The Vicar of Wakefield as a Failed *Morality Story*

Morality stories and plays that espouse Christian values have been incredibly popular in the history of English literature. In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Oliver Goldsmith presents a narrator who gives an account of the events that transpire in his family with a, nearly overbearing at times, critical voice that points out Christian morality in every section of his story. These morals, however, or not necessarily Christian, and are certainly different than the morals we see portrayed in older Christian morality stories, such as *Everyman*, which is a 15th century morality play. Though the narrator attempts to impose morals on every part of the tale he describes, the *Vicar of Wakefield* is ultimately a failed Christian morality story, as the plot of the story and the action of the characters fail to portray the importance of Christian morals, and the morals it does convey are often conflicted.

A Christian morality story, in the sense that I will be using it, is defined as a story that seeks to teach the reader lessons about the importance of Christian morals. Almost every story ever written has a moral; colloquially this term has become synonymous with the idea of "a take home message" that the author of a text is attempting to impart on the reader. The phrase, "the moral of the story," has arisen from a tradition of using stories to teach morals. In the later Middle Ages, around the late 15th and early 16th centuries, morality plays were incredibly common and popular in England. Morality plays often involve characters that are representative

of larger social groups, abstract ideas, or objects. In the play *Everyman*, the protagonist is a character named Everyman who discovers he must die and has to fight off his old sins in the form of characters to be redeemed in God's eyes when he is judged. The play is incredibly heavy-handed with its morals—even God is a character that spouts his judgments out to the watching crowds. The morals that this play, and most morality plays, portray are quite different from what we see in the *Vicar of Wakefield*. As Everyman approaches heaven alone in the eyes of God, it teaches the reader that all men are truly alone in responsibility for their sins. Everyman must learn to turn away from his love of friends, goods, and spirits in order to redeem himself. The play imparts Christian morals in a harsh, stark way. Its main lesson is that man stands alone before the eyes of God.

The lessons that morality plays espouse continue throughout literature even after their popularity fades. In Shakespeare's *King Lear* we are presented with a tale of a man who is destroyed by making poor choices and loving the wrong people. There is no redemption for Lear, who dies at the end of the play alone in his suffering before God. We can see a clear shift from this type of morality story, one in which a lone protagonist is stripped of everything he owns and must die and face the wrath of God, to the kind of attempted morality story that we see in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. In this new kind of story, we have a protagonist who is literally constantly surrounded by others, and rather than the judgment of God, we see the judgment of the narrator on all those around him.

The narrator's judgmental nature is what leads the *Vicar of Wakefield* toward failure in its moral delivery. This judgmental air signifies a different kind of story—one in which the individual's life choices and events have become just as significant as the events in his afterlife.

In the *Vicar of Wakefield*, judgment is something that occurs during this lifetime, with punishment coming in the form of poverty and reward in the form of wealth.

This is precisely why *The Vicar of Wakefield* fails to be a true Christian moral story. Though the narrator continually criticizes a love of wealth, saying, "the nakedness of the indigent world may be cloathed from the trimmings of the vain," when his wife and daughters attempt to dress up for church, we do not see this sentiment echoed in the action of the play. The wife and daughters never give up their love of finery, as a few weeks later they are at it again, asking to ride the horses to church, and are in the end rewarded by being married to rich men. This is incredibly different from the reward of death and renewal in God's love that we see in morality plays.

It is interesting that the narrator of this novel seems so convinced that he and his family are the perfect embodiment of Christian ideals. His wife seems more conniving that pious. "London is the only place in the world for husbands. …as Ladies of quality are so taken with my daughters, what will not men of quality be!" She is the very embodiment of Mrs. Bennett from Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, and all of her meddling is rewarded in the end of the novel when her daughters are married to rich husbands. Charles, the narrator, is continually over-ridden and controlled by the whims of his family, rather than being the traditional stern and controlling father figure that is presented in most Christian tales. He is also given to moments of uncontrollable inaction. He finds himself unable to save his daughter as she is drowning in a river, and when he goes to rescue Olivia when she runs away he is waylaid for three weeks with illness. His inaction does not belie a kind of Christian fortitude to do what is right, and he is never punished for his inaction. Even, "the unfortunate Moses was deceived" (84). This is quite unlike the biblical Moses, who had the clairvoyance to be able to perceive the voice of God. He

saw past the pharaoh's tricks in order to save his people. Moses Wakefield was not even able to see through the tricks of a common thief at market to help his family. The family is clearly lacking in Christian morals and strengths, and rather than atoning for this, they go through hardship only to be rewarded with wealth in the form of marriage to wealthy men. Rather than poverty being a blessing that allows them to live closer to God, as it is in when Everyman casts away his goods, it is an ordeal that they must live through and are rewarded for surviving by the acquiring of vast wealth. The business of wedding transactions is akin to winning the lottery plus a Get Out of Jail Free card to the Wakefield family. The moral lesson that we see here is, endure poverty, be good to those around you, and God will reward you with vast material riches. This is quite different from the reward of God's eternal love that Everyman and Lear receive after their deaths.

This is not to say, however, that *The Vicar of Wakefield* is completely devoid of morals. Rather, this story serves to show us how Christian morals are changing with society. Perhaps due to a rising middle class and exchange of goods an idea of reciprocity has entered Christianity. We can still see that an idea of giving to God without expecting in return is upheld in the vicar's "exhortations," yet there is also a new idea that, "*Former benevolence [will be] repaid with unexpected interest*" (184). So, perhaps the morals haven't changed so much as the timeline seems to have changed—reciprocity can happen in this life or the next. We can see characters making larger strides to prove that they are doing good deeds, that they merit have wealth in their lives because of their good deeds. "…never was the family of Wakefield known to turn the traveler or poor dependent out of doors," (38) the narrator tells us, and indeed he spends the entire first chapter explaining his families goodness, benevolence, and charity. There

is clearly a sentiment that one must justify ones wealth, or to say, one's wealth is a result of one's charity. In short, moral good is rewarded in this life as well as in the next.

There is also an interesting sense that to be an upstanding, moral person one must be educated. This could be due to the rising importance of the marriage market within the middle class, however it is cited many times within the book that the women are able to read, and that this fact improves their worth. "I armed her against the censures of the world, shewed her that books were sweet unreproaching companions to the miserable, and that if they could not bring us to enjoy life, they would at least teach us to endure it" (140). This shows a changed attitude about the morality of books. Previously we have seen a trend in literature toward viewing books as agents of evil and subversion. Books were to be feared. Yet this clearly shows that the vicar views books to be protective against ignorance. To him, they are something helpful he wishes to share with his daughter to help her through difficulty. Books are an aide that can lead Olivia back when she has gone astray. The only reference we see in *The Vicar of Wakefield* to the older idea that books are somewhat subversive is in the first chapter. The narrator tells us that his wife, "During her pregnancy had been reading romances, [and] insisted upon [the name] Olivia" (39). This seems to have a negative connotation, as the narrator later insists that he, "had no hand in it" (39). Books clearly still have some of their negative connotation, in that they still seem to be seen to have the power to subvert or take control of the reader's mind in a forceful way, yet overall it seems that books have lost most of their negative connotation and are viewed as healthy, moral objects.

The final conflicted moral that the book attempts to teach is that one must be loyal to one's family in order to be a moral person. The narrator spends countless pages exhorting his family and his love for his family. The book ends with the narrator, "seeing all [his] family

assembled once more by a cheerful fireside" (199). It is clear that he sees nothing more perfect in life than a happy, loyal family. Yet is the narrator's family loyal? Olivia runs away from home, which, at the time, was a grievous insult to her families honor. In fact, there is little she could have done that would have been less loyal to her family. She even gets married behind their backs. Also, the father shows very little regard for his family when he stays in jail to prove his point against Mister Thornhill even after he hears that Olivia is dying and that it is tearing his family apart. Is his pride—one of the seven deadly sins—more important than his family? The actions of these two characters create conflict in what is the story's most heavily emphasized moral.

It is clear that *The Vicar of Wakefield* does not fit in with earlier Christian morality stories, as it doesn't emphasize the same morals, and it even refutes several of the moral lessons taught by morality plays such as *Everyman*. It is also unclear as to its own moral message, while still obviously trying to impart a strong one. While the plot of the story and the actions of the characters show an interesting shift in ideas surrounding morality and Christianity around a time when the middle class was rising in England, it does not do an effective job of explaining what these new morals are. In this sense, *The Vicar of Wakefield* fails as a true Christian morality story.

Works Cited

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