a long period of poverty under laws made by a Protestant minority. Figura 7.1 sets his life against these events.

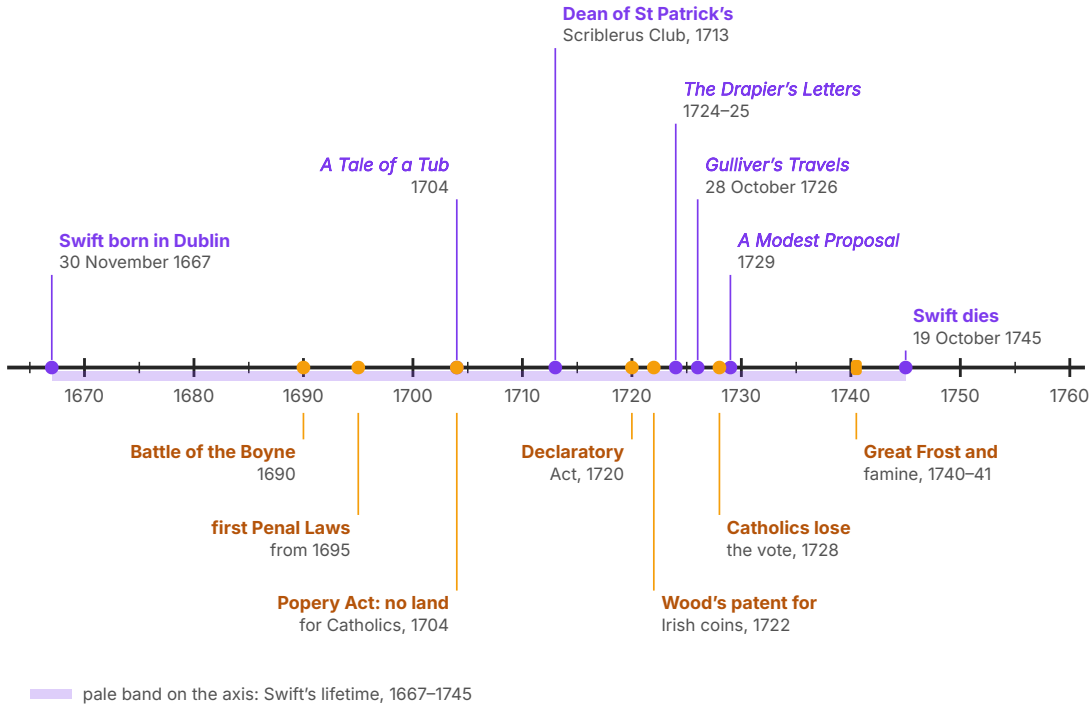


Figura 7.1 Swift's life and works (above the axis, violet) and the history of Ireland and Britain (below, amber), 1665–1760, on a proportional time axis (ticks every 5 years, labels every 10). The pale band on the axis is Swift's lifetime.

7.1.1 A Protestant kingdom with a Catholic majority

In the seventeenth century Ireland was a separate kingdom, but its king was the king of England, and its government answered to London. Most of its people were Catholic and spoke Irish; the landowners, more and more, were Protestants of English or Scottish origin. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (chapter 4) the deposed Catholic king, James II, fought for his crown in Ireland. His army was defeated by William III at the **Battle of the Boyne** (1690), and the war ended in 1691.

The Protestant parliament in Dublin then passed, from 1695 onwards, a series of laws against Catholics that historians call the **Penal Laws** (*leggi penali*). Catholics could not sit in parliament, hold public office, carry weapons, send their children to be educated abroad or, after the Popery Act of 1704, buy land or take a long lease on it; a Catholic's estate had to be divided among all his sons unless the eldest became a Protestant. In 1728 Catholics lost the right to vote. The laws were not always enforced, and the Catholic Church survived, but their aim was clear: land and power were to stay in Protestant hands. Presbyterians, the descendants of Scot-

tish settlers in Ulster, were also excluded from public office after 1704, because they did not belong to the established Church of Ireland.

The small Anglican elite that ruled Ireland — landowners, bishops, lawyers, members of parliament — is often called the **Protestant Ascendancy** (*l'"Ascendancy" protestante*). The phrase became common only in the 1780s and 1790s, but it describes the society Swift knew. Swift belonged to it: he was a Protestant clergyman of English descent. Yet he became the most famous defender of the Irish poor.

7.1.2 Land, landlords and poverty

Most Irish people were tenants who rented small plots of land and lived mainly on potatoes and milk. Many great landowners lived in England and spent their Irish rents there: they were **absentee landlords** (*proprietari assenteisti*), who sent agents to collect the money and rarely saw their estates. Irish trade was also limited by English law: the Wool Act of 1699 forbade the export of Irish woollen cloth to any country except England, to protect English manufacturers. And the Irish parliament itself was subordinate: the Declaratory Act of 1720 stated that the British parliament could make laws for Ireland.

When harvests failed, as they did several times in the late 1720s, people starved. Dublin, by the middle of the century the second city of the British Isles after London, had elegant new streets — work on a grand Parliament House began in 1729 — and beggars at every door. A much worse famine followed the "Great Frost" of 1740–41, when a large part of the population died of hunger and disease — historians' estimates vary widely, and the disaster is often compared to the Great Famine of the 1840s. Swift's angriest writing comes from the misery of the 1720s.

7.1.3 Jonathan Swift: a life between two islands

Swift was born in Dublin on 30 November 1667, to English parents; his father died before he was born. He studied at Trinity College, Dublin, and in 1689 went to England as secretary to Sir William Temple, a retired diplomat, at Moor Park in Surrey. There he read widely and met Esther Johnson, a young girl in the household whom he later called "Stella"; she became his closest friend for the rest of her life. In the 1690s he was ordained a priest of the Church of Ireland.

His first great satire, *A Tale of a Tub*, appeared anonymously in 1704. From 1710 Swift was in London, writing for the Tory government (chapter 5) as editor of its paper, *The Examiner*, and as a pamphleteer. He hoped to become a bishop in England, but Queen Anne, it is said, distrusted the author of the irreverent *Tale*. Instead, in 1713, he was made **Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral** in Dublin — the head of its clergy — a post he kept until his death. In the same years he joined the **Scriblerus Club**, a group of writer friends — Swift, Pope, John Gay, John Arbuthnot — who planned to mock bad learning through the invented memoirs of a foolish scholar, Martinus Scriblerus.

Back in Ireland, Swift became a national hero. In 1722 an English ironmaster, William Wood, received a patent to make copper coins for Ireland. Many Irish people believed the coins would be of poor value and that Ireland had not been asked. In 1724–25 Swift published *The Drapier's Letters*, pretending to be a simple Dublin shopkeeper, "M. B. Drapier". The letters were so successful that the patent was withdrawn in 1725. Then came *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and *A Modest Proposal* (1729). In his last years Swift was ill and lost his memory; he died on 19 October 1745 and was buried in his cathedral, next to Stella, who had died in 1728. He left most of his money to found a hospital for the mentally ill, St Patrick's Hospital, which opened in 1757 and still exists.

> **ERRORE FREQUENTE**
>
> ✗ «Swift era un rivoluzionario irlandese cattolico.» → ✓ Swift era un ecclesiastico **protestante** anglicano, di famiglia inglese, nato a Dublino: apparteneva all'élite che governava l'Irlanda. Difese i poveri irlandesi e attaccò il governo di Londra, ma non chiese mai la fine delle leggi contro i cattolici.
>
> ✗ «Swift fu vescovo di Dublino.» → ✓ Fu **decano** (*Dean*) della cattedrale di San Patrizio, cioè il capo del suo capitolo, dal 1713 al 1745.

7.1.4 Science on trial: the projectors

Swift lived in the age of the Royal Society (chapter 4) and of Newton, but also of the South Sea Bubble of 1720 (chapter 5), when thousands of investors lost their money in fantastic schemes. A **projector** (*progettista, faccendiere*) was a person who designed or promoted a "project": a new machine, an invention, a company, a plan to make the nation rich. Some projects were serious — Defoe (chapter 6) had published *An Essay upon Projects* in 1697, with ideas for banks, roads and insurance — but the word often suggested a dreamer or a swindler. Both kinds will appear in Swift's Academy of Lagado and in the voice of his "modest proposer".

7.2 Literature: Swift and the Art of Satire

7.2.1 Two ways of laughing: Horatian and Juvenalian satire

In English 3 (chapter 6) you met *satire*: writing that uses humour to expose the faults of people or institutions. Since the Renaissance, critics have distinguished two kinds, named after two Roman poets. **Horatian satire** (*satira oraziana*) is gentle and amused. Its model is Horace (65–8 BC), who asked in his *Satires* (I.1.24–25) what forbids us to tell the truth while laughing — *ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?* The Horatian satirist smiles at human follies — vanity, fashion, pedantry — and hopes to correct them. **Juvenalian satire** (*satira giovenaliana*) is bitter and indignant. Its model is Juvenal (c. AD 100), who said that if talent fails, indignation writes the verse

— *facit indignatio versum* (*Satires* I.79). The Juvenalian satirist attacks vices and crimes: corruption, cruelty, injustice.

Most satires mix the two tones, and Swift moves along the whole line (Figura 7.2): Lilliput's quarrels are comic, the last voyage of Gulliver is bleak, and *A Modest Proposal* is one of the most savage texts in the language. Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (chapter 5), by contrast, stays mostly Horatian. Swift himself, in his Latin epitaph, speaks of his *saeva indignatio*, "savage indignation": a Juvenalian phrase.

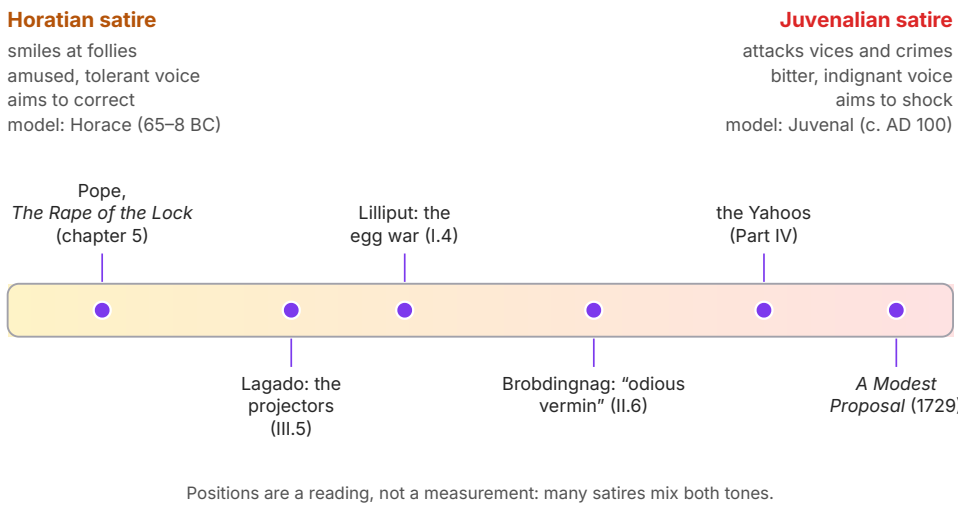


Figura 7.2 From Horatian to Juvenalian satire. The positions of the texts are a reading, not a measurement.

7.2.2 The satirist's masks

Swift almost never speaks in his own name. His books are "written" by a hack writer (*A Tale of a Tub*), a shopkeeper (the Drapier), a ship's surgeon (Gulliver) or an economist (the modest proposer). Each is a *persona* (English 3, chapter 6), and many of them are an **unreliable narrator** (*narratore inattendibile*): a narrator whose account or judgement the reader cannot fully trust, because he is naive, proud, mistaken or mad. The reader has to see what the narrator does not see.

This is why Swift's favourite weapon is **verbal irony** (*ironia verbale*), the kind of irony (English 3, chapter 6) in which the words say one thing and the writer means something else, often the opposite. Swift sustains it over whole books. His narrators praise what deserves blame, report horrors as if they were ordinary, and calculate where they should feel. The tone is **deadpan** (*impassibile, pince-sans-rire*): perfectly serious, without a smile or a wink, so that the reader must decide alone that the text cannot mean what it says.

7.2.3 *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)

The book appeared on 28 October 1726 with the title *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, "by Lemuel Gulliver, first a surgeon, and then a captain of several ships". It has the look of a real travel book of the time, with maps, dates, a portrait of the author, a letter from the publisher and plenty of measurements. That is part of the joke: Swift parodies the popular accounts of voyages that Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (chapter 6) had also used, and their claims to be true. It was never meant for children; the shortened versions for young readers came later.

IN SINTESI

***Gulliver's Travels*: the four voyages**

- **Part I · Lilliput.** Gulliver is a giant among people "not six inches high". Their court, their parties and their war with the neighbouring island of Blefuscu mirror British politics in miniature.
- **Part II · Brobdingnag.** Gulliver is now the tiny one among giants. He proudly describes England to the wise king, who concludes that his people are "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth" (II.6).
- **Part III · Laputa, Balnibarbi and other islands.** A flying island ruled by mathematicians and astronomers who cannot build a house; the Academy of Lagado and its projectors; the Struldbruggs, who never die but go on growing old.
- **Part IV · The Houyhnhnms.** A country of rational, honest horses, served by the Yahoos, filthy human-like animals. The Houyhnhnms have no word for a lie: they call it "the thing which was not". Gulliver comes home and can no longer bear human beings.

Swift's great technique is **scale and point of view**. In Lilliput Gulliver is twelve times as tall as the inhabitants; in Brobdingnag the giants are about twelve times as tall as he is (Figura 7.3). When we are big, the ambitions of the little people look ridiculous; when we are small, our own bodies and our wars look monstrous to the giants. The same change of size that makes children laugh is a lesson in humility: everything human depends on where you stand.

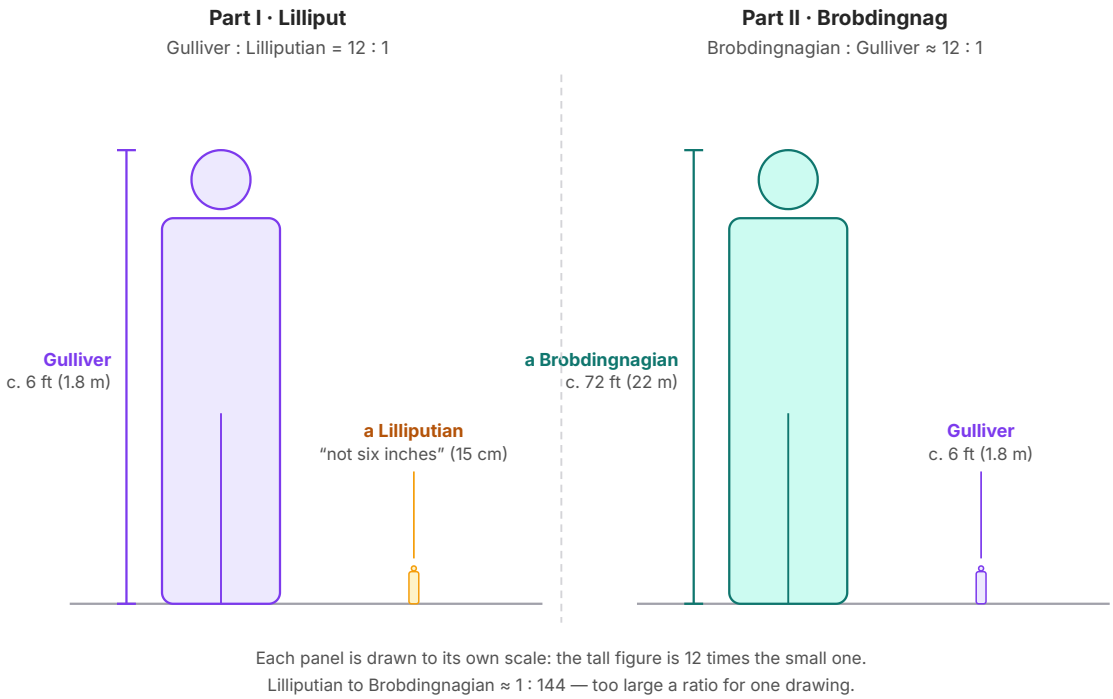


Figura 7.3 The two scales of Parts I and II. Swift states the Lilliputian ratio exactly (12 : 1, I.3); for Brobdingnag he gives no ratio, but his figures — a giant “as tall as an ordinary spire steeple”, a stride of about ten yards (II.1), hailstones “near eighteen hundred times” as large as ours (II.5) — imply about 12 : 1 again. Heights are approximate.

7.2.4 Politics, science and human pride

Each voyage has a different target. In **Lilliput** the two political parties are distinguished by the height of their heels, and the great war with Blefuscu began with a quarrel about the right end at which to break an egg (T1). Readers recognised the Tories and the Whigs, the conflict between Catholics and Protestants and England’s wars with France; ministers win office by dancing on a rope. In **Brobdingnag** the satire turns against Gulliver himself, who boasts of gunpowder to a king who is horrified by it. In **Laputa** Swift laughs at science cut off from life: the island’s rulers are so lost in mathematics and music that servants must hit them with bladders to make them listen, and the Academy of Lagado (T2) wastes the country’s resources on absurd experiments. The target is not knowledge itself, but knowledge without judgement or use.

The fourth voyage is the hardest to read. The Houyhnhnms live by reason alone; the Yahoos are greedy, dirty and violent, and Gulliver must admit that he resembles them. At the end he prefers the company of his horses to that of his wife and children. Is this Swift’s own view of humanity? Many critics think not: Gulliver has become an unreliable narrator, proud of his

new "reason" and blind to the kindness of the human beings — like the Portuguese captain, Pedro de Mendez, who rescues him. Readings of Part IV still differ, and that is part of its power.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ «*I viaggi di Gulliver* è una fiaba per bambini.» → ✓ È una **satira** politica e morale per adulti (1726). Le versioni per ragazzi, che quasi sempre tagliano la terza e la quarta parte, sono adattamenti successivi.

✗ «Gulliver è Swift.» → ✓ Gulliver è una *persona*, spesso un **narratore inattendibile**: il lettore deve vedere ciò che lui non vede.

7.2.5 *A Modest Proposal* (1729)

The full title is *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden on their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. It was published as a pamphlet in Dublin in 1729, after years of bad harvests. Its persona is a calm, well-meaning projector who has studied the problem of Irish poverty "for many years". He calculates how many children are born to poor parents each year — 120,000, by his arithmetic — and then proposes, with perfect politeness, that at the age of one they be sold as food for the rich.

The horror is the point. Swift wants readers to feel that his proposal is monstrous — and then to notice that the real treatment of the Irish poor by landlords and by England is not so different: the landlords, says the proposer, "have already devoured most of the parents". Near the end, the proposer lists the sensible remedies he refuses to discuss: taxing absentees, buying Irish goods, teaching landlords "to have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants". These were Swift's real proposals, which nobody had listened to. The satire attacks both the cruelty of the powerful and the cold language of economists who treat people as numbers.

7.3 Texts: Eggs, Cucumbers and Children

Three extracts, all in prose and all ironic: a political war explained by a Lilliputian minister, a scientist met by Gulliver in Lagado, and the central proposal of the modest proposer. Read each one twice: first for what it says, then for what Swift means.

7.3.1 T1 · Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* I.4: Big-Endians and Little-Endians

Context. Reldresal, a Lilliputian minister, visits Gulliver and explains the two "mighty evils" of the empire: a quarrel between two parties at home (High-Heels and Low-Heels) and the danger of an invasion from the neighbouring island of Blefuscu. Here he tells how the war began.

Tabella 7.1 T1 — *Gulliver's Travels* I.4 (Project Gutenberg eBook #829; spelling as printed there, apostrophes typeset)

> It began upon the following occasion. It is allowed on all hands, that the primitive way of breaking eggs, before we eat them, was upon the larger end; but his present majesty's grandfather, while he was a boy, going to eat an egg, and breaking it according to the ancient practice, happened to cut one of his fingers. Whereupon the emperor his father published an edict, commanding all his subjects, upon great penalties, to break the smaller end of their eggs. The people so highly resented this law, that our histories tell us, there have been six rebellions raised on that account; wherein one emperor lost his life, and another his crown. These civil commotions were constantly fomented by the monarchs of Blefuscu; and when they were quelled, the exiles always fled for refuge to that empire. It is computed that eleven thousand persons have at several times suffered death, rather than submit to break their eggs at the smaller end. Many hundred large volumes have been published upon this controversy: but the books of the Big-endians have been long forbidden, and the whole party rendered incapable by law of holding employments.

Glosses. *it is allowed on all hands*: everybody agrees · *primitive*: original, first · *edict*: official order · *resented*: felt angry about · *civil commotions*: riots, civil disorder · *fomented*: encouraged (trouble) · *quelled*: put down, stopped · *computed*: calculated · *rendered incapable by law of holding employments*: forbidden by law to hold public office.

Analysis

The allegory. Under the eggs lies English history. A ruler changes the religious rules — as Henry VIII did when he broke with Rome; there are rebellions, one king loses his life (Charles I, executed in 1649) and another his crown (James II, 1688); the exiles fly to the enemy across the sea (Catholic exiles in France, Lilliput's Blefuscu). The last sentence describes exactly the position of Catholics under the Test Acts in England and the Penal Laws in Ireland: their books forbidden, their party excluded from office.

Language and tone. The minister speaks in the dignified style of official history: *it is allowed on all hands*, *our histories tell us*, *it is computed*. Precise numbers (*six rebellions*, *eleven thousand persons*, *many hundred large volumes*) give the account the weight of fact. The contrast between this solemn language and the trivial cause — the end of an egg — is the source of the irony. A cut finger leads to the deaths of eleven thousand people.

Themes. Swift does not say that religion is unimportant; he says that people kill each other for differences that look absurd from outside.

1. What was the "primitive" way of breaking eggs, and why did it change?
2. Find three numbers in the passage. What effect do they have on the reader?
3. Which words make the account sound like serious history?
4. Which real events in English history could the two lost crowns refer to?
5. Who are the Big-Endians in Lilliput, and what has happened to them? Which Irish laws does this recall?

COLLEGAMENTI

Computing: big-endian and little-endian. In 1980 the computer scientist Danny Cohen borrowed Swift's words in a famous note on a technical "holy war": in which order should a computer store the bytes of a number? A **big-endian** system stores the most significant byte first (at the lowest memory address), a **little-endian** system the least significant byte first. The 32-bit number written in hexadecimal as 0A0B0C0D is stored as 0A 0B 0C 0D by a big-endian machine and as 0D 0C 0B 0A by a little-endian one. Both work equally well — which was exactly Swift's point about eggs. Today most personal computers are little-endian, while internet protocols send numbers in big-endian "network order".

7.3.2 T2 · Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* III.5: the projector of Lagado

Context. In Balnibarbi, the country ruled from the flying island of Laputa, Gulliver visits the Grand Academy of Lagado, where "every room has in it one or more projectors". He visits about five hundred rooms. This is the first man he meets.

Tabella 7.2 T2 — *Gulliver's Travels* III.5 (Project Gutenberg eBook #829)

> The first man I saw was of a meagre aspect, with sooty hands and face, his hair and beard long, ragged, and singed in several places. His clothes, shirt, and skin, were all of the same colour. He had been eight years upon a project for extracting sunbeams out of cucumbers, which were to be put in phials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the air in raw inclement summers. He told me, he did not doubt, that, in eight years more, he should be able to supply the governor's gardens with sunshine, at a reasonable rate; but he complained that his stock was low, and entreated me "to give him something as an encouragement to ingenuity, especially since this had been a very dear season for cucumbers."

Glosses. *of a meagre aspect*: thin and poor-looking · *sooty*: black with soot (smoke dust) · *singed*: slightly burnt · *phials*: small glass bottles · *hermetically sealed*: closed so that no air can pass · *raw inclement*: cold and wet · *stock*: supply of money and materials · *entreated*: begged · *ingenuity*: clever invention · *dear*: expensive.

Analysis

Portrait. The scientist's body tells his story: thin, black with soot, his hair burnt by his own experiments, his clothes and skin "all of the same colour". Swift describes him with the exact, neutral detail of a scientific observation — the method of the Royal Society turned against the experimenter.

Irony. The project sounds almost reasonable: plants grow in the sun, so perhaps they contain sunshine. The absurdity lies in the literal-minded idea of squeezing sunbeams out of a vegetable and storing them in bottles, and in the time scale: eight years already spent, eight more required. The final request turns the scientist into a beggar, and the last words are a comic anti-

climax: the season has been *very dear* for cucumbers. Gulliver reports everything without a word of judgement; his deadpan tone lets the reader laugh.

Themes. Swift mocks research that consumes money and never reaches a useful result — but gently: the projector is ridiculous rather than wicked.

1. Describe the projector's appearance in your own words. Why does Swift give so many physical details?
2. What exactly is the project, and what is it for?
3. How long has the project lasted, and how long will it last? What does this suggest?
4. Why is the last sentence funny?
5. Plants really do store the energy of sunlight. Does this make Swift's satire less effective, or more? Discuss.

7.3.3 T3 · Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (1729): the proposal

Context. After describing the beggars of Ireland and calculating the number of poor children born every year, the proposer finally reveals his plan.

Tabella 7.3 T3 — *A Modest Proposal* (Project Gutenberg eBook #1080; eighteenth-century spellings as printed there). […] marks a cut.

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricasee, or a ragoust.

[…]

I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.

Glosses. *liable to*: open to · *knowing*: well informed · *well nursed*: well fed (by its mother) · *wholesome*: good for your health · *I make no doubt*: I am sure · *fricasee*, *ragoust*: French-style dishes of stewed meat (modern spelling *fricassee*, *ragout*) · *I grant*: I admit · *dear*: expensive · *proper for*: suitable for · *title to*: right to own.

Analysis

The persona. The proposer is humble (*humbly propose*), reasonable (*I hope will not be liable to the least objection*), well informed (*I have been assured*) and practical: he even lists four ways of cooking. He never raises his voice. That calm is what makes the text so shocking: the most monstrous idea is presented in the most polite language.

Irony. The proposer seems to believe what he says, but Swift clearly does not. The irony works at two levels. At the first, the proposal is so absurd that no reader can accept it. At the se-

cond, a single word reveals Swift's real target: *devoured*. The landlords have "devoured" the parents — metaphorically, with high rents — so they have "the best title" to eat the children too. The literal cannibalism of the proposal becomes an image of the real economic cannibalism of Ireland.

Language. Notice the vocabulary of the market and the kitchen applied to human beings — *food*, *dear*, *nourishing*, *stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled* — and the vague authority of an anonymous "very knowing American", used as if it were evidence.

1. How does the proposer present himself in the first sentence? Find two adjectives or adverbs.
2. What is the source of his information, and why is it not reliable?
3. Which list in the second paragraph is most shocking, and why?
4. Explain the double meaning of *devoured* in the last sentence.
5. Who is the real target of the satire in this extract: the poor, the landlords, or the proposer himself? Justify your answer.

ESEMPIO SVOLTO

Reading verbal irony in four steps (on T3, last sentence).

1. **Read the literal meaning.** Children will be expensive food, so landlords should buy them, because landlords have already eaten the parents.
2. **Find the signal that the literal meaning cannot be true.** No sane writer proposes eating children; *devoured most of the parents* cannot be literal either.
3. **Reconstruct the intended meaning.** The landlords ruin poor families with high rents (they metaphorically "eat" them); Swift accuses them of treating the poor as things to be consumed.
4. **Name the effect.** The calm, polite tone (deadpan) and the logical form (*as… therefore…*) make the accusation stronger than any direct attack: the reader reaches the conclusion alone.

Model sentence: *Through the verb* devoured*, Swift turns the proposer's literal cannibalism into a metaphor for the landlords' exploitation of their tenants, so that the reader's horror at the proposal becomes horror at reality.*

LEARNING TO LEARN

Reading between the lines. Ironic texts have two meanings: the one on the page and the one the writer intends. To find the second, ask four questions.

- **Who is speaking?** The author, or a persona? What kind of person is the narrator?
- **Is there a contradiction?** Between tone and content (calm words, terrible facts), between the narrator's values and common sense, between the narrator's words and his actions.
- **What is exaggerated or too precise?** Numbers, lists and details that are "too much" are often a signal.
- **What would the opposite mean?** Try reversing a sentence: if the result makes more sense, you have found the irony.

The same questions work in Italian and Latin. Parini's *Giovin Signore* (chapter 5) is praised by a narrator who is really mocking him; in Latin, Horace's *Satires* often hand the speech to another voice — his slave Davus in II.7 — whom the reader must judge. In an oral exam, show that you can distinguish what the text says from what it means: it is one of the clearest signs of a B2 reader.

7.4 Language: the Subjunctive and Formal Unreal Structures

Swift's proposer writes in the formal language of proposals, laws and recommendations: *I do therefore humbly offer it to publick consideration, that…*. This section presents the grammar of that language — the English subjunctive — and the formal structures for unreal situations that you will meet in literary and academic English.

7.4.1 What is the English subjunctive?

The **subjunctive** (*congiuntivo inglese*) is a verb form that presents an action as necessary, desired or imagined, not as a fact. In modern English it has almost no forms of its own. The **present subjunctive** is simply the **base form** of the verb for every person: *that he **be**, that she **go**, that it **not happen*** — no *-s* in the third person, and *not* before the verb, without *do*. The **past subjunctive** survives only in *were*: *if I **were**, as if he **were***.

Do not confuse it with the Italian *congiuntivo*, which follows *credo che*, *spero che*, *benché*: English uses an ordinary indicative there (*I think he **is** right*). The English subjunctive is limited to a few formal structures.

7.4.2 The mandative subjunctive

The **mandative subjunctive** (*congiuntivo "di comando"*) follows words that express a demand, a proposal, a recommendation or a necessity (Figura 7.4, Tabella 7.4). It is common in formal writing, in laws, regulations and reports, and very common in American English.

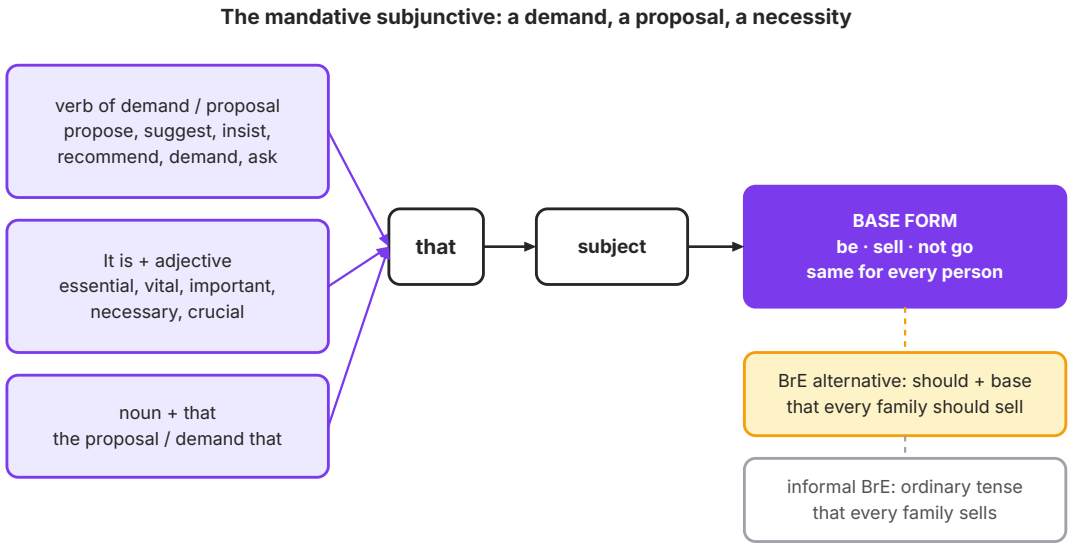


Figura 7.4 The mandative subjunctive: a word of demand, proposal or necessity + *that* + subject + base form (violet). British English also uses *should* + base form (amber) and, informally, an ordinary tense (grey).

Tabella 7.4 The mandative subjunctive: triggers and examples

Trigger	Words	Examples
verbs	*ask, demand, insist, propose, recommend, request, require, suggest, urge*	The proposer suggests that every poor child **be** sold at one year old. The Drapier insisted that the Irish **not accept** Wood's coins.
adjectives (*It is … that*)	*essential, vital, important, necessary, crucial, imperative, desirable*	It is essential that the reader **recognise** the irony. It is vital that every source **be** checked.
nouns	*demand, proposal, recommendation, request, suggestion, insistence* (+ *that*)	Swift's proposal that the children **be** eaten is, of course, ironic.

Notice three features. (1) The verb has no *-s*: *that every family* ***sell***, not *sells*. (2) The passive is *be* + past participle: *that he* ***be informed***. (3) The negative puts *not* before the verb: *that the patent* ***not be*** *renewed*.

British alternatives. In British English the mandative subjunctive is formal. It is very often replaced by *should* + base form — *It is essential that he* ***should be*** *informed* — and, in informal

speech, by an ordinary tense: *They insisted that he **pays** for it*. All three are correct in British English; in a formal essay the subjunctive or *should* is the best choice.

GRAMMAR IN ITALIANO

Il congiuntivo "di comando" (*mandative subjunctive*). Dopo verbi, aggettivi e nomi che esprimono ordine, proposta, raccomandazione o necessità (*suggest, insist, propose, recommend, demand; it is essential / vital / important; the proposal that*) si usa **that + soggetto + forma base**, uguale per tutte le persone: *I propose that he **go** = propongo che vada*; *It is essential that she **be** there = è essenziale che lei ci sia*. Negativa: *that he **not go*** (senza *do*).

Confronto con l'italiano. L'italiano usa il congiuntivo dopo moltissimi verbi (*penso che sia, spero che venga*); l'inglese no: *I think he **is**, I hope he **comes***. Il *subjunctive* inglese è raro e formale. In inglese britannico è comune anche *should* + forma base (*I suggest that he should go*); nell'uso informale, il tempo normale (*I suggest that he goes*).

***Suggest* and *recommend*: not with the infinitive.** These verbs do not take an object + *to*-infinitive. Say *I suggest that he (should) go*, *I suggest going* (gerund, English 3, chapter 10), or *I recommend that you read*. ✗ *I suggest him to go* is a very common mistake for Italian speakers.

7.4.3 Fixed subjunctives

A few **fixed subjunctives** (*congiuntivi cristallizzati*) survive in set expressions. They cannot be changed, but they are frequent in formal and literary English:

- *Be that as it may* = in spite of that: *Gulliver is a fool; be that as it may, he is an honest reporter.*
- *if need be* = if necessary: *The projector will work eight more years, if need be.*
- *so be it* = then let it happen: *If the critics hate the book, so be it.*
- *come what may* = whatever happens · *suffice it to say* = it is enough to say
- *God save the King*, *Long live the Queen*, *Heaven forbid!* — wishes, with no *-s*.

7.4.4 Formal unreal structures

English uses a past form to talk about situations that are imagined or contrary to fact (English 2, Unit 4; English 3, chapter 7). In formal and literary English these structures take some special forms (Tabella 7.5).

Tabella 7.5 Formal unreal structures

Structure	Use	Examples
as if / as though + past simple or *were*	an unreal comparison in the present	Swift writes **as if** he **were** serious. The proposer talks about children **as though** they **were** cattle.
as if / as though + past perfect	an unreal comparison about the past	Gulliver describes Lilliput **as if** he **had** really **been** there.
were for all persons	formal unreal conditions	If Gulliver **were** less proud, he would see his faults.
If … were to + base form	an unlikely or hypothetical future action, or a polite suggestion	**If** the plan **were to** succeed, the landlords would grow richer still. **If** you **were to** read Part IV, you might change your mind.
If it were not for + noun	a present situation depends on something	**If it were not for** its irony, the *Proposal* would be unbearable.
If it had not been for + noun	a past situation depended on something	"**If it had not been for** the present situation of things at court, perhaps I might not have obtained it so soon" (I.4).
But for + noun	formal, = *if it were not / had not been for*	**But for** the Drapier, Ireland would have accepted Wood's coins.

After *as if / as though*, use the present tense when the comparison may be true: *It looks as if it **is** going to rain* (it probably is). Use the past when it is unreal: *He talks as if he **were** the king* (he is not). In informal English *was* often replaces *were* (*as if he was serious*); in formal writing prefer *were*. For *suppose* and *imagine* + past (*Suppose you were a Lilliputian…*), see English 3, chapter 13.

GRAMMAR IN ITALIANO

Strutture irreali formali. *as if / as though* + *past* (o *were*) = *come se* + congiuntivo imperfetto: *He talks as if he were the king = parla come se fosse il re*; con il *past perfect* = congiuntivo trapassato: *as if he had been there = come se ci fosse stato*.

If … were to + forma base = un'ipotesi poco probabile: *If the plan were to succeed… = se il piano dovesse riuscire…. If it were not for / If it had not been for / But for* + nome = *se non fosse per / se non fosse stato per / senza*: *But for his help, I would have failed = senza il suo aiuto avrei fallito*.

ERRORE FREQUENTE

✗ *I suggest him to read Swift.* → ✓ *I suggest* ***that he read*** / ***that he should read*** *Swift.* oppure *I suggest* ***reading*** *Swift.*

✗ *It is essential that he is informed.* (registro formale) → ✓ *It is essential that he* ***be*** *informed* / ***should be*** *informed.*

✗ *They insisted that he doesn't leave.* → ✓ *They insisted that he* ***not leave****.*

✗ *He speaks as if he knows everything.* (se non è vero) → ✓ *He speaks as if he* ***knew*** *everything.* · ✗ *If it wasn't for you…* (scritto formale) → ✓ *If it* ***were*** *not for you…*

7.5 Skills: Irony, Understatement and the Satirical Piece

7.5.1 Vocabulary: satire and politics

To talk and write about satire you need words for mockery, exaggeration and indignation (Tabella 7.6).

Tabella 7.6 Satire and politics: key words

Word	Meaning	Example
mock (v.)	laugh at someone unkindly; imitate to make fun of	Swift mocks the vanity of courts.
ridicule (n., v.)	words or actions that make someone look silly	The projectors are exposed to ridicule.
absurd (adj.)	completely unreasonable, ridiculous	an absurd war about eggs
exaggerate (v.)	describe something as bigger or worse than it is	Satire often exaggerates a real fault.
scheme (n.)	a plan, often a dishonest or unrealistic one	a scheme for extracting sunbeams
project / *projector* (n.)	a planned undertaking / (18th c.) the person who promotes one	the projectors of Lagado
outrageous (adj.)	shocking and unacceptable	an outrageous proposal
savage (adj.)	fierce, violent; (of criticism) very harsh	a savage attack on landlords
deadpan (adj., adv.)	serious-looking while saying something funny or shocking	He delivered the joke deadpan.
faction (n.)	a small group within a party or state, often in conflict	the two factions of Lilliput

Word formation: number prefixes and measures

Gulliver measures everything, and English measures with prefixes from Latin and Greek, many shared with Italian (Tabella 7.7). The suffix *-fold* means "times": *a twelvefold increase* = an increase of twelve times (*dodici volte*); *to increase tenfold*; *manifold* = of many kinds.

Tabella 7.7 Number prefixes

Prefix	Meaning	Examples	Italian
uni-, mono-	one	*uniform, unicycle, monolingual, monotonous*	*uni-, mono-*
bi-, di-	two	*bilingual, bicycle, bicentenary, dioxide*	*bi-, di-*
tri-	three	*triangle, tripod, trilogy*	*tri-*
quad(r)-, tetra-	four	*quadrilateral, quadruple, tetrahedron*	*quadri-, tetra-*
semi-, hemi-	half	*semicircle, semi-final, hemisphere*	*semi-, emi-*
multi-, poly-	many	*multinational, multicultural, polygon*	*multi-, poli-*
-fold	times	*twofold, tenfold, twelvefold*	*doppio, dieci volte…*

Careful with *bi-* for time: *biennial* means every two years, but *biweekly* and *bimonthly* can mean either twice a week/month or every two weeks/months. When it matters, say *twice a month* or *every two months*.

7.5.2 Reading: The Dean's Last Word

Before you read. What do you expect to find in a cathedral: art, history, music, graves? Have you ever read an inscription on a tomb or a monument that surprised you?

The Link Reading Club · Our Gulliver Month — a post by Aoife Byrne, Galway

The Dean's Last Word

When our club voted to read *Gulliver's Travels* this month, I realised something embarrassing: I have lived in Ireland all my life and I had never been to the place where Swift worked for thirty-two years. So on Saturday I took the early train from Galway to Dublin and walked to St Patrick's Cathedral.

There has been a church here since the twelfth century, and inside the walls are covered with monuments to bishops, soldiers and forgotten lords. I had come for only one of them.

Swift is buried in the cathedral he ran as Dean from 1713 until his death in 1745, and next to him lies Esther Johnson, the friend he called "Stella". People have argued for three hundred years about what they were to each other; the cathedral, very wisely, just puts them side by side. On the wall nearby is the epitaph Swift wrote for himself, in Latin. I copied it into my notebook word by word, and with the help of Giulia, who studies Latin at her liceo in Turin, I translated the key part:

Ubi sæva Indignatio Ulterius Cor lacerare nequit. Abi Viator Et imitare, si poteris, Strenuum pro virili Libertatis Vindicatorem.

"Where savage indignation can no longer tear his heart. Go, traveller, and imitate, if you can, one who strove with all his strength to defend liberty."

I stood there for a long time. Most epitaphs talk about peace, love or heaven. Swift's talks about anger. He does not say that he was good or kind; he says that injustice hurt him so much that only death could stop the pain. And then he gives the reader a job: *imitate him, if you can*. Nobody had ever given me homework from a grave before.

The word *viator*, traveller, made me smile. Swift spent his life writing about a traveller, Gulliver, who learns all the wrong lessons from his voyages. Here he speaks directly to every one of us who passes by, and the lesson is not wrong at all.

Before leaving I read the information panels. I hadn't known that Swift left most of his money to found a hospital for people with mental illness, which still treats patients today. Nor had I known how popular he became in Dublin after the *Drapier's Letters*.

So here is my suggestion for the club, and it is a modest one: when you finish *Gulliver*, read the epitaph. It explains the book better than any introduction. Swift laughs at Lilliput and Laputa, but underneath the jokes there is a man who could not stop caring. That, I think, is what separates a satirist from a cynic. The cynic thinks nothing can change, so he stops trying. The satirist laughs because he is still trying.

Comprehension. (1) Why did Aoife decide to go to Dublin? (2) Who is buried next to Swift, and how does the cathedral deal with the controversy about their relationship? (3) Why is Swift's epitaph different from most epitaphs, according to Aoife? (4) Why does the word *viator* make her smile? (5) What two things did she learn from the information panels? (6) Explain in your own words her distinction between a satirist and a cynic.

Language in context. Find in the article: one example of *suggestion* used ironically; two phrasal or multi-word verbs; one sentence beginning with a negative word followed by inversion (*Nor had I known…*, chapter 3). Rewrite Aoife's final suggestion in formal English using a mandative subjunctive: *I propose that every member…*

7.5.3 Speaking: irony and understatement

In conversation, irony is often a matter of **tone**: the words are positive, but the voice, the face or the situation make the meaning negative. If your bus is cancelled in the rain and a friend says *Oh, brilliant*, she does not mean that it is brilliant. Saying something cutting with this kind of irony is *sarcasm*. British speakers are also famous for **understatement** (*understatement, attenuazione ironica*): describing something as much less important or serious than it really is — *It's a bit chilly* in a snowstorm, *We had a slight problem* when the car broke down on the motorway. Litotes (English 3, chapter 3) — *not bad*, *not exactly cheap* — is one form of it. Understanding these meanings that are not in the words is part of **pragmatics** (*pragmatica*), the study of how language is used in context.

Tabella 7.8 Useful language — irony and understatement

Function	Expressions
Ironic praise (flat or exaggerated tone)	Oh, brilliant. · Great, just what I needed. · Well, that went well. · Lovely weather for a picnic.
Understatement	It's a bit (inconvenient / chilly). · We had a slight problem. · It wasn't exactly cheap. · It could have gone better. · I'm not entirely convinced.
Checking the meaning	Was that ironic? · You're joking, right? · Are you being serious? · I can't tell if you mean that.
Responding to irony	Ha — very funny. · I'll take that as a no. · All right, point taken. · I see what you mean.
Making your irony clear	(a pause, a smile, a flat voice) · ...or maybe not. · Just kidding. · I'm only half joking.

1. **Pairs.** A describes a situation; B reacts with ironic praise, then with an understatement, then sincerely: 3 out of 10 in a test you studied for; rain as you leave without an umbrella; the same canteen dish for the fifth day. Then swap roles.
2. **Groups of three.** Choose a short ironic passage from T1–T3. One student reads it aloud with a completely serious voice, one with an obviously ironic voice, one explains to the group which reading sounds closer to Swift and why.

7.5.4 Writing: a satirical piece

A satirical piece uses a **persona** to propose, defend or praise something in a way that exposes its absurdity. The model below was written by Sam for the Link Reading Club blog after reading *A Modest Proposal* (Tabella 7.9).

Tabella 7.9 Model text — a satirical piece

A Modest Proposal for Ending Lateness at School Forever

It is a melancholy sight, at nine o'clock every morning, to see the corridors filled with students running, panting and apologising, while teachers stand at their doors with folded arms. Having studied this problem for many weeks, I am confident that I have found a solution that cannot fail.

I humbly propose that every student sleep at school. If each classroom were to be equipped with thirty folding beds, students would wake up in the very room where their first lesson takes place. It is essential that the beds be folded away by 8.59 precisely; desks, after all, are needed for learning.

The advantages are obvious. Lateness would disappear overnight — literally. Buses would be unnecessary, so the school would save money, and parents would save on breakfast. I have calculated that a school of a thousand students, each late by four minutes a week, loses over two and a half thousand hours a year — time that could be spent on revision, or on sleep.

Some will object that students also need a home, a family and some fresh air. Be that as it may, punctuality must come first. Others may suggest that the school simply start later. Such a proposal is clearly too reasonable to be taken seriously.

I have no personal interest in this scheme. I have not been late since Year 9, and I live four minutes from the school gate. (235 words)

Structure. Title: a formal, "modest" announcement · **paragraph 1**: the problem, described with mock seriousness · **paragraph 2**: the absurd proposal, in formal language (subjunctive, *if … were to*) · **paragraph 3**: advantages, with deadpan numbers · **paragraph 4**: objections dismissed — including the sensible solution, which the persona rejects · **paragraph 5**: the persona's "disinterested" conclusion, a final ironic twist.

Checklist. ✓ a persona who is not you, who takes the problem very seriously · ✓ a real, harmless problem (school, transport, technology, habits) · ✓ exaggeration that grows logically · ✓ a deadpan tone: no jokes explained, no "LOL" · ✓ formal structures: *I propose that…*, *It is essential that…*, *If … were to…*, *be that as it may* · ✓ a signal of the real, sensible answer · ✓ 200–250 words.

Task. Write a satirical piece (200–250 words) proposing an absurd solution to a school or local problem: queues at the canteen, heavy school bags, phones in class, homework at weekends. **Satirise a situation or an idea, never a real person**: no names of classmates, teachers or anyone you know.

7.6 Connections: Journeys to Impossible Places

7.6.1 Ariosto on the Moon, Lucian beyond the stars

Gulliver belongs to a long family of **imaginary voyages** (*viaggi immaginari*): journeys to places that do not exist, used to look at our own world from outside. In the second century AD the Greek writer Lucian of Samosata wrote a *True History* which, as he warns in the preface, contains nothing true: his travellers are carried to the Moon by a whirlwind and swallowed by a whale. Lucian was parodying travellers' tall tales — exactly what Swift would do.

Italian literature has its own great voyage to the Moon. In canto XXXIV of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (final edition 1532), the paladin Astolfo travels with Saint John, in Elijah's chariot, to the Moon. There, in a valley, he finds everything that people have lost on Earth — fame, lovers' sighs, wasted time, vain plans — and, in phials, the wits of human beings, including Orlando's, which he brings back to cure his cousin's madness. Ariosto sums it up, speaking to the reader:

> *ciò che in somma qua giú perdesti mai,*
> *lá su salendo ritrovar potrai.*
>
> — Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* XXXIV.75.7–8 (text of the edition by S. Debenedetti, Bari, Laterza, 1928, as transcribed on Wikisource; accents as printed there)

("In short, whatever you have ever lost down here, you will find again by going up there." — translation by the editors.)

The comparison with Swift is illuminating. Both writers use an impossible journey to measure human folly, with precise detail about impossible things. But Ariosto's irony is light and affectionate: even Astolfo finds a little of his own lost wit on the Moon. Swift's irony grows darker with each voyage, until the last one leaves Gulliver unable to live among people. Ariosto smiles at humanity; Swift, in the end, examines it like a specimen.

7.6.2 Scale and proportion: the square–cube law

Swift's Lilliputians are good mathematicians. Having measured Gulliver "by the help of a quadrant" and found him twelve times as tall as themselves, they conclude that his body "must contain at least 1724 of theirs" (I.3, as printed in our edition; other editions print 1728) and give him the food of that many people. The correct number is $12 \times 12 \times 12 = 1{,}728 = 12^3$, because volume — and so weight and the food needed — grows with the **cube** of the scale factor.

Almost a century earlier, Galileo had made this the starting point of a new science. In the *Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche intorno a due nuove scienze* (1638) he showed that when a body is enlarged, its weight grows with the cube of its size, but the strength of its bones, which de-

pends on their cross-section, grows only with the square. This is the **square–cube law** (*legge del quadrato e del cubo*) (Figura 7.5). Galileo concluded that nature could not make

> *un gigante dieci volte più alto di un uomo, se non o miracolosamente o con l'alterar assai le proporzioni delle membra ed in particolare dell'ossa*
>
> — Galileo Galilei, *Discorsi e dimostrazioni matematiche intorno a due nuove scienze*, Giornata prima (Edizione Nazionale, ed. A. Favaro, vol. VIII, as transcribed on Wikisource)

("a giant ten times taller than a man, except either by a miracle or by greatly changing the proportions of the limbs, and in particular of the bones" — translation by the editors.)

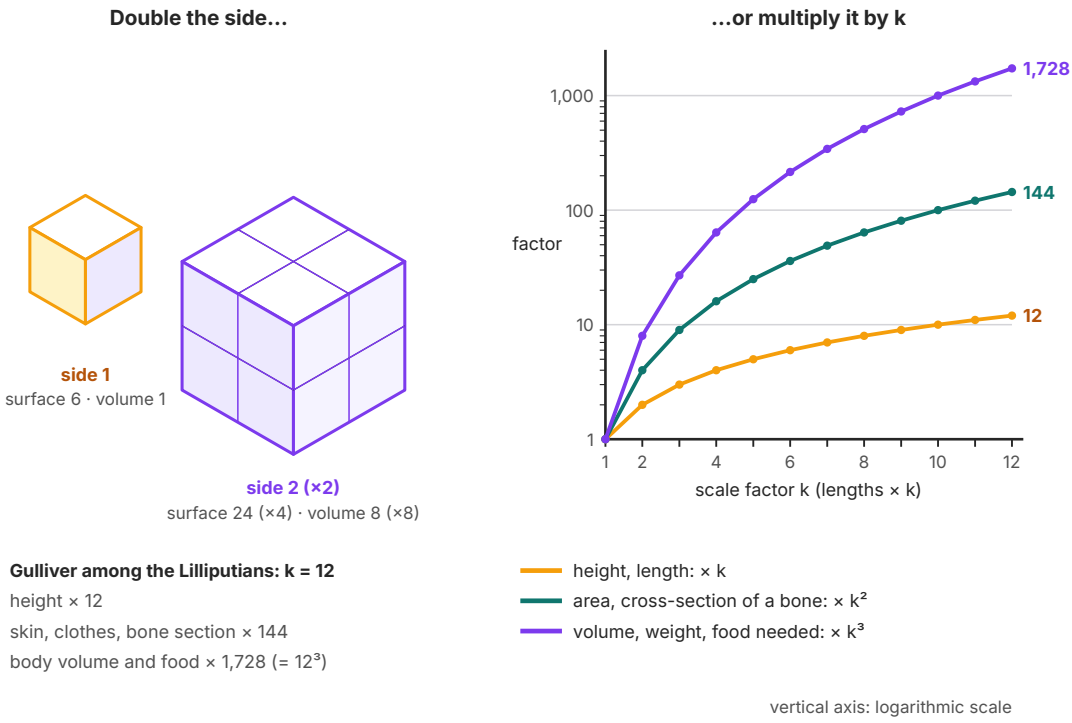


Figura 7.5 The square–cube law. Left: doubling the side of a cube multiplies its surface by 4 and its volume by 8. Right: for a scale factor k from 1 to 12, lengths grow as k, areas as k^2 and volumes as k^3 (logarithmic vertical axis). At k = 12, Gulliver's scale in Lilliput: 12, 144, 1,728.

ESEMPIO SVOLTO

Could a Brobdingnagian stand up? Suppose a man 1.8 m tall weighs 75 kg, and each of his thigh bones has a cross-section of 6 cm^2. A Brobdingnagian is the same man scaled up by k = 12.

1. **Height:** 1.8 m × 12 = 21.6 m.
2. **Weight** grows as k^3: 75 kg × 1,728 = 129,600 kg, about 130 tonnes.
3. **Cross-section of each thigh bone** grows as k^2: 6 cm^2 × 144 = 864 cm^2.
4. **Load per square centimetre of bone** (on two legs): man: 75 kg ÷ (2 × 6 cm^2) = 6.25 kg/cm^2; giant: 129,600 kg ÷ (2 × 864 cm^2) = 75 kg/cm^2, that is 12 times as much ($k^3 \div k^2 = k$).

Conclusion. Every square centimetre of the giant's bones carries twelve times the load of ours. Swift's giants, built with human proportions, would probably break their legs — just as Galileo said. Real large animals solve the problem with proportionally thicker bones: compare the legs of an elephant with those of a gazelle.

COLLEGAMENTI

Biology and engineering: why size matters. Small animals have a large surface compared with their volume, so they lose heat quickly — a shrew must eat almost constantly — while an elephant needs large ears to lose heat and thick legs to carry its weight. Engineers meet the same law when they scale up a bridge or a ship from a model: a design that works at one size may fail at twelve times that size.

SINTESI

- After the Williamite war (1689–91), Ireland was ruled by a Protestant minority, later called the Protestant Ascendancy; the Penal Laws (from 1695) restricted Catholics' rights to land and excluded them from office and, from 1728, the vote.
- Many landlords were absentees; trade was restricted by English laws (the Wool Act, 1699) and the Irish parliament was subordinate (Declaratory Act, 1720). Bad harvests in the 1720s and the famine of 1740–41 brought great misery.
- Jonathan Swift (Dublin 1667 – Dublin 1745), a Protestant clergyman, was Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral from 1713; *The Drapier's Letters* (1724–25) made him an Irish hero.
- Horatian satire laughs at follies and corrects them; Juvenalian satire attacks vices with indignation. Swift uses both.
- Swift writes through personae, often unreliable narrators, and uses sustained verbal irony with a deadpan tone.
- *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) parodies travel books in four voyages — Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa and the other islands, the Houyhnhnms — satirising politics, science and human pride through changes of scale and point of view.
- In Lilliput the war over the end at which to break an egg mirrors religious and political conflicts (T1); the Academy of Lagado mocks useless projectors (T2).
- *A Modest Proposal* (1729) proposes, with perfect calm, that poor Irish children be sold as food: its real targets are the landlords, English policy and the cold language of economists (T3).
- The mandative subjunctive (*I propose that he* ***be***) follows words of demand, proposal and necessity; British English also uses *should* + base form.
- Fixed subjunctives (*be that as it may, if need be, so be it*) and formal unreal structures (*as if* + *were*, *If … were to*, *If it were not for*, *But for*) belong to formal English.
- Irony and understatement depend on context and tone (pragmatics); a satirical piece uses a persona, deadpan exaggeration and formal language.
- Ariosto's Astolfo on the Moon and Lucian's *True History* are imaginary voyages like Gulliver's; the Lilliputians' arithmetic illustrates Galileo's square–cube law ($12^3 = 1{,}728$).

ESERCIZI

History and Literature

1. ● When did Swift become Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin?
   - **A.** 1704
   - **B.** 1713
   - **C.** 1726
   - **D.** 1745

2. ● In which voyage does Gulliver visit the Academy of Lagado?
   - **A.** Lilliput
   - **B.** Brobdingnag
   - **C.** Laputa and Balnibarbi
   - **D.** The country of the Houyhnhnms

3. ● Which statement describes Juvenalian satire?
   - **A.** It laughs gently at fashions and small vanities.
   - **B.** It imitates the style of epic poetry for trivial subjects.
   - **C.** It always uses a narrator who can be trusted.
   - **D.** It attacks vice and injustice with bitter indignation.

4. ● What was an absentee landlord?
   - **A.** A landowner who lived away from his estate, often in England, and spent his rents there
   - **B.** A tenant who abandoned his land during a famine
   - **C.** A Catholic landowner who had lost his land under the Penal Laws
   - **D.** An agent who collected taxes for the Dublin parliament

5. ●● True or false? Correct the false statements. a Swift was born in England and moved to Ireland as an adult. b The Penal Laws excluded Catholics from parliament and public office. c The phrase "Protestant Ascendancy" was already common in 1700. d *The Drapier's Letters* opposed William Wood's copper coins. e *Gulliver's Travels* was first published under Swift's own name. f Swift was buried next to Esther Johnson.

6. ●● Complete the timeline with the correct dates: Swift is born · *A Tale of a Tub* · Swift becomes Dean of St Patrick's · *The Drapier's Letters* begin · *Gulliver's Travels* · *A Modest Proposal* · Swift dies.

7. ●● Explain each term in one or two sentences in your own words: a Penal Laws · b projector · c unreliable narrator · d verbal irony · e deadpan · f imaginary voyage.

8. ●●● Answer in 50–70 words each. a Why is a change of scale such an effective tool of satire in Parts I and II of *Gulliver's Travels*? b Why do critics disagree about the meaning of Part IV? c Why did Swift choose a calm, well-informed projector as the voice of *A Modest Proposal*?

Text Analysis

9. ●● In T1, what does the quarrel between Big-Endians and Little-Endians mainly represent?

   A. A real dispute in Swift's time about cooking eggs

   B. The religious conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Britain

   C. The rivalry between Dublin and London booksellers

   D. A quarrel between Swift and the Royal Society

10. ●● T1. Find the phrases that make the minister's account sound like official history, and explain how the contrast between style and subject creates irony.

11. ●● T2. Which details of the projector's appearance suggest the results of his experiments? Why does the final request make the scene comic?

12. ●● T2. Find one example of anticlimax and one of understatement in the passage, and explain them.

13. ●● T3. Paraphrase the last sentence of the extract in modern, literal English, explaining what Swift really accuses the landlords of.

14. ●●● T3. Find four words or phrases with which the proposer presents himself as humble, reasonable or well informed. Why does this calm persona make the text more shocking?

15. ●●● Compare T1 and T3 in a PEE paragraph (about 100 words): which text is closer to Horatian satire, and which to Juvenalian? Use one quotation from each.

Language

16. ● Complete with the mandative subjunctive of the verb in brackets. a The committee recommended that the cathedral _____ (open) on Sundays. b It is vital that every student _____ (read) the whole book. c The Drapier demanded that the patent _____ (withdraw). d I insist that she _____ (not / pay) for my ticket. e It is important that the quotation _____ (be) exact. f Their proposal that the meeting _____ (postpone) was accepted.

17. ●● Rewrite each sentence with *should* + base form (British English), then with the subjunctive. a The teacher suggested that we compare Swift with Ariosto. b It is essential that the club meets every week. c They insisted that he didn't travel alone. d The doctor recommended that Swift rested more.

18. ●● Each sentence contains one mistake. Correct it. a ✗ I suggest you to read *A Modest Proposal* first. b ✗ It is essential that every reader understand the irony and not takes it literally. c ✗ He speaks about the war as if it is a serious matter, but it's about eggs. d ✗ If the Lilliputians were attack Gulliver, he would destroy their city. e ✗ The projector demanded that Gulliver gives him money. f ✗ But for the help of the Portuguese captain, Gulliver would never return home.

19. ●● Complete with *as if / as though* and the correct form of the verb in brackets. a Gulliver describes the flying island _____ it _____ (be) perfectly normal. b It looks _____ it _____ (be) going to rain: take an umbrella. c The proposer writes _____ he _____ (study) the problem for years — and he probably has. d After his last voyage, Gulliver treats his family _____ they _____ (be) Yahoos. e She looked at me _____ I _____ (say) something terrible.

20. ●● Rewrite the sentences using the words in brackets. a The war would not continue without the help of Blefuscu. (*If it were not for*) b Without Swift's letters, Ireland would have accepted the coins. (*But for*) c If the projector succeeded, the gardens would be warm in winter. (*were to*) d Without Stella's friendship, Swift's life would have been lonelier. (*If it had not been for*)

21. ●● Match the fixed subjunctives (1–5) to their meanings (a–e), then use three of them in sentences about Gulliver. 1 be that as it may · 2 if need be · 3 so be it · 4 come what may · 5 suffice it to say — a whatever happens · b I accept it · c I will only say that · d if necessary · e in spite of that

22. ●● Translate into English, using the structures of this section. a È essenziale che ogni studente porti il libro domani. b Il preside ha proposto che la gita sia rimandata. c Parla come se fosse il re di Lilliput. d Se non fosse stato per Aoife, non avremmo mai letto l'epitaffio.

23. ●●● Write a formal "resolution" of the Lilliputian parliament about eggs (five sentences), using at least three different mandative triggers (a verb, an adjective, a noun) and one fixed subjunctive.

Vocabulary

24. ● Complete with words from Tabella 7.6: *mock, absurd, exaggerate, scheme, outrageous, savage, deadpan, faction*. a The two _____ s of Lilliput disagree about heels. b Swift's attack on the landlords is _____ . c Comedians often deliver their best jokes _____ . d The projector's _____ will never work. e Don't _____ : the test wasn't that hard! f The price of the tickets is _____ : forty pounds for a school play! g It is easy to _____ people who are different. h A war about eggs is completely _____ .

25. ●● Complete the words with a number prefix or *-fold*. a A person who speaks two languages is _____ lingual. b A series of three novels is a _____ logy. c Gulliver is twelve times as tall: his height is a twelve_____ increase. d Half a circle is a _____ circle. e A company with offices in many countries is a _____ national. f The 200th anniversary is the _____ centenary. g A camera stand with three legs is a _____ pod.

26. ●● Match the adjectives (1–6) with the nouns (a–f) to form collocations from this chapter, then write a sentence with three of them. 1 savage · 2 absurd · 3 deadpan · 4 bitter · 5 absentee · 6 modest — a humour · b landlord · c indignation · d proposal · e satire · f scheme

Writing and Speaking

27. ●●● Writing. Write a satirical piece (200–250 words) in the form of "A Modest Proposal for…" about a school or local problem. Use a persona, deadpan exaggeration, at least two mandative subjunctives and one structure from Tabella 7.5. Satirise a situation, never a real person.

28. ●● Speaking. In pairs: A reports three small disasters from a school trip (lost luggage, rain, a cancelled train); B reacts once with ironic praise, once with understatement and once by checking the meaning. Then B explains in one minute what irony is and why it can be misunderstood in a foreign language.

Towards B2

29. ●● Multiple-choice cloze. Choose the word (A, B, C or D) that best fits each gap. *When* Gulliver's Travels *first (1)* _____ *in 1726, many readers believed that Lemuel Gulliver was a real person. The book was (2)* _____ *to look like a genuine travel book, with maps and measurements. Swift, (3)* _____ *, was mocking exactly this kind of book. His satire was so (4)* _____ *that politicians recognised themselves in Lilliput, and some readers (5)* _____ *offence. Today it is often read by children, (6)* _____ *its first readers were adults.* — 1 A came B appeared C showed D arrived · 2 A made B done C built D taken · 3 A therefore B moreover C however D otherwise · 4 A narrow B sharp C thin D steep · 5 A made B took C had D gave · 6 A because B unless C although D despite

30. ●● Open cloze. Write one word in each gap. *Swift's epitaph, (1)* _____ *he wrote himself, is cut on a tablet in St Patrick's Cathedral. It says that savage indignation can no (2)* _____ *tear his heart, and it asks every traveller to imitate him, (3)* _____ *he can. Few epitaphs are (4)* _____ *angry. (5)* _____ *from being a simple goodbye, it is a challenge. If it were not (6)* _____ *these lines, many visitors would pass (7)* _____ *noticing the grave (8)* _____ *all.*

31. ●● Word formation cloze. Use the word in capitals to form a word that fits the gap. a The Lilliputians showed great _____ in their calculations. (INGENIOUS) b Swift was a fierce critic of the English _____ of Ireland. (GOVERN) c The proposer's tone is completely _____ . (EMOTION) d Many readers find Part IV deeply _____ . (DISTURB) e The projector's experiments were a total _____ . (FAIL) f Gulliver's account is not always _____ . (RELY)

32. ●●● Key-word transformation. Complete the second sentence so that it means the same as the first, using the word in capitals and two to five words. a "You should read the epitaph," Aoife told the club. (SUGGESTED) Aoife _____ the epitaph. b Without the Drapier, the coins would have been accepted. (BEEN) If it _____ the Drapier, the coins would have been accepted. c He describes Lilliput, but he has never been there. (AS) He describes Lilliput _____ been there. d It is essential for every child to have food. (THAT) It is essential _____ food. e The plan is unlikely to succeed, but if it did, we would be rich. (WERE) If the plan _____ , we would be rich.

PER APPROFONDIRE

- [NOR] S. Greenblatt (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. C: the introduction to Swift, *A Modest Proposal* and selections from *Gulliver's Travels*.
- [SAN] A. Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*: the pages on Swift and the satirists of the early eighteenth century.
- [MOR] K. O. Morgan (ed.), *The Oxford History of Britain*: the chapter on the eighteenth century, for Ireland, the Penal Laws and the Protestant Ascendancy.
- [ABR] M. H. Abrams, G. G. Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: the entries "satire" (Horatian and Juvenalian), "irony" and "persona".
- [SWA] M. Swan, *Practical English Usage*: the entries on the subjunctive, *as if / as though* and *if … were to*.

Glossario del capitolo

Absentee landlord
proprietario assenteista — a landowner who lives away from his estate and spends its rents elsewhere.

Deadpan
impassibile — completely serious in manner while saying something funny or shocking.

Dean
decano — the priest at the head of the clergy of a cathedral.

Fixed subjunctive
congiuntivo cristallizzato — a subjunctive in a set expression: *be that as it may, if need be, so be it*.

Horatian satire
satira oraziana — gentle, amused satire that laughs at human follies in order to correct them.

Imaginary voyage
viaggio immaginario — a narrative of a journey to a non-existent place, used to look critically at our own world.

Juvenalian satire
satira giovenaliana — bitter, indignant satire that attacks vice and injustice.

Lilliputian
lillipuziano — very small; petty (from Swift's Lilliput).

Mandative subjunctive
congiuntivo "di comando" — the base form after words of demand, proposal or necessity: *I propose that he be…*

Penal Laws
leggi penali — laws passed in Ireland from 1695 that restricted Catholics' rights to buy or lease land and excluded them (and in part Protestant Dissenters) from office, from education abroad and, from 1728, from the vote.

Pragmatics
pragmatica — the study of how meaning depends on context, tone and the speaker's intention, beyond the literal words.

Projector
progettista, faccendiere — (18th c.) a person who promotes a scheme or invention, often an unrealistic or dishonest one.

Protestant Ascendancy
"Ascendancy" protestante — the Anglican landowning elite that dominated Ireland in the 18th century; the phrase became common in the 1780s–90s.

Square–cube law
legge del quadrato e del cubo — when a body is scaled by k, its areas grow as k^2 and its volume as k^3 (Galileo, 1638).

Subjunctive
congiuntivo (inglese) — a verb form (the base form, or *were*) that presents an action as necessary, desired or imagined.

Understatement
understatement, attenuazione ironica — presenting something as less serious or important than it really is.

Unreliable narrator
narratore inattendibile — a narrator whose account or judgement the reader cannot fully trust.

Verbal irony
ironia verbale — saying one thing and meaning another, often the opposite.

Soluzioni

1. B (1713; he held the post until his death in 1745).

2. C (Part III; Lagado is the capital of Balnibarbi, the country ruled from the flying island of Laputa).

3. D.

4. A.

5. a False: he was born in Dublin, in 1667, to English parents. b True. c False: the phrase became common only in the 1780s–90s. d True. e False: it appeared anonymously, as the travels of "Lemuel Gulliver". f True.

6. Born 1667 (30 November) · *A Tale of a Tub* 1704 · Dean 1713 · *Drapier's Letters* 1724 · *Gulliver's Travels* 1726 · *A Modest Proposal* 1729 · dies 1745 (19 October).

7. Model answers: a laws passed in Ireland from 1695 that excluded Catholics from parliament and public office, stopped them buying land or taking long leases and (from 1728) took away their vote · b in Swift's time, a person who promoted a scheme or invention, often an unrealistic or dishonest one · c a narrator whose account or judgement the reader cannot fully trust · d saying one thing and meaning another, often the opposite · e completely serious in manner while saying something funny or shocking · f a journey to a non-existent place used to look critically at our own world.

8. Traccia: a when Gulliver is a giant, the Lilliputians' political ambitions and wars look tiny and ridiculous; when he is tiny, the Brobdingnagian king sees human beings, and Gulliver's boasts about gunpowder, as small, monstrous vermin: the reader learns that judgements depend on point of view. b the Houyhnhnms seem ideal and the Yahoos disgusting, but Gulliver ends by rejecting all humans, even the kind Pedro de Mendez; some critics read Part IV as Swift's own misanthropy, others see Gulliver as an unreliable narrator whose pride Swift is also satirising. c the calm projector makes the monstrous plan sound logical; this contrast shocks the reader and exposes the cold economic language that already treated the poor as numbers.

9. B.

10. Phrases: *It is allowed on all hands*, *our histories tell us*, *It is computed that*, *edict*, *civil commotions*, *many hundred large volumes*, the precise numbers. The solemn, factual style is applied to a trivial cause (the end of an egg), so the contrast makes the deaths of eleven thousand people absurd and exposes the stupidity of real religious wars.

11. Sooty hands and face, hair and beard singed, clothes and skin all of one colour: the marks of smoke and fire from years of failed experiments. The request for money turns the scientist into a beggar, and the final reason (*a very dear season for cucumbers*) is a comic anticlimax.

12. Anticlimax: the solemn request for an *encouragement to ingenuity* ends with the price of cucumbers. Understatement: *his stock was low* (he is clearly penniless after eight years of failure); also accept *in eight years more*, said as if it were a short time.

13. Model: "Food made from children would be expensive, so it is suitable for landlords: they have already ruined most of the parents, so they have the best right to the children." Swift really accuses the landlords of exploiting their tenants with high rents and destroying poor families — figuratively "eating" them.

14. *humbly propose*, *I hope will not be liable to the least objection*, *I have been assured by a very knowing American*, *I make no doubt*, *I grant*. The polite, reasonable voice treats a horror as a normal economic plan; the gap between tone and content forces the reader to react and to see the real cruelty that the calm language of politics hides.

15. Traccia: Point — T1 is closer to Horatian satire, T3 to Juvenalian. Evidence — in T1 the war began

because a prince "happened to cut one of his fingers": the trivial cause makes us laugh at religious quarrels; in T3 the landlords "have already devoured most of the parents", an image that accuses and shocks. Explanation — both use a serious persona and irony, but T1 invites amused criticism, while T3 provokes indignation at real suffering. (Readers may stress that T1 also mentions eleven thousand deaths: accept arguments that place it in the middle.)

16. a open (or *be opened*) b read c be withdrawn d not pay e be f be postponed.

17. a ...that we should compare / that we compare Swift with Ariosto. b ...that the club should meet / that the club meet every week. c ...that he should not travel / that he not travel alone. d ...that Swift should rest / that Swift rest more.

18. a I suggest (that) you read / should read (or: I suggest reading) *A Modest Proposal* first. b ...and not take it literally. c ...as if it were a serious matter (it is not). d If the Lilliputians were to attack Gulliver, he would destroy their city (*were to* + base form). e ... demanded that Gulliver give (should give) him money. f ...Gulliver would never have returned home.

19. a as if / as though... were (was, informal) b as if / as though... is c as if / as though... has studied d as if / as though... were e as if / as though... had said.

20. a If it were not for the help of Blefuscu, the war would not continue. b But for Swift's letters, Ireland would have accepted the coins. c If the projector were to succeed, the gardens would be warm in winter. d If it had not been for Stella's friendship, Swift's life would have been lonelier.

21. 1 e · 2 d · 3 b · 4 a · 5 c. Example sentences: *Gulliver will return home, come what may. The Lilliputians will feed him, if need be, for years. Be that as it may, Gulliver is not a reliable judge.*

22. a It is essential that every student bring (should bring) the book tomorrow. b The head teacher proposed that the trip be postponed (should be postponed). c He talks / speaks as if (as though) he were the king of Lilliput. d If it hadn't been for Aoife, we would never have read the epitaph. (Also: But for Aoife, ...)

23. Model: *The Parliament of Lilliput, having considered the matter, resolves that every subject break his eggs at the smaller end. It is essential that no egg be broken at the larger end in public. It further recommends that all books of the Big-Endians be burnt. The Emperor's proposal that a fleet be sent against Blefuscu is approved. Be that as it may, the price of eggs shall not rise.*

24. a faction b savage c deadpan d scheme e exaggerate f outrageous g mock h absurd. (*absurd* could fit f, but h needs it.)

25. a bilingual b trilogy c twelvefold d semicircle e multinational f bicentenary g tripod.

26. 1 c (savage indignation) · 2 f (absurd scheme) · 3 a (deadpan humour) · 4 e (bitter satire) · 5 b (absentee landlord) · 6 d (modest proposal). Accept other sensible pairs (e.g. *bitter indignation*, *absurd proposal*).

27. Assess: a persona and a harmless real problem; logical, growing exaggeration; deadpan tone; at least two mandative subjunctives (*I propose that..., It is essential that...*) and one formal unreal structure; a hint of the sensible solution; 200–250 words; no real people targeted. See the model in Tabella 7.9.

28. Model answer: A: "The airline lost my suitcase." B: "Oh, wonderful — just what you needed." A: "It rained for five days." B: "So the weather was a bit disappointing." A: "And the train home was cancelled." B: "You're joking, right?" — Explanation: irony means saying the opposite of what you mean, or much less; the listener must use the tone and the situation. In a foreign language we often hear only the words, so we may take ironic praise as sincere, or not notice an understatement.

29. 1 B 2 A 3 C 4 B 5 B 6 C.

30. 1 which 2 longer 3 if 4 so (also: *this*, *as*) 5 Far 6 for 7 without 8 at.

31. a ingenuity b government c unemotional (also: *emotionless*) d disturbing e failure f reliable.

32. a suggested (that) the club read / suggested the club should read (also: suggested reading) b had not

been for c as if (as though) he had d that every child (should) have e were to succeed.