

Satire and Morality in *The Vicar of Wakefield*

The Vicar of Wakefield, by Oliver Goldsmith, can be read as a satire because of the exaggerated portrayal of innocence and gullibility, particularly in the case of Dr. Primrose. The decisions the family makes and the situations they experience are ridiculous, not only for the reader, but for other characters in the story as well. However, *The Vicar of Wakefield* has a very different end than the typical literary satire. Rather than denouncing vice and folly through sinful characters, Goldsmith draws attention to the foolish acts of morally upright characters, suggesting that well-intentioned, religiously-guided behavior does not always result in a positive end. It is the more multi-faceted characters, those who are deceptive and shift roles both in the eyes of the reader and the family, who are in control of themselves and the destiny of the family. The eventual balance of reward for righteous behavior is not achieved by the Primroses themselves, but by other characters, specifically William Thornhill, who transcends notions of class and propriety, appearing in the story both as a villain and hero. When confronted with the deception and evil inherent in the world, the Primroses, guided and represented by the narrator, must be rescued time and time again. The story challenges the narrator's limited perception of the world, placing more importance on the mutability of character, chance and trickery to effect consequences in life, rather than to Primrose's much simpler, more ineffective notion of virtue that goes rewarded.

Dr. Primrose is a character both incredibly sentimental, showing emotion which oftentimes prevents him from acting in dire situations, and guided by very rigid principles. This dichotomy of reason and emotion creates tension between his actions and thoughts. He sets down laws, but cannot maintain his authority as master of the family. He elaborates for pages on end about the need for reform in laws and power, but we never see evidence in his character that

suggests he can accomplish these reforms. He is a man of thoughts ideals that do not reflect in his actions. For example, he describes their first churchgoing day in the new town: "When Sunday came, it was indeed a day of finery, which all my sumptuary edicts could not restrain. How well so ever I fancied my lectures against pride had conquered the vanity of my daughters; yet I still found them secretly attached to all their former finery…" (23). "My sumptuary edicts" suggests that he has created laws to which he expects his family to adhere. His preoccupation with dress as a marker of class and worth is indicted here and throughout the novel. He creates legislation, but as demonstrated in this quote, his daughters remain "secretly attached to all their former finery"; they internalize their own wishes and vanity, but not admonitions, which more times than not fall useless. In another example, their landlord visits and asks for a song. Primrose narrates: "As I did not approve of such disproportioned acquaintances, I winked out my daughters in order to prevent their compliance, but my hint was counteracted by one from their mother; so that with a cheerful air they gave us a favorite song…" (25). Here, Primrose's action is "counteracted" by one from the mother, and the daughters end up ignoring his wishes and heeding their mother's. The use of the word "counteract" suggests that his effort is completely neutralized by the mother's, so that the woman's will supercedes the man's. This holds true to the sentimental form, and demonstrates how completely Primrose's edicts fail in practice.

Also speaking to the simplicity and ineffectiveness of the narrator is his obstinate adherence to class rules. He does not waver from his beliefs, which do not allow him to notice deeper than the superficial qualities of those around him. The examples of his efforts at creating laws for his family also relate to issues of class. He mentions "disproportioned acquaintances", meaning that Thornhill was too wealthy to be prudently associated with his much poorer family (25). Later, he describes how his daughters touch Mr. Thornhill: "All my endeavours could

scarce keep their dirty fingers from handling and tarnishing the lace on his cloaths, and lifting up the flaps of his pocket holes, to see what was there" (26). The image is striking because of the way he describes his own family: "dirty fingers" which "tarnish" the clothes suggests a soiling, his family somehow denigrating Mr. Thornhill simply by touching him. His tone is detached, as if he is describing beggars on the street, people fouled, though we know from earlier descriptions that these women were earlier dressing above their class, polished and clean. As with the early sumptuary concerns, Primrose is painfully aware of his own class and the propriety of it; he is so much preoccupied with this that he remains a spectator: his family's touching and handling, their investigation of Thornhill's pockets is a symbolic curiosity, a search for secrets that are hidden, whereas Primrose can only see the surface, nothing past the class of the person and his own sense of imprudence.

William Thornhill, in the guise of Burchell, says of himself "He was surrounded by crowds, who shewed him only one side of their character; so that he began to lose a regard for private interest in universal sympathy. He loved all mankind; for fortune prevented him from knowing there were rascals" (19). It is inferred that he changes greatly after this, because he must regain his fortune after having been too trusting. The way in which he describes his former self is very similar to Primrose's own predicament, especially in the case in which both he and Moses are hoodwinked by the same man, who takes both their horses. Being shown "only side of their character" alludes to the difference between William Thornhill and the narrator: Thornhill, once similar to Primrose, has since learned to embrace the multiple sides of his own personality, to seek out the reality of people and not judge by appearances alone. Primrose still cannot do this, as indicated by his interactions with different classes, of his judgment of his own family, and his misfortunes with money due to his snap judgments of others.

It is William who generally fixes all that has gone awry in the Primroses' life. He is the one who has the power to pass judgment in the end. He says, upon revealing his true identity to the family "I am now come to see justice done a worthy man, for whom I have the most sincere esteem" (152). It is William who must bring justice; Primrose's own actions do not promise a good end. His unveiling heralds a turn of events. Curiously, the eventual restoration of the family comes from a series of almost arbitrary events. Jenkinson happens to recognize the description of Sophia's kidnapper, also later admitting he had married Olivia and Thornhill, saying "Perhaps you'll think it was generosity that made me do all this. But no. To my shame I confess it, my only design was to keep the licence and let the 'Squire know that I could prove it upon him whenever I thought proper, and so make him come whenever I wanted money" (164). This is followed by immediate pleasure, but the juxtaposition with the very selfish, unvirtuous story means that they have accepted the good news, despite the means to an end.

The ending rests not completely resolved, because though William Thornhill is established as a redeeming figure, bringing Sophia back and resolving the marriages of each of the family members, people like his nephew Thornhill have not redeemed their actions earlier in the story. The nephew says "I see no hardship or injustice in pursuing the most legal means of redress" (155). This theme continues from the beginning of the story, in which Primrose establishes his efforts at legal power over his own household. The difference here, however, is that the nephew Thornhill has the means to pursue prosecution and real consequences of legal precedents. To this end, the practice wins out over Primrose's idea of legality, which remains mostly theoretical, never practical. A sort of trial ensues, witnesses like the butler brought into testify. The narrator, upon hearing that the nephew Thornhill is already married, says "For when we reflect upon the various schemes this gentleman has laid to seduce innocence, perhaps

someone more artful than the rest has been found able to deceive him" (163). Thornhill's final punishment, having not been able to trick Wilmot from her fortune, rests entirely on another man's greater trickery. This neither aligns with Primrose's idea of virtuous action securing heaven, nor does it undo Thornhill's initial sabotage, abduction and trickery. The outcome, in which Olivia is "thus restored to reputation, to friends and fortune at once, was a rapture sufficient to stop the progress of decay and restore former health and vivacity" (164). "Reputation" here is not a reputation based on moral goodness, but on "fortune", the cause of all the class distinction that Primrose so adamantly lectures against, instead seeking modesty and class propriety for his daughters. This restoration to fortune, hinging on a marriage with a trickster and an exploitative cheat, is not altogether ideal. Thornhill is found criminal through the trial, yet because Jenkinson out-tricks him by having already married him, the family is happy. There is no complete sense of redemption or resolution here, because it is not virtue that is rewarded, but deceit.

The consequences and final judgments in *The Vicar of Wakefield* are rendered by those characters who express the greatest mutability, who have been deceptive, have worn guises and used trickery to achieve their ends. The most morally grounded character, with the most faith in doctrine and idealism, is Primrose, yet the family is punished time and time again for the foolish behavior which stems from his simple way of looking at the world. The end of the story, though seemingly establishing a virtuous family rewarded, places great emphasis on fortune and on deceit to achieve an end. Primrose, guided by morality and principles of class propriety, is the least ineffectual when trying to effect change; as the leader of his family, he remains generally ineffective until William Thornhill saves them. Goldsmith overturns the conventions of satire,

exposing vice and folly, but moreso exposing and questioning innocence and the kind of morality that has no place in the world.

Works Cited

Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Ed. Arthur Friedman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.