

Charity in the Character of Sir William Thornhill

In the novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* by Oliver Goldsmith, one man describes Sir William Thornhill as a man “who has the first character in the kingdom for every thing that is just and good” (136). Others, throughout the novel, make similar protestations of his goodness. However, for a character supposedly so good and decent, he does not take the actions he should in preventing his friends’, the Primroses, downfall. Similarly, he does not show as many instances of charity one would expect from someone considered so charitable (19). By taking a closer look at Sir William’s character, it is clear that he is not as deserving as everyone in the novel believes he is of the many kind descriptions attributed to him, and as a friend, he leaves much to be desired.

Sir William states of himself, “At present, his bounties are more rational and moderate than before; but still he preserves the character of an humourist, and finds most pleasure in eccentric virtues” (20). Yet, after having not given up charity completely when realizing his previous mistakes, it is hard to understand why Sir William would not show more charity to his friends, the Primroses, especially since right after their meeting the Vicar tells him of their “late misfortunes” (18). In fact, other than saving Sophia, an act that actually requires no charity, saving a dog stealer, and the money he spends at the end of the novel, he performs no charitable acts. All of the charity ascribed to him was done in the past, and for a man supposedly given to reckless charity, it is hard to believe there would not be more instances with regards to his new friends.

In addition to hardly showing charity to his friends, he takes from them. It would be one thing if he went around masquerading as poor while never taking from others less

fortunate than himself, but he does take from others. When Sir William is first seen in the novel, he is asking for money from the inn keeper and then after being denied, is given money by the Vicar (18). These people all have less than he does so it seems unkind to accept from them money that they need more than he does, especially when the Vicar has six children. Sir William states that he is “glad that a late oversight in giving what money I had about me, has shewn me that there are still some men like you” (18). Surely, though, he could observe charity in the world while still not taking from others. Later, as his visits to the Primroses become more frequent, he begins helping them in the field, which to a degree makes up for his taking from them, yet it is hard to believe he would not offer more to them than gingerbread and boxes, especially given the many hardships the family faces as the novel progresses (54).

While these instances are important in noting how his character is not quite as worthy of the titles he is given, they in no way prove it as much as his unkindness to the Primrose family does in not taking further means to prevent Olivia from being seduced by his nephew, Mr. Thornhill. At the end, Sir Williams says to the Vicar, “It is impossible...that I should forgive you, as you never deserved my resentment. I partly saw your delusion then, and as it was out of my power to restrain, I could only pity it!” (149). This is not true. It was certainly not “out of his power to restrain” (149). He could have done any number of things to prevent this from happening. Sir William could have further told the Primroses of Mr. Thornhill’s villainy, or he could have revealed himself as Sir William if they needed further proof, or he could have simply forbid his nephew from acting the way he acted or cut off his money. Surely, by then he had known enough of the Primroses’ benevolence to give up his masquerade for something as important as

saving their daughter. The fact that he did not and only “pitied” them is both cruel and selfish. A truly charitable person would go out of their way no matter what the cost to save friends.

This seduction and removal from her family was no small matter. It was only by chance that the Vicar found Olivia. What if she had not made it back? What if she had starved to death? The danger to more than just her character was simply too high for Sir William to ignore, although saving her character alone still should have been enough to induce him to intervene. Furthermore, if his refusal to take further measures was only out of indignation because of his previous fight with the family, or to teach them a lesson, then it was too unkind a lesson.

Sir William says at the end of the novel, of his nephew’s actions, “Good heavens! How every new discovery alarms me,” which could provide proof that he did not know the lengths to which his nephew would go to satisfy his lust, but that is hard to believe as well (158). Olivia says to her father that Sir William “took every opportunity of privately admonishing me against the artifices of Mr. Thornhill, who I now find was even worse than he represented him” (109). Knowing that Mr. Thornhill had “artifices” at all makes it hard to accept that Sir William did not know the full length of his nephew’s “artifices” (109). Even if he did not know the full lengths to which Mr. Thornhill would go, there is really no acceptable length for letting someone, let alone a friend, be fooled. In other words, apprehensions are apprehensions and no matter how small, if he had reason to believe something bad would happen then that should have been enough to persuade him to take a stronger course of action. He should have also notified the entire family of Mr. Thornhill’s character. If Olivia was in love with Mr. Thornhill, then it is not hard to

believe that she would not act on or believe his warnings. Granted his letter did show the Primroses his disagreement with Olivia and Sophia's trip to London, but he did not explain or defend his actions, and it is natural that they should think his disagreement was based on his love for Sophia (68-69). Furthermore, the Vicar states, "So saying, I threw him his pocket-book, which he took up with a smile, and shutting the clasps with the utmost composure, left us, quite astonished at the serenity of his assurance" (68). It is hard to believe him kind when he smiles, because he knows they do not know all that he does about Thornhill's character; therefore, he has to suspect that something bad might happen. In addition to that, it is hard to believe a true friend would leave people he cares about so easily and without defending his actions. It seems as though that would have been the perfect time to reveal his true identity, saving everyone so much pain.

There is other proof throughout the novel that Sir William knew more about his nephew than he leads on at the end. For example, when George goes to get help from Sir William after having fought in a duel for Mr. Thornhill, Sir William calls him "the instrument of his vices" (97). This means that not only does he know his nephew gets into duels, but he then must also know there is a reason behind all of these duels. Furthermore, Sir William's lack of surprise at someone like George showing up and asking for help further confirms he knows what types of things his nephew gets into. In addition to this instance, Sir William repeatedly says "fudge!" to the two ladies employed by Mr. Thornhill to deceive the Primroses. Although he might be saying, "fudge," because he does not care for their characters or because he does not want the Primroses to believe them and go to town with them, and not because he does know who they really are, it is uncertain. Yet, given how much he knows about his nephew's business in terms

of his nephew's marriage and the role Sir William plays in that marriage by drawing up the papers, it is therefore easy to assume that he might know a great deal more about what his nephew does and who visits him (161). Similarly, not being all the time under the guise of Burchell, he also must know who is of rank and who is not, which means it is plausible he could know all along these ladies are not who they claim to be. If that is the indeed the case, then he should have been more upfront about it to the Primroses, because that would be a great injustice towards them on his part.

Sir Williams says, "I am now come to see justice done a worthy man, for whom I have the most esteem. I have long been a disguised spectator of thy father's benevolence" (152). Having said that, it is hard to then understand why, when he goes to such lengths to state his reverence for the Vicar and after warning Olivia about his nephew, he then goes to such lengths to protect Mr. Thornhill (155-156). Naturally, he could feel it is his duty as an uncle, but after discrediting his nephew and proclaiming his friendship to the Primroses, it does not make sense. His inconsistency in his support of his nephew is confusing, and it seems he would be more apt to favor the Primroses, since all along any unkindness they showed him was out of fear of his threatening their daughters' chances at making good marriages, which was something they greatly needed to get by, which as a man of class, he would know.

Lastly, as "a man whose character for every virtue was universal, yet just," Sir William does not act anywhere near as kind or just as the Vicar does (97). It is as though the Vicar is more deserving of Sir William's praises. For his example, where Sir William seems unwilling to do his friends the kindness of fully revealing his nephew's character, the Vicar is not unwilling. He sends a letter right away to Miss Wilmot to save her from

marrying him (117). In addition to this, the Vicar has to insist that Sir William be more forgiving towards his nephew: “Sir William was going to spurn him away, but at my request he raised him...” (165).

Certainly, in the novel, the Primroses’ vanity and quest to be better than they really are, are to be blamed for what happens to them. Even so, as a self-proclaimed friend and widely proclaimed good man, Sir William should have taken better care of them and better care to prevent bad things from happening to them. When a friend knows something that could prevent his friends from impending calamity, then that friend does whatever he can to ensure his friends’ safety. Sir William does not follow this rule. He lets his friends walk right into danger, and no one who is actually charitable would do that.

Works Cited

1. Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Oxford University Press. New York: 2006.