The Country Parson in the Eighteenth-Century Novel

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ABSTRACT

The occasion for this study was an awareness of a need for an isolated examination of the country parson figure in the English novel. Owing to the limits of time and space regulating this research, its scope has been limited to the seminal period of the novel in the eighteenth century, and even further limited to three novels whose publication spans the century. These novels are Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Pride and Prejudice. An attempt has been made to investigate the parsons in the other writings of these novelists. The country parson has always been a central character in English society; successors to the "types" of country parson in the eighteenth-century novels can be found in Victorian novels such as Samuel Butler's The Way of all Flesh, and twentieth-century fiction.

This study examines the nature of the relationship between the parson as portrayed in the eighteenth-century novel, the parson as portrayed in previous literature and the parson as a real figure in eighteenth-century society. The broad scope of this work has necessitated the use of a wide variety of historical, ecclesiastical and literary sources. It has been necessary to inquire into church history and social history of the eighteenth century, and also into the different theological factions of that age. The backgrounds of the country parson in English literature has been briefly

summarized by looking at works of major importance. An attempt has been made to examine certain novels and novelists contemporary with and also succeeding the writers this work principally studies. Finally, this study utilizes the research of theorists who have written about the novel form, or about the relationship between history and literature.

The movement of this study proceeds chronologically from the beginning to the end of the eighteenth century, tracing the evolution of the country parson in the novel and society. Joseph Andrews was published in 1743 and represents the concern with Latitudinarian Christianity of that time and Fielding's specific devotion to social and church reform. The Vicar of Wakefield (1766) represents the sentimental interest in rural retirement of mid-century, and Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice (1813) is the secular country parson, who entered the church at the end of the century, when the value of church livings had risen. This study attempts to show that as a character, the country parson has unique qualities which are shared by no other "type" of character, and which render him especially valuable; as it were, a lighthouse from which can be more clearly viewed the very fabric of individual and social life rendered in the novel.

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INTRODUCTION

The country parson in the eighteenth century was a very special kind of gentleman. He was at the center of parish life and the parish was the central unit of eighteenth-century English society. He was, in many ways, at liberty to be as dutiful or as negligent in his office as he chose to be and his reputation in successive centuries is partly a result of this liberty--or sometimes license. In the eighteenth-century novel, the country parson was afforded a place of importance, and the novelists attempted to expose the abuses in this office and to reward the unrecognized men among the bad clergy who served their people well. Regarding the good and bad clergy in the eighteenth century Anthony Armstrong has concluded:

> One tentative observation may be made: whenever generalization is attempted, the eighteenth-century clergymen gets the worst of it; and whenever detailed study of individual clergy is made, they emerge with credit.[1]

In this study I shall explore the portrayal of the parson figure in three novels whose publication spans the century. I shall attempt to distinguish the author's intention behind the characterization of the parsons in these different novels, and observe the wider implications of these presentations. I shall also try to ascertain to what extent these characters were contemporary manifestations of clerical types inherited

from the tradition of such clerical figures in English letters, or to what degree these parsons reflect the actual clergymen of eighteenth-century society. To fulfil this intention, I shall briefly explore the position of the parson in eighteenth-century history and in the tradition of English narrative. In order to understand the eighteenth-century country parson in literature, it is necessary to appreciate the social and religious milieu in which he was created, for as David Cecil writes of the study of the historical charcter:

> It is over religion, above all, that people nowadays so often fail to understand a past age. Their historical imagination fails them. They cannot, as it were, fit the religious pieces into the rest of the evidence about an historical character so as to make up a convincing human being.[2]

It is for this reason that an analysis of the religious climate of the eighteenth century has been made at some length in this study. I have chosen to examine the country parsons in Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews (1743), Oliver Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield (1766), and Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice (1813), because these are major, representative works whose production spans the eighteenth century, and because the parsons in them hold places of vital importance. Pride and Prejudice is widely regarded by scholars as a work illustrative of the late eighteenth century, and is included here in that context.

As an historical barometer the country parson is a very valuable figure, and as a character in literature he embodies very peculiar and unique qualities which render him useful in the study of the eighteenth-century novel. Almost by his very nature he is designed for special treatment. He is the pious and benevolent man, and is so, as it were, by profession. He is at once a man raised above his fellows and given a special duty to observe and "judge" them, and a mortal man with a common share of human faults and sins. As the descendant of the disciples of Christ, he must eat with sinners and publicans without becoming seduced by their worldly ways. He is, by nature of his calling, expected to be an upright and honest man, and an example to others, and necessarily, his vanities and hypocricies are, by contrast, highly visible. As a result of this inherent weakness in his position, and the constant danger of self-righteousness to which he is subjected, the country parson figure in literature has a very special relation with comedy. If he is a good, kind parson and is well loved, then his moral failings will be regarded warmly as marks of his humanity, but if he is a selfish and vile parson, he will be damned without mercy. The comic learned parson of the eighteenth-century novel who inclines towards pedantry, who feels he has mastered himself and has solved the puzzle of the universe, and is curiously blind to the real world, forms a "type" character upon which succeeding parsons in literature have been modelled.

In the eighteenth century, writes the historian J.H. Plumb "the vast majority of parish priests and curates were not quite gentlemen".[3] The clergy in England were not to rise from this ambigious and uncomplimentary status until the beginning of the nineteenth century. This is the situation of the curate in George Eliot's The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton, at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Eliot writes:

> Given a man with a wife and six children: let him be obliged always to exhibit himself when outside his own door in a suit of black broadcloth, such as will not undermine the foundations of the Establishment...let him have a parish large enough to create an external necessity for abundant shoe-leather, and an internal necessity for abundant beef and mutton, as well as poor enough to require frequent priestly consolation in the shape of shillings and sixpences; and, lastly, let him be compelled, by his own pride and other people's, to dress his wife and children with gentility from bonnet-strings to shoe-strings. By what process of division can the sum of eighty pounds per annum be made to yield a quotient which will cover that man's weekly expenses?[4]

Although a great many curates and parsons were often really destitute, they assumed responsibility for many of the social services which would be undertaken in the nineteenth century by professional men. In the eighteenth century the country parson was a very important man in the parish and he upheld most of the basic values of English society. For example, in Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield and Pride and Prejudice, the country parsons all recommend matrimony and family life

as an institution necessary for temperance and stability in their parish. The numerous progeny of Parson Adams and Vicar Primrose demonstrate their domesticity, as does the name of Mr. Quiverful in Anthony Trollope's Barchester Towers, who has

> The impossible task of bringing up as ladies and gentlemen fourteen children on an income which was insufficient to give them with decency the common necessaries of life....[5]

Although it is never overtly stated by the parsons in these three novels, they, like the rest of society, would seem to measure success in this world in monetary terms. Mr. Collins has an easy competence when he first raises his head in Pride and Prejudice, and Parson Adams and Dr Primrose are "rewarded" for their tribulations at the end of Joseph Andrews and The Vicar of Wakefield with substantial worldly wealth. In Joseph Andrews and The Vicar of Wakefield the parson's good fortune at the end of the story would nearly seem to suggest their selection for "reward" in the next life. The parson in these novels is a part of the fabric of the social order of the novel and accepts many of those values of the eighteenth century which we now question. G.M. Trevelyan writes in English Social History of the historical parson:

> It was natural that an aristocratic, unreforming, individualistic, 'classical' age should be served by a Church with the same qualities and defects as the other chartered institutions of the country.[6]

The country parsons in Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield and Pride and Prejudice, represent a basically conservative

force in the society of the novels. While the authors of these novels may be attempting to enlighten and reform men and women, they intended to effect this change from within the existing social structure. A study of the country parson in eighteenth-century novels must also be an inquiry into the very nature of eighteenth-century social life and its reflection in literature.

CHAPTER I

THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY BACKGROUND

The conservatism of the eighteenth-century Church of England followed a century and a half of religious upheaval and controversy. Since the 1534 Supremacy Act of Henry VIII, the Anglican Church had been the national English church, but it was not until the eighteenth century that the strong position of the Roman Catholics and the Dissenters, and particularly the Presbyterians, was significantly weakened. By the end of the eighteenth century none of the Dissenting congregations had a denominational unity at the national level, and the Presbyterians, who controlled parliament during the Civil War, were virtually extinct in England. The rise of Methodism was, to a large extent, a result of the doggedly slow process of reform so badly needed in the eighteenth-century Anglican Church. In the seventeenth century, England had been primarily an agricultural economy, with eighty-percent of the population located in the agricultural south. With the discovery of the industrial uses of water power, coal, and iron in the north, in the 1750s, large parts of the population were being attracted to that area.[1] The old parochial system was not suited to city populations and as a

result, large numbers of people in the newly expanding northern towns went without religious guidance. The Bishop of Manchester wrote in a visitation charge in 1872 to his clergy:

> The parochial system, as ordinarily conceived, admirably efficient in rural parishes and among limited populations, where the pastor knows and is known to everyone committed to his charge, breaks down in face of that huge mass of ignorance, poverty, and wretchedness by which it is so often confronted in the thickly peopled areas of our manufacturing towns.[2]

For this reason, the itinerant Methodist preachers who made the village green the city square and the sky their chapel, had a willing audience, and even today the strongholds of Methodism are in the northern Midlands, Yorkshire, and Wales. Methodism was a reaction against the conservative and moderate theology of the eighteenth-century episcopacy, which had to a large extent grown out of the Latitudinarian and the Cambridge Platonist movements of the seventeenth century. The emphasis upon a rational Christianity, stressing the benevolence of God the Father, and the need for moderation in man, so pronounced in the sermons of Archbishop Tillotson of Canterbury (1630-94), highly admired and widely emulated by the eighteenth-century clergy, was criticized by the pious William Addison, who wrote in The English Country Parson:

> Tillotson's conception of religion dominated the Church of England throughout the eighteenth century... In it the old religion of revelation gave place to the new religion of reason...

> The plain fact is that in Tillotson's hands Christianity becomes little more than a prudential morality.[3]

In the twentieth century there has been a major revision among Church historians of the previously prevailing attitude which was highly critical of the eighteenth-century episcopacy. This important re-evaluation was led by Norman Sykes's book Church and State in the Eighteenth Century.[4] By making close reference to contemporary journals and diaries Sykes attempts to weigh the balance of opinion in the favour of the sincere and dedicated clerics who strove against institutional atrophy and communicational problems to perform their duty. He quotes the letters of bishops who undertook arduous confirmational tours to remote areas in their vastly over-sized dioceses, and some of these areas had never been visited b a Bishop before. Sykes suggests that it is not the individuals in the church who were to blame for the many weaknesses of the system but the cumbersome institution itself. These faults made more difficult the administration of the duty of both the high church officials and the lesser clergy. In this light, Bishop Hoadly cannot be condemned for not setting foot in his see at Bangor for the six years of his charge, as he was incurably crippled and should not have been appointed to the fatiguing job in the first instance. The institution of the church in the eighteenth century allowed for just this kind of excess. Sykes notes that the injustice of preferment

in the ecclesiastical lottery was conveyed unharmed from the seventeenth century:

> Tradition assumed without comment or criticism that bishops must provide first for their relatives and chaplains before weighing the claims of the inferior clergy of their diocesses....[5]

As a result of this practice, and because the bishops were partly elected for their political leanings, the holders of the top church offices were often related by kinship as well as by belief. The appointment of bishops to the House of Lords was one of the ways a balance of power could be maintained there and usually bishops spent eight out of the twelve months of the year attending parliament in London.[6] The importance of the political connection in the church is shown by the example presented by Sykes of the altarpiece of the Last Supper in the parish church of Whitechapel, in which the bishop, as a result of his unpopular whiggism, was portrayed as Judas Iscariot.[7] A bishop who held the proper political views was in a highly advantageous position to sway his clerics and in turn the general populace to his opinion.

The discrimination between the high church officers and the country parsons was extreme, and was a result, as Dr. Johnson noted, of the overcrowding in the ecclesiastical profession. As Bishop Porteus observed in the latter part of the eighteenth century, of the misguided ambition of the less qualified candidates for ordination:

> ...the holy office of the priesthood [is regarded] in a very mistaken point of view, i.e. as furnishing a ready provision for those who, being in trouble and distressed circumstances, but of a condition removed from the vulgar, were unfit for anything else.[8]

Without wealth or influence, nevertheless, rising up the ladder of preferment was almost impossible. The ordination of candidates for the priesthood was conducted on certain Sundays of the year but only in the diocese of the Bishop, and only if the candidate had an offer of a living. As a result of the difficulty in gaining such a meeting with the Bishiop, and with obtaining the offer of a living, many scholars just graduated from university, and without the weight of family interest behind them, accepted small, ill-paid curacies. A. Tindal Hart writes in The Eighteenth Century Country Parson that,

> Less fortunate men, who had no real job to go to, simply became vagrants, marrying and baptizing under a hedge for what fees they could get; whilst among this numerous and discreditable company there were some who had never been ordained at all![9]

As a consequence of the practise of pluralism allowed by Henry VIII to certain members of the clergy, the resident curates were often left to perform all the duties of a vicar at hopelessly low wages. The result of absenteeism and pluralism, was a lowering in the reputation of the church.

> Over much of rural England the Church's ministry in the early years of the nineteenth century was little short of a scandal.[10]

The average salary of a country parson in the eighteenth century was between twenty and fifty pounds a year yet many men subsisted below the minimum allowance. Of the village parson in Oliver Goldsmith's famous poem The Deserted Village, the poet writes:

> A man he was to all the country dear,
> And passing rich with forty pounds a year;[11]

Towards the end of the century, nevertheless, the livings increased as a result of higher tithes and better rents from glebe farms, and by the grants of capital from Queen Anne's Bounty.[12] The editor of The Diary and Letter Book of Thomas Brockbank writes that,

> ...as regards the clergy, the outstanding features are the prevalence of non-residence and plurality on the part of the superior ecclasiastics; but in no small degree this is counter-balanced by the earnest and hard-working, but hidden lives of many (if not most) of the local ministers.[13]

Norman Sykes recognizes three levels in the structure of the clerical sub-alterns. At the top of the ladder are the minority who possessed prebends and other cathedral dignities, and who were justly rewarded for their learning, ability and zeal. Below them were the parochial clergy, who, if they lived in harmony with the parish squire, and made a small income by their glebe, could lead happy country lives,

if not of excitement, then of peace and contentment. To this class belongs Parson James Woodforde, the rector of Weston near Norwich, from 1776 to 1802, who writes in his famous diary of the joys of eating and drinking and entertaining and being entertained by his parishioners and his superiors.[14] Woodforde's salary was a comfortable three hundred pounds per annum. This is the happy lot of the chaplain Sir Roger de Coverly employs (Joseph Addison's Spectator paper 106). The writer tells us that Sir Roger,

> ...desired a particular friend of his at the University to find him out a clergyman rather of plain sense than much learning, of a good aspect, a clear voice, a sociable temper, and, if possible, a man that understood a little of backgammon.[15]

At the lowest level were the "depressed clergy" surviving on small livings or by stipendiary curacies, living in poverty, and often with large families, and often doing the work of non-resident pluralists. Men at this level of the ecclesiastical ladder were the most outspoken and indignant, and, at the same time, they were most readily chosen for satirical treatment by anti-clerical writers, who used their lot to demonstrate the worthlessness of the entire system.

Archdeacon Paley described the rewards of the close contact between the country parson and his parishioners, in an ordination service addressed to country clergymen in 1781:

> Another and still more favourable circumstance in your situation is this: being upon a level with the greatest part of your

> parishioners, you gain access to their conversation and confidence, which is rarely granted to the superior clergy without extraordinary address and the most insinuating advances on their parts. And this is a valuable privilege; for it enables you to inform yourselves of the moral and religious state of your flocks...[16]

Certainly, for the dedicated man, the country parsonage allowed ample opportunity to share in the pleasures and distresses of the lives of his congregation. He acted as a magistrate, a social reformer, a school teacher, and occasionally as physician, as in the eighteenth century social services for the poor were only beginning to be developed and poverty was still accepted by the ruling classes as an unchangeable aspect of the servant class. If the parson himself was a scholar and a gentleman, he would provide, as A.T. Hart observes,

> ...a tiny oasis of gracious and cultured living in the midst of an almost inevitably boarish and frequently savage village community.[17]

Nevertheless, he was isolated much of the year, and especially in winter by nearly impassable roads, from the news and the ideas of the major centers. G.M. Trevelyan notes that in the eighteenth century the characteristic unit was not the town but the country village:

> Village life embraced the chief daily concerns of the majority of Englishmen. It was the principal nursery of the national character. The village was not then a moribund society, as in the nineteenth century; nor was it, as in our day, a society hoping to revive by

> the backwash of life returning to it from the town. It contained no inspected school imparting a town-made view of life to successive generations of young rustics, preparing for migration to other scenes. City civilization, with its newspapers and magazines, had not supplanted provincial speech and village tradition.[18]

Before the intellectual and religious upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the church was established in the center of the village and in the center of the villager's lives. The theology of the majority of the country parsons was clearly not elaborate and was based, primarily, upon a belief in acts of charity and good faith in preparing the temporary inhabitants of the earthly for the heavenly city. The country parson was at the heart of the village life of the country, which was the central unit of eighteenth-century England. It was Dr. Johnson who wrote:

> ...that it might be discerned whether or not there was a clergyman resident in a parish by the civil or savage manner of the people.[19]

CHAPTER I

II

The literary background of the English country parson has its beginnings in the Elizabethan age, but the roots of the clerical figure in literature extend to the Medieval tales of dissolute friars and monks. Among the writers of the eighteenth century there was, simultaneously, an attempt to re-establish a dignity to the somewhat soiled reputation of this office and a desire to ridicule and also to satirize the offences carried on within its ranks, for a variety of motives. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there were perhaps three types of parson figures. On the one hand there were the learned and sometimes almost saintly clerics like George Herbert, who tried to make himself a model worthy of imitation, and attempted to fuse his own contemplative life of the spirit with his work in the parish. On the other hand there were the men who emerged newly from university and almost in desperation for a means of support took orders and maintained their enjoyment of a worldly life, often neglecting their duties in their country offices. As A. Tindal Hart writes:

> ...although the English clergy of all periods have been addicted to sport and country pursuits, the eighteenth century

> saw more of them then ever before indulging, without fear of any rebuke, dicing and card-playing. Many scandals were caused, but few clergymen were indicted; and only too much rope was allowed not only to the vicious, idle or eccentric, but also to the genius, to develop along his own particular lines without the slightest inteference from Church or State.[1]

The third type of parson figure in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries includes those men who, with possibly a more simple faith, sought to enter into the daily life of all the social levels of the parish and in a kindly and yet perhaps bumbling fashion live the message of the gospel. These three types of actual persons living in the two centuries prior to the eighteenth century served as models for the domestic literary tradition of the English country parson which emerged in the eighteenth-century novel. In the eighteenth century, satirical writers employed their pens in the cause of exposing the wretched lot of the poor country clerics, who were victims of a Church badly in need of reform. These two traditions, the satiric and the domestic, merge, and form the basis of the figure of Parson Adams in Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews.

In Boccaccio's Decameron (1348), a forerunner of modern fiction, the priestly class is regularly accused of evil, hypocrisy and worthlessness, for they hold themselves as examples of virtue and yet indulge to an even greater degree the vices that they upbraid the common people for pursuing. In the preface to her story, the second on the fourth day,

Pampinea explains that her story will:

> ...illustrate the extraordinary and perverse hypocrisy of the members of religious orders. They go about in those long, flowing robes of theirs and when they are asking for alms, they deliberately put on a forlorn expression and are all humility and sweetness; but when they are reproaching you with their own vices, or showing how the laity achieve salvation by almsgiving and the clerics by almsgrabbing, they positively deafen you with their loud and arrogant voices. To hear them talk, one would think they were excused, unlike the rest of us, from working their way to Heaven on their merits, for they behave as though they actually own and govern the place...[3]

The church officials are the last to recognize merit among people and the man who is rewarded by them is Ser Cepperello; "Of women he was as fond as a dog is of a stick". After a false confession he is revered by the officials as a saint. Boccaccio's priests are typically gluttenous, slothful, and avaricious. Many are the tales of priests entering nunneries or nuns entertaining male visitors. As exemplified in the case of the abbess in the second story on the ninth day, one caught in the act of fornication is always the first to try to accuse another of the same vice. The activities of the abbess are discovered when she dons the breeches of the priest she is sleeping with instead of her headress, while hurrying to hurl abuse at one of her nuns found in bed with a priest.

There is a criticism implied in the Decameron of the superstition of the people, who would believe that, for example, a goose feather is a feather of the Angel Gabriel

left in the bedchamber of the Virgin Mary at the annunciation in Nazareth (story of the Friar Cipolla on day six). It would seem that for Boccaccio the church with its friars and nuns provides for mankind a release of unnecessary guilt. As an older woman advises a younger woman in the fifth tale on day three: "It's better to do a thing and repent of it than do nothing and regret it." For Boccaccio the pleasures of the earth are transitory and ruled by fortune, and he ridiculed the friars and monks who are not strong enough to resist the temptations they railed against in their talk.

In the General Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, the gentle parson is contrasted with the monk and the wanton and merry friar who, "...lipsed, for his wantownesse,/To make his Englissh sweete upon his tonge."[4] The parson, on the other hand, is introduced in this manner:

> A good man was ther of religioun,
> And was a povre PERSOUN OF A TOWN,
> But riche he was of hooly thoght and werk.
> He was also a learned man, a clerk,
> That Cristes gospel trewely wolde preche;
> His parisshens devoutly wolde he teche.
> Benygne he was, and wander deligent,
> And in adversitee ful pacient.[5]

Like a good cleric he has a sermon with him for all occasions and, disdaining the untruthful frivolities of the other tales, preaches on the preparation for confession and the seven deadly sins. The Parson's Tale is the last before the pilgrims reach Canterbury and the last before Chaucer's Retraction, and it is an appropriate ending for the pilgrimage and a preparation for entry to the Saint's shrine. Chaucer's parson is a devout

man who has given himself to the care of his flock, as, in a sense, it travels where he goes, and consists of whomever he meets. The same excellent qualities, defining the ideal of priesthood, are manifest in other contemporary works--for example the portrait of Piers in Piers Plowman. In the poem, goodness and faith in God, are said to be meaningful only if demonstrated by good deeds and acts of charity in this world as, "That faith without the feat, is right nothing worth".[5]

After the Middle Ages and the establishment of a national church in Elizabeth I's reign the church was drawn magnetically from the extreme left to the right. The Pilgrim's Progress is an example of the literature of the dissenting faction in England and it was conceived initially by John Bunyan as something of a Puritan tract. Christian, the hero of Bunyan's tale, recognizes his sinful nature and takes refuge in the teaching of the Bible, commencing a wandering life. His pilgrimage "through the wilderness of this world" represents allegorically, Bunyan's belief that men wrongly call the earth their home. For Christian and for Bunyan, life in the world is an exile from God and a sorrowful place of trial. Almost anyone connected with the Church was necessarily drawn into the disputes between the Puritanism of Bunyan and the doctrines of the Church of England. This was not the case with George Herbert, who led a life of piety and meditation amid his duties as a parson and withdrew from public life, as Marchette Chute argues, to devote himself

more successfully to bring about peace in England. With an aristocratic background, a youth of application and promise, distinguished at Cambridge, known to influential friends, he decided to enter into the life of a country parson. As a friend of his said, he "...lost himself in a humble way..."[6] Izaak Walton, in his famous Life of George Herbert, implies that Herbert was indeed a saint:

> ...he seem'd to be marked out for piety, and to become the care of Heaven, and of a particular good Angel to guard and guide him.[7]

Like John Donne, Herbert went through great trials and doubts choosing a profession and, also like the Dean of St. Pauls, Herbert as a country parson became an exemplary cleric. Herbert said to a friend of his choice of profession:

> ...though the iniquity of the late Times have made Clergy-men meanly valued, and the sacred name of "Priest" contemptible; yet I will labour to make it honourable, by consecrating all my learning, and all my poor abilities, to advance the glory of that God that gave them.[8]

As the vicar of the parsonage of Bemerton near Salisbury after his ordination in 1630, Herbert led a devout life of fasting and mortification, with the routine of every day dedicated to the service of God and his people. Despite his lofty personal ideals, or perhaps because of them, coupled with his great understanding, he ministered in a way which was understandable to poor farmers, for, as he writes:

> ...Countrey people; which are thick, and heavy, and hard to raise to a poynt of zeal, and fervency, and need a mountaine

> of fire to kindle them; but stories and sayings they will remember.[9]

In the rules he wrote for himself as a parson in "A Priest To The Temple or, The Country Parson", he defines his duty simply:

> A Pastor is the Deputy of Christ for the reducing of Man to the Obedience of God.[10]

He came to know and live the holy life in his parsonage which Donne described in his final sermon "Death's Duel":

> ...this deliverance from that "death", the death of the "wombe", is an "entrance", a delivering over to "another death", the manifold deathes of this "world".[11]

In George Herbert's opinion the country parson had to submit himself to care for his flock, but his first duty was to submit his will to God. Herbert held doubts about his own worthiness to perform his duty, as did John Donne. Helen Gardner writes:

> The two poles between which it oscillates are faith in the mercy of God in Christ, and a sense of personal unworthiness that is very near to despair.[12]

Just as Herbert felt that the body of the Church contained God, so the parson contained and was responsible for the sins and vices of his flock:

> The outward form [of the temple] was the visible shaping of an inward spirit, and everything within the building spoke to him of the presence of God.[13]

Herbert believed that the order and structure of the church building was highly meaningful. He writes in his poem "The Altar", itself shaped on the page like the outline of a Christian altar:

...each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praise thy Name.[14]

Herbert wanted to make of his little parsonage a religious community--almost a new Jerusalem. In "The Country Parson" he says that the ideal parson should be sexually a virgin and lead his people by elevated example along the spiritual path. His idealism is shown in his writings on visitations:

> ...the Parson questions what order is kept in the house, as about prayers morning and evening on their knees, reading of Scripture, catechizing, singing of Psalms at their work, and on holy days; who can read, who not; and sometimes he hears the children read himselfe, and blesseth them, encouraging also the servants to learn to read, and offering to have them taught on holy-dayes by his servants.[15]

George Herbert only wanted his poetry to survive if his friend Nicholas Ferrar, to whom he sent it on his death bed, felt it would inspire and instruct others. His book of poems, The Temple, details his own progress through the dark night of the soul of St. John of the Cross before he found peace in the service of God. The poet speaks in "The Flower":

O my onely light,
It cannot be
That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.[17]

His poetry was largely neglected but, surprisingly, his book of rules for the country parson was, "...often quoted and praised in the eighteenth century...."[18]

Robert Herrick, a contemporary of George Herbert, never experienced the same soul searching or the sense of

unworthiness in himself. He was in fact not the same kind of country parson as Herbert. There is every reason to believe, as Marchette Chute suggests, that Herrick only entered holy orders to follow the example of a friend and in despair of finding another more suitable livelihood. After an apprenticeship as a goldsmith and an attempt at becoming a lawyer, he entered the Church on being ordained a deacon in 1623 and was nominated to the vicarage of Dean Prior in Devonshire in 1630. Before his entry into orders he had been a typically dissolute apprentice and a lazy student and, in his parsonage in Devon, "He belonged to a happy little band of hard-drinking clerics...."[19]

Herrick almost certainly devoted much of his church employment to the crafting of his poetry and the enjoyment of the revels and seasons of the countryside. He kept a pet sparrow and a pet pig, which, it is rumoured, he taught to drink out of a tankard, and he marked the Christian festivals with the pagan celebrations of those times: "Herrick's heart moved to a more pagan rhythm and when he thought of Christmas it was of the Yule log and 'the rare mince-pie'":

> He was once reported, in fact, for failing to do his duty, and the welfare of his parishioners' souls does not seem to have caused him much concern.[20]

When Herrick's poetry was published, it was printed in bookseller's lists in the category of religious books, as in the eighteenth century sermons were best sellers, even though Herrick's religious poems only comprise a small fraction

of his book. The Noble Numbers begins with an apology for the mildly erotic and sensuous poems which go before, which he calls: "my unbaptized Rhimes,/Writ in my wild unhallowed Times".[21] Concerning the questionable sentiments of some of Herrick's religious poetry, as when he weeps in verse at the circumcision of Christ, or expresses his own childish assurance of heaven in "His Creed", Marchette Chute argues:

> The line between the sacred and the profane was almost non-existent in Herrick's mind and sometimes it is only his purity of intention that keeps him from blasphemy,
>
> ...when he describes the entombment of Christ, the Saviour is "sweetly buried" in almost the same tone of voice that the poet uses for Robin Redbreast.[22]

Herrick's poems did not see a second edition and, despite his own self-confidence so often expressed in Hesperides, "...he had no glory and very little attention for over 150 years."[23]

In the next century, Laurence Sterne, like Herrick, was a "naughty priest". But Sterne, unlike Herrick, wrote about country parsons as well as living the life of one. In many ways the figure of Parson Yorick is Sterne's portrait of himself, and Sterne obviously realized some of his own weaknesses and short-comings as a parson, as is shown by the good humour with which the naive Yorick is drawn. The eighteenth-century Church was tolerant of the behaviour of its ministers, whether they were predisposed to indolence or to the exercise of literary or scientific genius. Arthur

H. Cash writes, in his encyclopaedically detailed biography of Sterne:

> But Sterne wore the wrong colour for a sinner of even slight degree, at least for an indiscreet one. It probably was a mistake to take up parochial duties, which confined him to a life too narrow for his restless, gay spirit.[24]

Sterne was the son of a soldier who died in foreign service when Laurence was very young, and he entered the church after an education aided by his influential relatives. In her Introduction to The Sermons of Mr. Yorick, Marjorie David argues that

> As a fatherless young man, his decision was one of financial expedience and had probably been made for him by relatives before he even entered Jesus College, Cambridge.[25]

For twenty years he was the vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest, near the seat in York of his Uncle Jaques, the Archdeacon of Cleveland, with whom he later quarrelled. In politics Sterne was a Whig, in religion a Latitudinarian, and in his life a free-thinker.

Laurence Sterne was a most eccentric man, but at the beginning of his life as a country parson, he seems to have fulfilled his duties in a respectable manner. Mr. Cash writes:

> Sterne seems to have had a special fondness for his more humble parishioners-the families of fifty or sixty labourers who owned no more that a cottage and a patch of garden, and the genuinely poor squatters who lived in make-shift hovels on the commons. From these arose

> the house servants whom he portrayed so lovingly as Susannah, Obadiah, Jonathan the coachman, and fat foolish scullion.[26]

The dramatic possibilities of the pulpit appealed to Sterne and, "...he was one of the most popular preachers in York...", sometimes composing and improvising his sermons as he preached.[27] What has chiefly tarnished his reputation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and what swayed Thackeray's opinion against him, was his infidelity to his marriage bed. He had, as did his Parson Yorick, in The Life And Opinions Of Tristram Shandy, a certain "...carelessness of heart".[28] His famous creation is described in the novel:

> With all this sail, poor Yorick carried not one ounce of ballast; he was utterly unpractised in the world; and, at the age of twenty-six, knew just about as well how to steer his course in it, as a romping, unsuspicious girl of thirteen: So that upon his first setting out, the brisk gale of his spirits, as you will imagine, ran him foul ten times in a day of somebody's tackling.[29]

In his own lifetime, the conflicts in the popular mind regarding Sterne's performance as a clergyman and his success as a writer, gave him a scandalous reputation. Reading of Yorick, it is often difficult to disentangle the antics of his creation and the actuality of Sterne's own life. For example, writes Marjorie David:

> A story by one of Sterne's friends had him one day walking over to Stillington to preach, probably armed with the same sermon he had used that morning at Sutton. On his way his dog flushed a flock of game birds, and Sterne calmly returned home for his gun, leaving the parishioners waiting until he had finished hunting.[30]

Sterne, like another great eighteenth-century writer, Jonathan Swift, maintained the firm base of his clerical position as a point from which to launch his literary activities.

There were many splinterings from the established satirical and domestic literary traditions of the country parson in the eighteenth-century novel. In the eighteenth century many learned men felt that the profession of the clergy had fallen into disrepute and sought to rectify it by either showing the glaring faults of the clergy and the church as a whole with the flare of satire, or, by painting the country parson in an idyll of peacefulness, with the brush of romanticism. In his poem "The Parson's Case", Jonathan Swift exposes the sad lot of the beggarly parson, "thy cassock rent", and also, at the same time, chides the poor parson's irreligious wish for a dean's life of luxury and ease.[31] Within the church itself there were dissolute, self-seeking parsons, and also sincere parsons who embodied the teachings of their faith and were shepherds to their parishioners. George Crabbe refers to Oliver Goldsmith's poor parson, rich in spiritual values of The Deserted Village, in his poem about another type of cleric:

> And doth not he, the pious man, appear,
> He, "passing rich with forty pounds a year?"
> Ah! no; a shepherd of a different stock,
> And far unlike him, feeds this little flock:
> A jovial youth, who thinks his Sunday's task
> As much as God or man can fairly ask;
> The rest he gives to loves and labours light,
> To fields the morning, and to feasts the night.[32]

As the century progressed, the life of the country village was rapidly altering with the first quakings of the Industrial Revolution and the sort of parson which Oliver Goldsmith describes in The Vicar of Wakefield is portrayed with an air almost of sadness and nostalgia, as if in the vehicle of art, to capture its perfections for ever. At the end of the century a different breed of clergy was developing, satirized by Jane Austen in the person of Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice. The eighteenth-century country parson, like the old life of the English countryside itself, was never found after the advent of the modern world.

CHAPTER II

PARSON ADAMS IN JOSEPH ANDREWS

> One of the most striking traits in Fielding's character is his steady optimism--a trait peculiar to the 'once born', which was formed when he most keenly felt the exuberant joy of living, and was afterwards finely tempered by the cold waters of adversity. Throughout his life Fielding had that joy of spirit which goes with a "happy constitution...."[1]

So writes Gerard Edward Jensen in the Introduction to The Covent Garden Journal. Fielding was seriously disturbed by the abuses in society and in the church which he saw about him in the eighteenth century, and his genius and his classical training taught him that the most effective way to expose and defeat them was by using the two-edged sword of humorous, "laughing satire" and to entertain and instruct at once. As the Third Earl of Shaftesbury whose aesthetic theory Fielding admired, believed:

> Humor is not only a method of attack upon all forms of narrow-mindedness, intolerance, and bigotry, but in a more fundamental sense it characterizes the state of mind in which truth is best apprehended.[2]

Social reform was one of Fielding's stated intentions in his writing and it is useful to examine his early work to discover the social climate of the early eighteenth century. Perhaps Fielding's most successful character, Parson Adams,

is at once a realistic character and a figure of fun, an idealistic innocent and a crusader for the cause of his religion. Fielding apologizes for his portrayal of the clergyman in his Author's Preface, included in the first edition of the novel:

> It is designed a character of perfect simplicity; and as the goodness of his heart will recommend him to the good-natured, so I hope will excuse me to the gentlemen of his cloth; for whom, while they are worthy of their sacred order, no man can possibly have a greater respect.[3]

Adams was the perfect character, in Fielding's fictitious world of cunning, deception and fraud, to act as a foil and show up the wolves masquerading as lambs even among the brethren of the clergy itself (and clergymen and their progeny abound in all of Fielding's novels). His presence in the novel, as we come to know him more fully, is the major element which elevates the novel above a still more aggressive and extended attempt at the parody that Fielding had begun in Shamela. "Whole facets" of the character of Adams were developed in Fielding's revision of Joseph Andrews completed for the second edition of the novel, as Martin Battestin points out in his essay, "Fielding's Revisions of Joseph Andrews". Adams' poverty and "his impractical Christian-Stoic idealism" were made explicit in the revision, as was "Adams' absentmindedness, his piety and good nature, his bookish speech and his preference for 'the Pedestrian even to

the Vehicular Expedition'."[4] The novel was the fruit of a long apprenticeship which Fielding served as a playwright and a political hack writer, and in a real sense, the ideas, opinions and observations expressed in Joseph Andrews had been already formed in these early years.

Henry Fielding was born the grandson of the Archdeacon of Dorset and Chaplain to King William the Third, in an old family of English yeomen. Henry's father was a reckless man and a gambler with an aristocratic background, and his mother was descended from prosperous country gentlemen. After his mother's death, Henry, attending Eton, was put under the charge of his grandmother, Lady Gould. Before enrolling for the classical training at Eton, he was instructed at home by a Reverend Mr. Oliver, curate of the parish of Motcombe, who F. Holmes Dudden suggests may be the original of Parson Oliver in Shamela, or, as Fielding's first biographer Authur Murphy wrote in 1762, he may have been the real Parson Trulliber.[5] After his education at Eton, the young Fielding, "green in judgement", decided to enter into the world, living on the income of a man of leisure and keeping a valet. (Dudden, with seemingly little evidence, finds autobiographical strains everywhere in Fielding's novels, noting for example that Fielding, when he left Eton, resembled in physical appearance the strikingly handsome young Joseph Andrews.[6]) Fielding entered the gay and noisy world of London and at the age of

twenty-two was the author of his first performed play, Love Among Several Masques. In this period Fielding came in contact with Colley Cibber, who was principal reader for the Drury Lane company and who in the year 1732 accepted and produced five of Fielding's plays.

One of Fielding's two stated intentions for writing Joseph Andrews was to emulate and follow the lead of Samuel Richardson's Pamela, and the poet laureate Cibber's An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, Comedian and late Patnentee of the Theatre Royal...Written by Himself. Cibber, in his pompous and often absurd book, presented himself as a model of male virtue and "the only virtue which the great Apologist had not given himself for the sake of giving the example to his readers", was that of male chastity.[7] Colley Cibber was a notorious fop and gambler, "a snob, and a social climber", and in his dealings with playwrights and actors, "he was singularly tactless". When he had to dismiss a play, it is said, "...he actually liked it, he called it choking singing birds."[8] It was almost certainly his pretentiousness in rejecting plays by unknown authors and his demands for unnecessary revisions which infuriated Fielding, who ridiculed Cibber in several of his plays, and particularly in "The Historical Register" of 1736. To procure greater freedom of expression Fielding took over the management of the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, where he produced plays which lampooned Walpole's government and led directly to the

Licensing Act of 1737. Mrs. Eliza Haywood called Fielding's Great Mogul's Company of Comedians, "F_____g's scandal shop", and just as he was becoming very successful, his theatre was closed.[10]

In 1739 Fielding headed a group of writers responsible for conducting an Opposition newspaper called the "Champion", in which Fielding, as Capt. Hercules Vinegar, battled the rival "Daily Gazetter".[11] Cibber's Apology was published the next year and Fielding immediately recognized his target and began an onslaught of ridicule against Cibber's language, described by Pope as "prose on stilts". In his Apology Cibber had referred to Fielding as a "Broken-wit", and in the "Champion" of May 17, 1740, Fielding retaliated. Colley Cibber was brought before the Court of Censorial Enquiry on indictment for, "murdering the English Language". Replying to the charges the defendent says, employing his usual style rich in mixed metaphors:

> Sir, I am as innocent as the child which hath not yet entered into human nature of the fact laid to my charge. This accusation is the forward spring of envy of my laurel. It is impossible I should have any enmity to the English language, with which I am so little acquainted; if, therefore, I have struck any wounds into it, they have rolled from accident only...[12]

Aside from satirical pieces and exercies in parody for the reader's entertainment, the "Champion" also spoke out seriously about the contemporary problems in society and in

the church.[13] Fielding's work in the "Champion" marks a culmination of his career as a hack writer of moral satirical articles. It was his last enterprise before he undertook to write Shamela and Joseph Andrews, and particularly in the five articles comprising the "Apology for the Clergy", Fielding seems almost to be thinking out the theoretical basis for that novel. He writes of the qualities of the good country parson which would later be embodied in Parson Adams:

> This good Man is entrusted with the Care of our Souls, over which he is to watch as a Shepherd for his Sheep: 'To Feed the Rich with Precept and Example, and the Poor with Meat also.' To live in daily communication with his Flock, and chiefly with those who want him most, (as the Poor and Distress'd) nay, and after his Blessed Master's Example, to eat with 'Publicans and Sinners'; but with a View of reclaiming them by his Admonitions, not of fatning himself by their Dainties.[14]

At the same time, in the "Apology", as later in Joseph Andrews, Fielding lambasts the corrupt clergy, calling them "The worst of Men" as, "nothing can hurt Religion so much as a contempt of the Clergy",[15] which they arouse. A concern for the lot of the clergy was a subject which never lost its importance for Fielding, and later, in 1748, he wrote in The Jacobite's Journal of his plan of setting up a fund for the widows and children of deceased clergymen:

> ...a Multitude of our Livings are so impoverished, as not to be sufficient to produce a Minister with a tolerable competency, while he lives, much less to enable him to leave wherewith to support a Family after his Decease.[16]

It was Fielding's concern for the clergy which provoked his horror at their preaching from the pulpit the very low, mercenary "rewarded virtue" of Samuel Richardson's Pamela, and which led him to parody that book in Shamela. In Pamela, as Cross writes, "It is not virtue that is rewarded, it is cunning".[17] Fielding presents Shamela as a group of new letters found by the conscientious Parson Oliver who in turn sends them to the dupe, Parson Tickletext, who feels that the book should be given to young people for the moral example it sets. Richardson's serving girl who rebuffs the assaults on her person from her employer Squire B, and who wins his love and admiration by her goodness is ridiculed in the person of Shamela, who purrs

> I thought once of making a little fortune by my person. I now intend to make a great one by my vartue.[18]

Certain scholars have felt that Fielding's Joseph Andrews began solely as another attempt to parody Pamela, as when in the theatre, Fielding had continued to blast a topical scandal until the public wearied of it. Pamela, of course, is introduced as Joseph Andrews' sister at the beginning of Joseph Andrews, but does not make an appearance in it until the end, when Fielding's opinion of Richardson's heroine is shown by her double's incredible haughtiness and condescension after her aristocratic marriage, and her excessive vanity. Pamela is made to chide poor Fanny, "for her assurance in

aiming at such a match as her brother", the irony being that she is the unfortunate's sister:

> 'She was my equal,' answered Pamela, 'but I am no longer Pamela Andrews; I am now this gentleman's lady, and as such am above her.[19]

Fielding was shocked that a book which so blatantly associated virtue and Christian goodness with wealth and social position could be applauded by the clergy of his day.

In Shamela the new-found letters are sent to Parson Tickletext, who had been enraptured by the almost pornographic scenes in the original letters: "Methinks I see Pamela at this instant, with all the pride of ornament cast off."[20] The weak and ineffective Parson Williams of Richardson's Pamela is given a new visage in Shamela. He is said to have already fathered a child by Shamela before her marriage to the dull-witted Squire Booby. Parson Oliver, the editor of these stray papers, writes to Parson Tickletext: "...if a clergyman would ask me by what pattern he should form himself, I would say, Be the reverse of Williams".[21] The cowardly Williams in Richardson's Pamela addresses his patron after Pamela's marriage in a sermon on "the right Use of Riches" and Fielding insinuates in Shamela that Williams avoided rescuing Pamela from her imprisonment because of his fear for the security of his own position. Pamela is glad that in his sermon Williams obliges the "Delicacy" of Squire B. by "judiciously keeping to Generals", obviously flattering the

Squire's vanity for his own future gain.[22] In his parody Fielding has Parson Williams preach on the text:

> 'Be not righteous over-much'; and, indeed, he handled it in a very fine way: he showed us that the Bible doth not require too much goodness of us .... That to go to church, and to pray, and to sing psalms, and to honour the clergy, and to repent, is true religion; and 'tis not doing good to one another, for that is one of the greatest sins we can commit, when we don't do it for the sake of religion. That those people who talk of vartue and morality, are the wickedest of all persons. That 'tis not what we do, but what we believe, that must save us, and a great many other good things; I wish I could remember them all.[23]

The Parson Williams of Shamela is a rank Methodist, one of the first to be ridiculed in Fielding's works. Fielding's next production after Shamela was Joseph Andrews. In it he incorporates techniques learned from his theatrical experience and his classical training,[24] continuing in the satirical mode used in his journal articles, and amalgamating his concern with men and Christian morality which distinguish those works. In Joseph Andrews, as in Shamela, Fielding employs the device of a centrally-positioned good clergyman, who contrasts sharply with the corrupt clergy he stands to oppose.

2

In his theology Parson Adams is a moderate Latitudinarian, admiring the sermons of Isaac Barrow. In the Introduction to Barrow's sermons, John Tillotson writes of the popularity of his contemporary:

> The Author of the following sermons was so publickly known, and so highly esteemed by all Learned and Good Men, that nothing either needs or can be said more to his Advantage.[25]

In his sermons Barrow eulogizes the benevolence of God the Father and the natural tendency in man which, through the exercise of his reason, must induce him to follow the rule of truth. He writes in his sermon, "On Faith":

> Truth is the natural food of our soul, toward which it hath a greedy appetite, which it tasteth with delicious complacency, which being taken in and digested by it doth render it lusty, plump and active....[26]

It is reading the sermons of Barrow that Booth is converted at the end of Fielding's last novel Amelia, in which Dr. Harrison recommends the doctrine of primitive religion. He says:

> It would be fair to conclude that religion to be true which applies immediately to the strongest of these passions, hope and fear, choosing rather to rely on its rewards and punishments than on that native beauty of virtue which some of the ancient philosophers thought proper to recommend to their disciples.[27]

When attempting to sell his sermons to the bookseller of Parson Barnabas, Adams says that he accepts the primitive doctrine of the popular Methodist Whitefield who believes in "the poverty and low estate which was recommended to the church in its infancy". Adams becoming heated, avers that

> ...if Mr. Whitefield had carried his doctrine no farther than you mention, I should have remained, as I once was, his

> well-wisher...but when he began to call nonsence and enthusiasm to his aid, and set up the detestable doctrine of faith against good works, I was his fried no longer; for surely, that doctrine was coined in hell...[28]

The Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone and the dubious ministerial aids of faith healing and speaking with tongues Adams and his creator Fielding deplored, as they were suspicious of anything which gave a second place to charity. Of Whitefield's impassioned preaching the editor of his sermons remembered:

> How awfully, with what thunder and sound did he discharge the artillery of Heaven upon us?[29]

In his sermon on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, Whitefield preaches:

> Whoever understands and preaches the truth as it is in Jesus, must acknowledge, that salvation is God's free gift, and that we are saved, not by any or all the works of righteousness which we have done or can do: no;...We are justified by faith alone.[30]

For Whitefield the story of Abraham represented the idea that faith held a higher place in religion than good works, when obviously for Fielding, and for Latitudinarian divines the importance of the story is Abraham's willingness to give expression in action to his faith and trust in God.

Parson Adams abhors the Methodism of Whitefield for its fanaticism just as he detests the Deists for their rationalized retreat from the suffering of life requiring

charity and human warmth. The Deists were a small group, evolving from the Cambridge Platonists of the seventeenth century, who in turn believed that God could only be understood rationally and that, "To be a good Christian was to share in God's rationality".[31] The Deists, on the other hand, stressed the ordering of the universe, and while they believed that it had been created by God, they felt that God was personally removed from the daily life of mankind and was, in effect, an "absentee landlord". Deists such as Mathew Tindal (1655-1733) and the free-thinker Thomas Woolston (1670-1733) believed that the non-rational elements of Christianity should be jettisoned. In his "Discourses on the Miracles of our Saviour", in which Woolston puts forward an allegorical interpretation of the Biblical miracles, and for which he was imprisoned, he propounded a doctrine in which, as Colin Brown writes:

> Hell, Satan and the devil are really states of mind. Fifteen Gospel miracles are explained away. But the climax comes in the final Discourse where the resurrection of Jesus is depicted as a gigantic piece of fraud, perpretrated by the disciples who in fact stole the body of Jesus.[32]

The Diests wanted to make of Christianity a merely rational system of morality. Stanley Grean writes of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Deists and the positive nature of their impact upon historical theology:

> ...the Deists wanted to preserve theology while freeing it from super-naturalism;

> both denied the occurence of miracles; both called for free criticism of the Bible and questioned the absoluteness of its authority; both shared a distrust of sacramental and priestly religion; and both stressed the importance of morality in religion.[33]

Parson Adams, in his coach ride with Peter Pounce, discovers that gentleman holds some of the doctrines of Deism, although he has diluted them to suit his own avarice. Pounce believes that charity, "does not so much consist in the act as in the disposition to do it.... Believe me, the distresses of mankind are mostly imaginary, and it would be rather folly than goodness to relieve them".[34] In many ways he resembles Mr. Square, the Platonist in Tom Jones, who believes:

> ...human nature to be the perfection of all virtue, and that vice was a deviation from our nature in the same manner as deformity of body is.[35]

In practice he follows the golden mean of self-interest and, "...regard[s] all virtue as matter of theory only". (The theism of the Third Earl of Shaftesbury was not far removed from the hypocritical idealism of Pounce, although he gives some place to emotion and intuition in religious matters.)[36] In Mr. Wilson's tale, the major digression in Joseph Andrews, Wilson tells of joining a group in London who delved into the "deepest points of philosophy" and had established a 'Rule of Right', which superseded a need for a Diety, and felt no other inducement to virtue besides her intrinsic beauty.

Wilson leaves the society when he realizes the implications behind such a relative philosophy of good and evil:

> There was nothing absolutely good or evil in itself; that actions were denominated good or bad by the circumstances of the agent.[37]

It was this naively optimistic doctrine that Voltaire was to ridicule ten years later in Candide. In the philosophy of Pangloss:

> It was proved...that things cannot be other than they are, for since everything was made for a purpose, it follows that everything was made for the best purpose.[38]

The falsity of such a doctrine was immediately apparent to Fielding and he ridicules it. Parson Adams regularly meets with men who have twisted complex theories of morality to suit their own self-interest. In contrast to them, Adams applauds generous action and gives a high place to the appearance of this virtue, whether or not it springs from Christian motives.

Charity is the greatest Christian virtue for Adams, the main theme of his sermons, and the basis of his dispute with the Deists and the Methodists. When Adams discourses on the subject of charity with Parson Barnabas at the Tow-wouse Inn, the primary thematic and moral thrust of the novel has changed from a concern with chastity to a concern with "an energetic and universal" charity demonstrated by Adams' experiences on the open road. On both matters Adams teaches an "...ideal morality, untainted by circumstantial knowledge and unbending to it", and his zeal is the cause of much of

the comic unravelling of the last three books of the novel".[39] While the excesses of his religious zeal are ridiculed, the character of Adams is never completely over-burdened by Fielding with comic degradation, even when he is baptized in the world, with the contents of a chamber pot or a pig-sty. His folly is a result of his sincere and over-trusting goodness. He is utterly unprepared to meet the avarice and greed which he encounters on his journey to sell his valuable sermons in London. Cross writes:

> For food and lodging on the way he took only a few shillings, for he expected to meet with the same hospitality that he was accustomed to extend to strangers who passed through his own parish.[40]

The world outside his parish in which Adams travels is one where Joseph Andrews, robbed and stripped and left for dead in a ditch, is rescued by a passing coach, only because a travelling lawyer fears the legal repercussions of leaving him. The pity of the postilion, a good Samaritan, puzzles the more affluent travellers, but for Fielding this simple boy is obviously a better Christian, though in all ways an outsider:

> (a lad who hath been since transported for robbing a hen-roost) had voluntarily stript off a greatcoat, his only garment, at the same time swearing a great oath (for which he was rebuked by the passengers), "That he would rather ride in his shirt all his life than suffer a fellow-creature to lie in so miserable a condition.[41]

As Adams is tricked and deceived along his journey he comes to learn, as Fielding writes in "An Essay on the Knowledge of the Characters of Men", that "the actions of Men are the surest Evidence of their Character...".[42] Adams never achieves his journey's goal in London, but in Mr. Wilson's tale of his young life of debauchery, wickedness and gloom in that city, Adams gains a knowledge of it at a safe distance. It instinctively makes him groan, "Good Lord! what wicked times these are!"

Adams cannot see the deceit behind the masks of his fellow-men and he is as often mistaken by them. Shortly after Parson Adams has been identified by a country justice as a common rapist, he is mistaken by the hypocrite Parson Trulliber and his down-trodden wife as an excellent judge of swine's flesh, come to examine his sty. Adams enters the homestead of Trulliber with a naive and trusting assurance, expecting hospitality and a good, honest theological discussion with his new companion. In the revised edition of the novel, Trulliber's hypocrisy, was made "explicit", which reinforced the picture of Adams' charity.[43] When Trulliber discovers the real purpose of Adams' visit, Fielding's diction rises to the modern equivalent of epic similies to describe his horror and amazement. In Trulliber's view, charity resides in the heart, and must not escape from there; Adams in his estimation fits the definition of a "Fool", given by Fielding in The Covent Garden Journal:

> A complex Idea, compounded of Poverty, Honesty, Piety and Simplicity.[44]

Trulliber defends his tight purse by his belief in justification by faith alone. He rages, "I know what charity is, better than to give to vagabonds", making himself an example of the exclamation of Mrs. Tow-wouse, to whom Adams' bill is owing: "Common charity, a f__t!" Adams has tested Trulliber's charity and found it to be with him a word without meaning. The humorous aspects of this theatrically-shaped and balanced scene become serious and potentially tragic as Truilliber threatens to fight with Adams if he will not leave his door. Trulliber is a selfish man who commands the fear and respect of his wife and his parishioners; after Adams leaves we can only presume that he continues undisturbed to rule the domain of his parish in the same manner. Adams has unmasked a Pharisee and says bitterly that, "he was sorry to see such men in orders".

Douglas Brooks suggests in his essay "Abraham Adams And Parson Trulliber: The Meaning of Joseph Andrews, Book 11, Chapter 14", a classical, allegorical interpretation of the Trulliber scene. In the Odyssey, chapter XIV Odysseus visits the swineherd Eumaeus, who responds to Odysseus' request of charity with offerings of wine and food and who gives him a coat, whereas the brutish Trulliber gives Adams his worst ale and threatens to strip him:

> As a clergyman Adams is in a very special sense sent by God, and all this is, of course, central to the charitable ethic of Joseph Andrews: Fielding is measuring Trulliber's lack of charity and hospitality by the standard of what had become almost the archtype of the charitable Man.[45]

The scene is one of triumph for Adams. Eventually, Adams is given the money to pay his reckoning by a man of "low life", a poor pedlar. Like Prometheus of the Aeschylus he loved so much, Adams has a fundamental belief in mankind. He is baptized in the grime and the fire of the world, just as he tosses his beloved author to burn in the chimney grate.[46] When he leaves the house of Mr. Wilson later on, hearing of the man's immoral early life now reformed into an idyll of domestic peace, he says, with possibly a sense of wonder and sadness, "...this was the manner in which the people had lived in the Golden Age".[47]

In writing Joseph Andrews, Henry Fielding had set out to produce a "comic-epic-poem-in-prose", to match the lost comic epic written by Homer, which supposedly bore the same relation to comedy which the Iliad bore to tragedy. In the Preface to his sister Sarah Fielding's David Simple, Fielding writes that the action of his Joseph Andrews is like that of the Odyssey:

> ...where the Fable consists of a Series of separate Adventures detached from, and independent of each other, yet all tending to one great End...[48]

Ian Watt, in his book The Rise of the Novel, declares that, "Fielding's argument here [in the Preface of Joseph Andrews] for 'referring' his novel to the epic genre is unimpressive", because, "...Fielding's attempts to bring his novel into line with classical doctrine could not be supported either by existing literary parallel or theoretical precedent". Nevertheless, he admits that the action of Tom Jones, "...has epic quality at least in the sense that it presents a sweeping panorama of a whole society".[49] Watt's argument is based on a fixed idea that the novel form arose from evolving social elements in the eighteenth century and had no connection with the classical tradition and was, in performance, focused primarily on the interior life of the individual narrated in a "realist" manner. In making generalizations about the novel form, Watt must either deny or ignore certain aspects of Fielding's work as irrelevant to his conception of the novel. In his evaluation of Joseph Andrews and the epic, Watt seems to overlook the possibly facetious aspect of Fielding's claim to base his book on the model of a lost work, and also the concept of Parson Adams as a modern Christian hero.

Adams is the Don Quixote of Cervantes, wearing a parson's cassock torn crossing a stile. As John Butt writes:

> His book-reading did not, like his illustrious prototype's, lead him to mistake windmills for giants or inns for castles; it lead him instead to expect on every hand an honest, undesigning, Christian behaviour....

> He is therefore constantly the victim of deceit. But he never loses our affection, partly because his expectations are noble....[50]

When Beau Didapper draws his hanger against Joseph for rewarding his rudeness to Fanny with a sound box on the ear, Adams behaves like Cervantes' hero:

> ...Adams observing, snatched up the lid of a pot in his left hand, and, covering himself with it as with a shield, without any weapon of offence in his other hand, stept in before Joseph, and exposed himself to the enraged beau, who threatened such perdition and destruction....[51]

With his easily-fooled benevolence and his mistaking the world of the road for the world of his Greek authors, we must appreciate the "romantic turn" of a character, too naive for this earth.[52] As his name suggests, he is at once the patriarch and the tutor of Joseph, and also the first unfallen Adam, blind to the evil about him. Nevertheless, he is also the good Christian knight and is always prepared to support his opinions with his fist, which curves like an ox's knuckle, instinctively snapping his fingers when his passions are aroused and raging when he confronts an unmasked villain. Martin C. Battestin has thoroughly investigated and has explained at length the sources of this type of strong Christian hero who is "the good man...heroic for virtue's sake".[53] Adams is at once almost the personification of the ideal Christian parson, embracing all strangers as members of his extended flock, and a comic individual of Quixotic proportions.

He is the wise man and the clown together in one person. Battestin explains that, "With the exception of the supreme achievement of Parson Adams, who is too much himself to stand for anyone else, all the characters in Joseph Andrews...", represent humorous 'types', and are described in the novel by the narrator from the distance which comedy requires. George Eliot writes of Fielding, the intrusive, omniscient narrator:

> he seems to bring his armchair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English.[54]

We know Adams through the distance which comedy requires, for while Adams is the good Christian hero in the novel, serving as an example of goodness and testing the honesty and the charity of those he meets, he is also a figure of fun.

But Adams is never burlesqued and rendered totally flat and lifeless to the extent to which Sophia is, for example, in Tom Jones, even in the comic scenes of his mock-heroic battles. These episodes, as when Adams is set upon by the dogs of the roasting squire, lead Ian Watt to observe that they

> are narrated in such a way as to deflect our attention from the events themselves to the way that Fielding is handling them and to epic parallels involved.[55]

The predicaments which Adams is gulled into, even when the ensuing action is almost a burlesque, are never really at odds with the nature of Adams' basic character. The credulity of Parson Adams is not damaged despite the variance in

Fielding's presentation of character generally, between the mock-heroic, the slap-stick, and the exact imitation of nature for a moral purpose. At the end of the novel, Adams is reinstated in his parish, with, we presume, a wider knowledge of men and the world. So the novel closes, in the comic pattern, with the individual conforming to the rules of his society. In Henry Fielding: Mask and Feast, Andrew Wright explains:

> Freedom belongs to the realm of tragedy. The tragic hero can choose, and being human he makes the choice that brings the world crashing down about him... Comedy's focus is upon a character who abandons rather than nourishes his eccentricities, who discovers in the last chapter or the last act that self-love and social are the same.[56]

Adams is a character of epic proportions--a trusting Christian who makes a pilgrimage in a world which he discovers is rife with wickedness and treachery. His discovery is presented comically as Adams' character has mixed elements of gravity and humour.

Adams, Fielding writes, is "Designed a character of perfect simplicity", one whose, "understanding of the world is very neatly prelapsarian".[57] He is first introduced as a man of great learning:

> Mr Abraham Adams was an excellent scholar. He was a perfect master of the Greek and Latin languages; to which he added a great share of knowledge in the Oriental tongues, and could read and translate French, Italian, and Spanish. He had applied many years to the most severe study, and had treasured up a fund of learning rarely to be met with in a university. He was besides a man of good

> sense, good parts, and good nature; but was at the same time as entirely ignorant of the ways of this world as an infant just entered into it could possibly be. As he had never any intention to deceive so he never suspected such a design in others. He was generous, friendly, and brave to an excess; but simplicity was his characteristic....[58]

He is characterized by the nearly "pentecostal fire" of his zeal and his athletic constitution, his love of food and drink and tobacco, and his absent-mindedness. His strong body often protects him from the results of the excesses of his zeal. Using one of the devices Fielding must have learned in the theatre, Adams is always contrasted in a scene with a character of a disposition virtually the reverse of his own. "All his Effects, his Spirits, and his Powers," in the words of Ben Jonson, are for Adams recruited in defending his faith.[59] It was Fielding's belief that the imprint of a man's basic nature, his humour, was stamped at birth and could not be hidden, for, "if we let nature out of the door she will come in at the window".[60] Fielding writes in, "An Essay On The Knowledge Of the Characters Of Men":

> This original Difference will, I think, alone account for that very early and strong Inclination to Good or Evil, which distinguishes different Dispositions in Children, in their first Infancy... and almost obliges us, I think, to acknowledge some unacquired, original Distincition, in the Nature or Soul of one Man, from that of another.[61]

He goes on to say that men who cloak their ill natures and appear smiling, (but are still villains) prey on the men of 'open

Disposition' and 'upright Heart', whose all-trusting nature, "chiefly renders [them] liable to be imposed on by Craft and Deceit, and principally disqualifies them for this Discovery".[62] Joseph Andrews learns in the scene of the grand promiser in Book II, Chapter XVI, to distinguish, with a shrewd prudence, the emptiness of that man's charity. Parson Adams, "whose heart was naturally disposed to love and affection", in his "honest simplicity", continues gullible and the rogue must be pointed out by Joseph, who is beginning to act on his growing knowledge of men's deceit. Fielding writes optimistically in "An Essay On The Knowledge Of The Characters Of Men", that the Masquerader, "...very rarely escapes the Discovery of an accurate Observer".[63] Adams gets into trouble when led by his trusting nature and by the dogmatism of beliefs derived from his reading in the Ancients, for, as Fielding writes in "An Essay on Wit and Humour":

> Excess, says Horace, even in the Persuit of Virtue, will lead a wise and good Man into Folly and Vice-So will it subject him to Ridicule; for into this, says the judicious Abbé Bellegarde, a Man may tumble headlong with an excellent Understanding, and with the most laudable Qualities. Piety, Patriotism, Loyality, Parental Affection, &c. have all afforded Characters of Humour for the Stage.[64]

In writing Joseph Andrews Fielding hoped to instruct his readers while entertaining them, and "laugh mankind out of their favorite follies and vices", and his work has a serious moral purpose. As Henry James observed:

> The story is like a vast episode in a sermon preached by a grandly humorous divine; and however we may be entertained by the way, we must not forget that our ultimate duty is to be instructed.[65]

Parson Adams, as the supremely good man, "the epitome of human faith expressed in works", serves to heighten the vices of those around him, even among the clergy, but even Adams demonstrates the faults which are the fruit of over-righteous zeal.[66] He blindly clings to his theory that all the possible types of character were revealed in the Iliad and the Odyssey, and retains a contempt for the knowledge derived from experience in the world. For example, he is even willing to believe Mrs. Slipslop to be a ghost or a demon when he wrestles with her in Book IV. When Fanny is abducted by the thugs of the roasting squire, Adams vainly lectures Joseph, his partner in bondage, on the arrogant sinfulness of earthly attachments and advises him to rejoice at this new trial and take consolation in religion. "No accident happens to us without the Divine permission":

> 'O sir!' cried Joseph, 'all this is very true, and very fine, and I could hear you all day, if I was not so grieved at heart as now I am.' 'Would you take physic,' says Adams, 'when you are well, and refuse it when you are sick? Is not comfort to be administered to the afflicted, and not to those who rejoice, or those who are at ease?' ——'O! you have not spoken one word of comfort to me yet!' returned Joseph.[67]

Adams' religious learning and self-righteousness, in this instance almost renders him unfeeling and divorces him from

the sufferings of his fellow-men, a quality which Robert Alter enlarges and, I think, distorts in his description of Adams as "an inflexible egotist".[68] The famous scene in which Adams advises Joseph not to lust after Fanny, using the story of Abraham and Isaac, as an example, and then collapses in a torrent of grief when he learns his son is drowned, shows the absurdity of Adams' position in a dramatically exaggerated manner. Recovered from his extravagant joy after his son is declared safe, Adams proceeds to advise Joseph on the need to detach oneself from worldy passions:

> The patience of Joseph, nor perhaps of Job, could bear no longer; he interrupted the parson, saying, 'It was easier to give advice than to take it; nor did he perceive he could so entirely conquer himself, when he apprehended he had lost his son, as when he found him recovered.' —'Boy,' replied Adams, raising his voice, 'it doth not become green heads to advise grey hairs.'[69]

There is a similar and even more exaggerated scene in Voltaire's Candide, in which Candide, caught in the Lisbon earthquake, is rescued by the philosopher Pangloss, who ignores his friend's suffering and proceeds to demonstrate that the earth followed from a logical cause and that his hypothesis is certainly proved:

> 'Nothing is more likely' said Candide, 'but oil and wine, for pity's sake!' 'Likely!' exclaimed the philosopher. 'I maintain it's proved!' Candide lost consciousness....[70]

Voltaire, perhaps consciously echoing Joseph Andrews, realized the limits of human understanding and the breach which exists between knowledge and actual day-to-day experiences of circumstance and suffering in this world. J. Paul Hunter explains that this strain in Fielding is a reaction against the doctrine of Christian Perfection, popular in the 1720s, which was espoused alike by Methodists and Anglican churchmen. It was a theory derived from Thomas à Kempis' The Imitation of Christ, a book which Joseph reads in London. As Hunter explains, the excesses of such a belief were legion, and the "...net result of absolute demands was more likely to be self-righteousness".[71] Fielding's moral and satiric method in Joseph Andrews is, as Hunter points out, "...a negative one-taking away comfortable alternatives rather than offering any really plausible ones...".[72] Adams cannot thrive outside the boundaries of his parish and at the novel's end is rewarded for his care of Joseph with a living of one hundred and thirty pounds a year. He is destined to become the shepherd of a new generation.

Joseph Andrews ends with a return to the parish and a life of rural retirement for its principal characters back where the novel began. Adams is welcomed home by his loving parishioners, who have been guided by his example and prosper; the travellers he meets on the road, on the other hand, whom he immediately treats as further members of his flock and who attempt to beguile him are unrepentant. Here the social

utility of religion is manifestly apparent and we are left perhaps to presume that Adams has derived some understanding of the world from his "pilgrimage through strange lands to his true home", having undergone the suffering which his beloved Aeschylus believed was necessary before wisdom could be attained. When we meet Mrs. Adams and her children, Adams' "wife and six", contrasting with the coach and six of Lady Booby, we are given the last revealing glimpse into his character.[73] He loves his son and his wife more even than he realizes and is protected by his wife from the comic self-righteousness of his profession to Joseph of the virtues of moderation in marital love. This scene comes, of course, before the ambiguity of his comic misadventures at Lady Booby's house; the sexually ambiguous aspects of the parson's professions of innocence are singularly amusing. Mrs. Adams has the last word:

> 'Indeed,' says Mrs. Adams, who had listened to the latter part of their conversation, 'you talk more foolishly yourself. I hope, my dear, you will never preach any such doctrine as that husbands can love their wives too well. If I knew you had such a sermon in the house I would burn it.... Marry come up! Fine doctrine indeed! A wife hath a right to insist in her husband's loving her as much as ever he can; and he is a sinful villain who doth not. Doth he not promise to love her, and to comfort her, and to cherish her, and all that? I am sure I remember it all as well as if I had repeated it over but yesterday, and shall never forget it. Besides, I am certain you do not preach as you practise....[74]

The novel ends with an exposition of Christian marriage and rural retirement. Adams the Christian hero, believer in charity and the laws of the ancients, is rewarded in this world after his pilgrimage along the road peopled with vanity and deceit. We laugh heartily at Adams but his personal courage and athletic defence of his beliefs and his loveable foibles ever keep him above contempt. It was the quaint and lovable and warm-blooded qualities of Parson Adams which, when the book was published, insured its popular success, even though some critics found it full of "dull burlesque" and "dull morality".[75]

CHAPTER III

DR PRIMROSE IN THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

> We read it in youth and age, and return to it again and again, and bless the memory of an author who contrives so well to reconcile us to human nature,

writes Sir Walter Scott in one of many eulogies to The Vicar of Wakefield written during the two hundred years of its popularity.[1] Although in the Advertisement to the book Goldsmith proclaims, "There are an hundred faults in this Thing", the inconsistencies and "absurdities" of the work have contributed to its success, as critics have admired its quality of warm humanity. The great merit of the novel is largely a product of Goldsmith's deceptively simple technique of "point of view", which allows him to speak through the vicar's mouth, or stand at a distance behind his shoulder. As the vicar describes his world and his life after the events of the story have taken place, we are allowed to almost feel his own self-consciousness and human graciousness in an intimately personal manner. Through reading the novel and coming to know the outer and inner life of the vicar so closely, we, as Henry James has noted, begin to know, "...something of the very soul of Goldsmith".[2] We almost, in a sense, can feel the vicar recognizing, in his awareness of his own wisdom and

his folly, something of the characteristics of all men. In part, this powerful aspect of the novel is a result of the autobiographical element in the work, for as in Goldsmith's other productions, he amalgamates his own experiences and observations of the world into his writing. As many periods of Goldsmith's life are undocumented, critics have, sometimes too liberally, drawn the missing information from his creative writing.

The scholars who have studied Oliver Goldsmith's work have always felt a need to reconcile Goldsmith's very odd and uneven life and character with the genial wisdom of his smoothly-flowing writing. In his authoritative biography of Goldsmith, Ralph M. Wardle sees the necessity of constructing an apology for his subject, attempting to justify and normalize Goldsmith's character and actions. After noting Goldsmith's unacknowledged incorporation of an article from the fifth volume of the Encyclopédie into his Citizen of the World, Wardle asks, "And again, what can be said in his defence?"[3] The tendency of scholars to fill in undocumented periods of Goldsmith's life with pages from Goldsmith's fiction, leads Oscar Sherwin to creatively combine the two in such a manner that they are undistinguishable. William Freeman recognizes this problem:

> Biographers, a trifle hesitant and apologetic, have fallen back upon "The Present State of Polite Learning", "The Citizen of the World", "The Traveller" and various contributions

> to "The Bee", for clues concerning those unrecorded gaps in the Goldsmithian odyssey, though in all of them there remains the insoluble problem of deciding how much is solid and dependable auto-biography, and how much fantastic elaboration.[4]

Nevertheless, the argument does work the other way, and just as Goldsmith incorporated parts of his own experience, and sometimes stole ideas from other writers to make up the massive amount of hack work he produced over fourteen years to support himself, so he refined this practise with an artist's sensibility in his more creative writing.

Prior, one of Goldsmith's first major biographers, writes that,

> ...inattention to worldly matters, a certain eccentricity of character, and inability to get forward in life, seem to have characterized the Goldsmith race.[5]

Goldsmith's grandfather and his great-grandfather held livings in the Church of Ireland, as did his father the Reverend Charles Goldsmith. It is widely agreed among scholars that the portrait of the man in black's father in The Citizen of the World derived its original from Goldsmith's father. Goldsmith writes in the latter work:

> My father, the younger son of a good family, was possessed of a small living in the church. His education was above his fortune, and his generosity greater than his education. Poor as he was, he had his flatterers still poorer than himself; for every dinner he gave them, they returned him an equivalent in praise; amd this was all he wanted...thus his pleasure encreased, in proportion to the pleasure he gave;

> he loved all the world, and he fancied all the world loved him.
>
> As his fortune was but small, he lived up to the very extent of it; he held no intentions of leaving his children money, for that was dross; he was resolved they should have learning; for learning he used to observe, was better than silver or gold. For this purpose he undertook to instruct us himself; and took as much pains to form our morals, as to improve our understanding. We were told that universal benevolence was what first cemented society; we were taught to consider all the wants of mankind as our own....[6]

Goldsmith was a sensitive boy and perhaps the "lack of balance" in his later character was a result of his early sense of inferiority; he was physically unattractive yet with a fine conscience, nursed by his father. Goldsmith received an education in the classics at elementary school and at Trinity College, Dublin, but he was a tardy student, and unsuccessful in his choice of teachers. Goldsmith was an intemperate youth, being involved in riots at University and recklessly squandering his little money, becoming seduced by the gambling which was to prove such a disaster in his later years. It is interesting that at this time Goldsmith, uncertain of a career, was persuaded through family pressure to enter holy orders. He presented himself to Bishop Synge of Elphin for examination and was rejected. On the occasion of the examination he is said to have appeared in scarlet breeches, which detail has led M. Machennan to produce a book based on the hypothesis that Goldsmith was colour blind. This study,

dubiously verified by an addition of all colour references in all of Goldsmith's writings, develops in part as yet another attempt to explain the baffling disparity between Goldsmith's life and works. As Machennan writes with great solemnity:

> That it appears to have afflicted one of the most talented writers of the third quarter of the eighteenth century was a personal tragedy and a misfortune for English letters.[7]

Goldsmith was an unsettled youth, and with family money he went to study medicine at Edinburgh University and then at Leyden in Holland, skipping away for two or three years to survey the continent on foot. Like the tale of the prodigal George in The Vicar of Wakefield, who, amid his wanderings, at one point went "to teach the Dutch English in Holland", Goldsmith must have led a very precarious and exciting existence in these years. On returning to England, Goldsmith set himself up as an apprentice in the trade of hack-writing, after his failure as a doctor and after abandoning such schemes as, "going to decipher the inscriptions on the written mountains", in Arabia, not bothered by the fact that he knew no Arabic.[8] Recognition soon came to Goldsmith as a writer and he enjoyed his first contact with the "literary lions" of London, among Samuel Johnson and his circle. James Boswell recorded after his first meeting an opinion of Goldsmith which was to be shared by many in London:

"Mr. Goldsmith, a curious, odd, pedantic fellow with some genius".[9] It was much later, after Goldsmith had laboured to produce long works on an unlimited range of subjects, that The Vicar of Wakefield was written and published. The famous story of its discovery by Samuel Johnson is probably exaggerated, but serves to show the reputation Goldsmith lived under in his own life:

> Johnson himself told the story afterwards. 'I received one morning a message from poor Goldsmith that he was in great distress, and as it was not in his power to come to me, begging that I would come to him as soon as possible. I sent him a guinea, and promised to come to him directly, I accordingly went as soon as I was dressed, and found that his landlady had arrested him for his rent, at which he was in a violent passion. I perceived that he had already changed my guinea, and had got a bottle of Madeira and a glass before him. I put the cork in the bottle, and desired that he would be calm, and began to talk to him of the means by which he might be extricated?' Upon which Goldsmith, calming down, produced the draft of The Vicar of Wakefield, and Johnson, telling the lady that he would soon return, went out with the manuscript and raised sixty pounds on it.[10]

Samuel Johnson thought the book rather simple and marred by many faults, and it was only after Goldsmith's lifetime that the book received the tremendous acclaim by which it is known today. The book met with great success among the romantic writers and particularly among the Victorians, who admired the pastoral aspect of the novel and the morally stalwart vicar presented as its hero; "the friend and teacher of virtue". In the early nineteenth

century Edward Margin lauded the truly "English" character of the vicar's Christianity:

> ...it abounds in strokes of humour and tenderness; and fixes the attention by a most affecting picture of a happy 'home', enjoyed by persons in the middle rank of life, citizens of a free country, and possessing competent means and innocent minds. The group of characters, their circumstances, and local situation, are truly 'English', and could only belong to the enviable land within whose confines the scene is laid.[11]

In 1830, the great German thinker Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, writing to Zelter, praised the novel as an instructor of moral virtues:

> It is not to be described, the effect which Goldsmith's 'Vicar' had upon me just at the critical moment of mental development. That lofty and benevolent irony, that fair and indulgent view of all infirmities and faults, that meekness under all calamities, that equanimity under all changes and chances, and the whole train of kindred virtues, whatever name they bear, proved my best education.[12]

The novel was regarded as a Christian idyll of rural peace and domestic happiness. Such an enthusiasm almost mounted to an attitude that to be appreciated in all its perfect simplicity, the novel would not stand analysis in any depth. This is the view taken by J.M. Dent, writing in the twentieth century:

> If one were to attempt to analyse its power over us, one would be inclined to use an almost unforgivable paradox and say-that it lay in the 'art of perfect artlessness', the power so to break down the dam of self-consciousness that the stream of pure feeling

> and fine humanity might flow freely from the heart into the course prepared for it of perfect style.[13]

The Vicar of Wakefield has presented a special problem to modern scholars, because it has been so long regarded as an unquestioned classic of English literature, without any thorough critical investigation into its merits. Partly as a result of this and partly because of the modern popularity of historical and psychological criticism, there has been an increasingly more sceptical reaction against regarding the novel as simply a flawless idyll of rural peace. Often this counter-reaction has, in its attempt to restore a reasonable balance to our perception of the novel, over-burdened the matter and humourlessly ignored the buoyant spirit of the work and its overall unity. Twentieth-century critics have tended to emphasize the irony and satire in the novel's characterization. For example, William Freeman writes that,

> ...one aspect of the story... I have always felt is insufficiently realized or accepted. It is the fact that much, if not most of the time, Goldsmith is writing with his tongue in his cheek. Plot and conversations (but not the descriptive passages) are suffused with private irony which he must have feared his readers might realize-and equally feared they would miss.[14]

Robert H. Hopkins argues in his book The True Genius of Oliver Goldsmith that a complete revaluation of Goldsmith is necessary and that his satire, which Hopkins feels is really harsh and biting like that of Swift, has been misunderstood.

In an admirable attempt to justify the faults of the novel, he explains that disconnected incidents which have been regarded as flaws are all intentional, given the premise that Goldsmith fully meant to present Primrose as a flawed narrator, who disguises and distorts his own background and certain particulars of his life, in order to appear more favourably in the eyes of his readers. For Mr. Hopkins' hypothesis to be successful--and he regards The Vicar of Wakefield as a masterpiece--he is forced to view the novel as an intentional and sustained satire of the sentimental romance, and to utterly devalue the Vicar, accusing him of looking, "...upon his children as annuities and upon benevolence as a good business investment".[15] Such an approach overstrains the satiric elements in the novel and destroys what it would attempt to defend. This critical reaction comes to its most exaggerated and heavy-handed expression in the criticism of A. Lytton Sells, who attempts to prove that the novel is implausible throughout and is intentionally absurd. He feels that the events in the novel, such as the snowfall on the vicar's way to prison, and his tranquil sleep there, are preposterous and meant as a type of ribald humour by Goldsmith:

> The facts appear to be, first that The Vicar of Wakefield was not intended to be a novel, but a parody; and-what lies much deeper-that it was a 'riposte' to Tristram Shandy.[16]

He goes on to say that, at the expense of his audience,

"Goldsmith is thus amusing himself from beginning to end". Obviously, such an assessment represents a gross reduction and misunderstanding of the subtleties of the novel, and an unreceptive blindness to its merits, in order to score a critical point. Sells appears to base his argument on his feeling that Goldsmith must have felt a hatred for a public which ignored his greatness, and a violent resentment for the success of Tristram Shandy, which it is reported that he disliked--the satire of The Vicar of Wakefield was his revenge. It is quite apparent that Sells, like so many of Goldsmith's critics, falls into the "intentionalist fallacy", of trying to judge a work of art solely by our ideas of the impetus which generated its production.

At once in Goldsmith's writing there is a very definite sentimental and nostalgic element, and also a ridiculing of the sentimental tradition so popular in the eighteenth century, a combination he so successfully achieved in She Stoops to Conquer. In The Vicar of Wakefield Goldsmith celebrates the honesty and simplicity of the rural happiness he knew as a youth in Ireland, doubtlessly intensified in his perception by years of wearying hardship and lonely wandering. The vicar, like Goldsmith, praises this life as Thomas Gray did in his "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard":

> Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
> Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray;
> Along the cool sequester'd vale of life
> They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.[17]

Goldsmith was known most widely in his own lifetime as a poet and his praise of rural retirement had its full expression in his poetry. He disliked the insincerity of poetry when it was divorced from personal feeling, or was too elevated for understanding by everyone. Goldsmith has Mr. Burchell disclaim on modern poetry in The Vicar of Wakefield, as the writer did so often in his essays:

> English poetry, like that in the latter empire of Rome, is nothing at present but a combination of luxuriant images, without plot or connection; a string of epithets that improve the sound, without carrying on the sense.[18]

The Vicar of Wakefield is a rememberance of past happiness and a memoir of Goldsmith's father. In the Dedication to his poem The Traveller, famous in the eighteenth century, Goldsmith writes to his brother of his "blest retirement":

> I now perceive, my dear brother, the wisdom of your humble choice. You have entered upon a sacred office, where the harvest is great, and the labourers are but few; while you have left the field of Ambition, where the labourers are many, and the harvest not worth carrying away.[19]

In his poem The Deserted Village, Goldsmith even more poignantly laments the parting of personal joys and the heritage of a country. The parson in this poem is, like Primrose, a disciple of charity:

> His house was known to all the vagrant train;
> He chid their wanderings, but relieved their pain;
>
> Careless their merits or their faults to scan
> His pity gave ere charity began.[20]

Perhaps it in part accounts for the ambiguity of the novel's sentiment and its gentle ridicule of the sentimental that it is both an English novel, very carefully set in Yorkshire, and the fruit of an Irish boyhood, composed in the tranquility of reflection.

The ideals of the vicar Primrose in The Vicar of Wakefield often are, very obviously, the same as those of Goldsmith expressed in forceful terms in his other works. It is one of the novel's faults that occasionally, very different characters express exactly the same views on similar subjects. For example, George, returning from Europe, echoes the vicar's praise of monarchy:

> I found that monarchy was the best government for the poor to live in, and commonwealths for the rich. I found that riches in general were in every country another name for freedom; and that no man is so fond of liberty himself as not to be desirous of subjecting the will of some individuals in society to his own.[21]

Primrose's views on monarchy seem to be derived largely from the writings of Thomas Hobbes, who believed that men can only live together in peace if they subject themselves to the rule of an absolute sovereign. Hobbes felt that man's nature was basically evil and that the individual choice to surrender his freedom to the monarch came only after his

realization that without the ensuing stability of such a social contract, man's life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". Primrose shares something of the same scepticism when he gives his reasons for preferring absolute monarchy. For the preservation of the middle order of society, those "between the very rich and the very rabble", he says that, "I am then for, and would die for, monarchy, sacred monarchy":

> In this middle order of mankind are generally to be found all the arts, wisdom, and virtues of society. This order alone is known to be the true preserver of freedom, and may be called the People.[22]

The vicar's views on matrimony strengthen our view of him as a parson in his very nature and serve to make him slightly ridiculous in that he has chosen a rather foolish wife. That his favourite principle is based on the writings of the out-spoken eccentric William Whiston (1667-1752), who was considered a heretic in his day, was probably intended by Goldsmith to serve to undervalue our opinion of the vicar's lofty idealism. Primrose, "the strict monogamist", installs an epitaph for his wife on the chimney-piece of their home, in which he "extolled her prudence, economy, and obedience till death".

> It admonished my wife of her duty to me, and my fidelity to her; it inspired her with a passion for fame, and constantly put her in mind of her end.[23]

The meaning of this passage is ambiguous and while it shows Primrose's deep-rooted belief in the importance of marital

fidelity it also demonstrates his zeal, taken to near-absurdity; a quality which Goldsmith loved and often alluded to in the novel. Primrose's ideals support the structure of society and he seems to favour rural retirement because he is dismayed by the life of men of wealth and position in the town. The novel is full of scenes of rustic amusement and references to the honesty of hard country work:

> Remote from the polite, they still retained the primaeval simplicity of manners, and frugal by habit, they scarce knew that temperance was a virtue. They wrought with cheerfulness on days of labour; but observed festivals as intervals of idleness and pleasure. They kept up the Christmas carol, sent true love-knots on Valentine morning, ate pancakes on Shrovetide, shewed their wit on the first of April, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas eve.[24]

The vicar and his family join in the antics of the parish, visiting "these harmless people", for health and retreat. Primrose distrusts vanity and affectation and is suspicious when the Squire, champion of "love, liberty, and pleasure", comes to court his daughter: "I did not approve of such disproportioned acquaintances", for "aspiring beggary is wretchedness itself". He would rather resolve himself and his family to the contentments of a simple life spent without ambition or its companion worry:

> ...we loved each other tenderly, and our fondness encreased as we grew old. There was in fact nothing that could make us angry with the world or each other. We had an elegant house, situated in a fine country, and a good neighbourhood. The year

> was spent in moral or rural amusements; in visiting our rich neighbours, and relieving such as were poor. We had no revolutions to fear, nor fatigues to undergo; all our adventures were by the fireside, and all our migrations from the blue bed to the brown.[25]

The portrait of the vicar is a sentimental one and he holds many of the ideals in which Goldsmith believed, but Primrose is also the hero of the novel and uniquely combines many of the characteristics of the Christian hero. In the Advertisement for the novel Goldsmith outlines his conception:

> The hero of this piece unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth; he is a priest, an husband-man, and the father of a family. He is drawn as ready to teach, and ready to obey, as simple in affluence, and majestic in adversity.[26]

At the base of Primrose's religious faith lies a modified Christian stoicism. He is prepared to accept the hardships of life because he realizes the unfixed nature of security on this earth. Each day is regulated in his household to provide stability, and a balance of toil and ease, and always there is a remembrance that all such pleasures are fleeting:

> The little republic to which I gave laws, was regulated in the following manner: by sunrise we all assembled in our common apartment; the fire being previously kindled by the servant. After we had saluted each other with proper ceremony, for I always thought fit to keep up some mechanical forms of good breeding, without which freedom ever destroys friendship, we all bent in gratitude to that Being who gave us another day.[27]

Primrose's charity expresses itself in the hospitality he offers to his poor parishioners and to all who need assistance. All men are equal in his sight and he overrules his wife's feeling that it is beneath the dignity of his cloth, and "might probably disgrace my calling", to minister to the prisoners in the jail. He regards them as "this mischievous group of little beings", a phrase which could almost describe naughty children:

> Their insensibility excited my highest compassion, and blotted my own uneasiness from my mind.

He declares to his wife:

> These people, however fallen, are still men, and that is a very good title to my affections. Good counsel rejected returns to enrich the giver's bosom; and though the instruction I communicate may not mend them, yet it will assuredly mend myself.[28]

He preaches to them of the superiority of religion in relation to philosophy, whose consolation only gives comfort from a bitter steeling of the self against a randomly ordered universe. He embraces truth as the refuge of the good man, realizing that a man's conscience is his real dwelling place in this world. As he preaches:

> If we are to be taken from this abode, only let us hold to the right, and wherever we are thrown, we can still retire to a charming apartment, where we can look round our own hearts with intrepidity and with pleasure![29]

After his release form the prison, forty pounds is distributed among the prisoners, and outside the wedding feast, the poorer parishioners are fed. As his world rapidly crumbles about him, we are given instances of the depths of his understanding. Yet he has a slowly accelerating disdain for the world, which we know so well he loves and treasures. The discrepancy is the basis for Goldsmith's satire. The virtue that never leaves him is his Christ-like love for his children, whom he runs into the fire to rescue. When his wife disowns Olivia he corrects her, and gently spares and forgives the girl:

> Yes, the wretched creature shall be welcome to this heart and this house, tho' stained with ten thousand vices.[30]

His fatherly love of his children and his parishioners is coupled with an almost Old Testament realization of the nearly equal mixture of good and evil in this life, for he says, in one of his maxims:

> Man little knows what calamities are beyond his patience to bear, till he tries them....[31]

Like Parson Adams in Joseph Andrews, Primrose's zealousness in defending his faith sometimes plunges him into absurdity and,also like Adams, there is a mixture of great wisdom and pedantic folly in his character. John Forster writes:

> In the parson's saddle-bag of sermons would hardly have been found this prison-sermon of the vicar; and there was in Mr. Adams not only a capacity for beef and pudding, but for beating and being beaten, which would ill have

> consisted with the simple dignity of Doctor Primrose. But unquestionable learning, unsuspecting simplicity, amusing traits of credulity and pedantry, and a most Christian purity and benevolence of heart are common to both.[32]

Primrose's belief in his "favourite principle", matrimony, is contrasted with his choice of a ridiculous wife. Although he would presume to be the head of his household she counters him in matters of the girls' marriage prospects, a detail which should be highly important to him. He realizes that in England, wives "manage their husbands". At times he is inconsistent in his views and disdains the admirable Burchell as a mate for Sophia because the man is poor:

> Your mother and I have now better prospects for you. The next winter, which you will probably spend in town, will give you opportunities of making a more prudent choice.[33]

He rails against gambling yet goes on to confess that,

> ...as I hated all manner of gaming, except backgammon, at which my old friend and I sometimes took a two-penny hit. Nor can I pass over an ominous circumstance that happened the last time we played together: I only wanted to fling a quatre, and yet I threw deuce ace five times running.[34]

He seems to accept the vanity and gullibility of his daughters, and particularly that of Olivia, the "coquette", for it proceeds from his own failure to educate them properly:

> Mr. Thornhill, notwithstanding his real ignorance, talked with ease...It is not surprising then that such talents should win the affections of a girl, who by education was taught to value an appearance in herself, and consequently to set a value upon it in another.[35]

Primrose shuns vainglory but sometimes appears in a ludicrous light as in the family portrait, in which,

> My wife desired to be represed as Venus... I, in my gown and band, was to present her with my books on the Whitsonian controversy.[36]

At the fair he is led by his vanity into giving up forty pounds with no security to the sharker Jenkinson.

> His locks of silver grey venerably shaded his temples, and his green old age seemed to be the result of health and benevolence... He most respectfully demanded if I was any way related to the great Primrose, that couragious monogamist, who had been the bulwark of the Church. Never did my heart feel sincerer rapture than at that moment. 'Sir', cried I, 'the applause of so good a man, as I am sure you are, adds to that happiness in my breast which your benevolence has already excited. You behold before you, Sir, that Dr. Primrose, the monogamist, whom you have been pleased to call great'.[37]

The most delicate and absurd example of his folly is his hasty desire to retreat from the pain of the world at the immediate appearance of disaster. When the news of Olivia's elopement, based possibly on the true story of Goldsmith's sister Catherine, interrupts his family's peace, he despairs:

> 'Now then', cried I, 'my children, go and be miserable; for we shall never enjoy one hour more....I must look for happiness in other worlds than here.[38]

In another instance of his folly, hearing of his son's act of murder in the prison, the worldly weight of his misfortunes makes Primrose declare:

> I am now raised above this world, and all the pleasures it can produce. From this moment I break from my heart all the ties that held it down to earth....[39]

Soon after "kissing the earth" in his misfortune, Primrose is restored to health and fortune and Goldsmith must have been amused to have him say, upon seeing his son well dressed, with his declared non-attachment to the world:

> He now therefore entered, handsomely drest in his regimentals, and, without vanity, (for I am above it) he appeared as handsome a fellow as ever wore a military dress.[40]

While Primrose is so often inconsistent in his views and in the exercise of his domestic duty, and lacking in his own self-knowledge, we can never be absolutely certain that he is completely unaware of his own foibles because he is the narrator of his own folly, and for the same reason he is never completely ridiculous. This quality was noticed by an early, bewildered reviewer of the novel, who wrote in 1766:

> Through the whole course of our travels in the wild regions of romance, we never met with any thing more difficult to characterize, than the Vicar of Wakefield; a performance which contains many beauties sufficient to entitle it to almost the highest applause, and defects enough to put the discerning reader out of all patience with an author capable of so strangely underwriting himself.[41]

A. Norman Jeffares has pointed out that there are three levels of narrative point of view in The Vicar of Wakefield.[42] Firstly, there is the "solemn, dead-pan narrative style", in which the vicar explains without comment the situation of his house and grounds or the actions of his neighbours. Such descriptions are usually "laid out to invite speedy disruption", as when the family is in the garden and one of two

singing blackbirds is shot, perhaps symbolizing the coming ruin of Olivia. The second level of narrative is when the vicar speaks with Goldsmith at his elbow, as for example, when he regards the vanity of his wife and daughters. The two daughters are uneducated, frivolous creatures but they delight their father with their feminine vivacity and their sympathy:

> The hours between breakfast and dinner the ladies devoted to dress and study: they usually read a page, and then gazed at themselves in the glass, which even philosophers might own often presented the page of greatest beauty.[43]

Deborah his wife is pompous and absurd in her own vanity and in her hopes for her daughters. When she expects one of them to be soon wedded to the squire, the vicar relates,

> The sun was dreaded as an enemy to the skin without doors, and the fire as a spoiler of the complexion within. My wife observed, that rising too early would hurt her daughters' eyes, that working after dinner would redden their noses, and she convinced me that the hands never looked so white as when they did nothing.[44]

The vicar usually apologizes for his wife's foolish simplicity and vanity, when it does not immediately surprise him with alarm. Although she first responds to calamity with a concern for herself and her daughter's futures, she does love and respect her husband and we are told that he loves her. The last mention of her in the novel is at the wedding banquet, when her son George has suggested that every couple should sit indiscriminately:

> This was received with great approbation by all, excepting my wife, who I could perceive was not perfectly satisfied, as she expected to have had the pleasure of sitting at the head of the table and carving all the meat for all the company.[45]

We are told of her foibles and antics by the vicar at a surprised distance and while we know she is at heart a good woman, we can never forget her absurdities.

A third level of narrative comes into play in the digressions and particularly in the vicar's prison sermon, in which he seems to lecture the reader as much as his "present audience" and the flow of the narrative is broken. A fourth level of narrative which Jeffares does not mention and for which it is difficult to isolate examples is when the mind of the narrator Primrose would seem to be self-conscious, witnessing and evaluating his own actions. The vicar is supposedly speaking reflectively from a future vantage point in the novel. He appears to almost have an awareness of his own loneliness, being separated by his education and sensibility even from his family. He is also a man alone, in a significant sense, in that he must deal with the transience of his fortunes. At times he is thus self-conscious and recognizes his own limitations as when, for example, his wife asks his opinion of the girls' success with the squire:

> 'Ay', returned I, not knowing well what to to think of the matter, 'Heaven grant they may be both the better for it this day three mounths!' This was one of those observations I usually made to impress my wife with an opinion of my sagacity; for if the girls succeeded, then it was a pious wish fulfilled; but if anything unfortunate ensued, then it

might be looked upon as a prophecy.[46]

There is almost a sad, old-world sense of ennui when the vicar realizes that he is surrounded by folly even in his household, and that his own example has not lessened it:

> To say the truth, I was tired of being always wise, and could not help gratifying their request, because I loved to see them happy.[47]

There is always a curious feeling in reading the novel that the vicar is never wholly unaware of the depths of self-doubt and sheer absurdity, which he, like all men, is a victim to.

The vicar lives by Goldsmith's philosophy of "contented acceptance". He expresses this philosophy when he says of the balance in his life:

> In this manner we began to find that every situation in life may bring its own peculiar pleasures: every morning waked us to a reception of toil; but the evening repaid it with vacant hilarity.[48]

The philosophy of "contented acceptance" is a partly world weary attitude which maintains that whatever happens to a man must be born with patience, as real happiness does not arise from the ordering of external circumstances, but from the attitude one holds to life. In his essay, "Happiness, In a Great Measure, Dependant on Constitution", Goldsmith writes:

> If the soul be happily disposed, every thing becomes capable of affording entertainment, and distress will almost want a name.[49]

In the beginning of The Vicar of Wakefield, a stoical philosophy is expounded by the vicar to his family as a consolation after disaster. He believes,

> If we live harmoniously together, we may yet be contented, as there are enough of us to shut out the censuring world, and keep each other in countenance.[50]

This philosophy is ultimately rejected in the prison sermon and the vicar at the end of the novel embraces the joys of his remaining life. The consolation of the stoical philosophy is proved counterfeit and shunned and, sensual happiness, in all its admitted frailty, is welcomed. In The Citizen of the World, Goldsmith writes of the sensuous basis of all happiness:

> ...all our pleasures, though seemingly never so remote from sense, derive their origin from some one of the senses. The most exquisite demonstration in mathematics, or the most pleasing disquisition in metaphysics, if it does not ultimately tend to increase some sensual satisfaction, is delightful only to fools, or to men who have by long habit contracted a false idea of pleasure; and he who separates sensual and sentimental enjoyments, seeking happiness from mind alone, is in fact as wretched as the naked inhabitant of the forest, who places all happiness in the first, regardless of the latter.[51]

Goldsmith's philosophy of life and life's happiness had their expression in his art, which he proclaimed was to be an art understandable by everyone. He recognized the anguish of life and believed that it was part of the purpose of his writing to instruct as well as to "brighten the lives" of everyone. Goldsmith and his vicar believed in the principle

of happiness and contentment and the aid of these principles in strengthening morality and their importance as a refuge against a hostile and terrifying world. The vicar confides,

> ...I was never much displeased with those harmless delusions that tend to make us more happy.[52]

Primrose is a good parson, indulging with an understanding temperance in the pleasures which the parish affords, yet ever with an eye to life's transience. Near the end of the novel, after his family have been raised from adversity, he prays that he may now be thankful in his prosperity. He is unlike the parsons which Goldsmith writes of in Letter XLI and Letter LVIII of The Citizen of the World. The latter reward themselves for their abstinence with regard to women, with a bestial over-indulgence in meat. Goldsmith has one parson warn another at the visitation banquet with significant double meaning:

> -take care of your beard, Sir, it may dip in the gravy.[53]

The Vicar of Wakefield has a peculiarly protective fire-side quality, as it presents us with danger at a safe distance. The portrayal of the vicar is the great success of the work, but it has been widely read as much for the vicar's portrayal as for the almost narcotic quality of its rich plot. The book presents a view of life, in which, although the presence of evil is always very real and threatening, the forces of benevolence and compassion are always strong enough to defeat

them. Henry James writes of the living quality of the novel:

> ...the heavy heart that went through all this overflows in the little book as optimism of the purest water-as good humor, as good taste, and as a drollery that, after all, has oftener its point than its innocence.[54]

CHAPTER IV

MR. COLLINS IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

> Dr. South complaining of Persons who took upon them Holy Orders, tho' altogether unqualified for the Sacred Function, says somewhere, that many a Man runs his Head against a Pulpit, who might have done his country excellent service at a Plough-tail,

writes Addison in The Spectator.[1] Mr. Collins in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice is an example of this type of man, who is unfitted for the clerical office but who enters the Church because nothing else offers. Towards the end of the eighteenth century the value of Church livings was steadily increasing, because of the more substantial profits derived from tithes and glebe farms. As a result of this the social position of the country parson was becoming more refined and he was now almost the social equal of his patron and the more wealthy families in his parish. As the social and material prospects in the clerical life became more favourable, the lower Church offices were increasingly regarded as a suitable profession for the younger sons of well-to-do families, not provided for in the reducing order of inheritance. Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park, second in line to his brother Tom for the family fortune, convinces Mary Crawford that he will have no money from his relatives, and coolly admits his inspiration in choosing to enter the Church:

> ...the knowing that there was a provision for me, probably did bias me. Nor can I think it wrong that it should. There was no natural disinclination to be overcome, and I see no reason why a man should make a worse clergyman for knowing that he will have a competence early in life.... I have no doubt that I was biased, but I think it was blamelessly.[2]

He will accept the parsonage of Thornton Lacey which holds a living of seven hundred pounds per annum. Even the villainous Wickham in Pride and Prejudice recognizes that a comfortable living may be maintained with a minimum of exertion. He confesses to Elizabeth:

> I should have considered...[making sermons] as part of my duty, and the exertion would have been nothing. One ought not to repine; -but to be sure, it would have been such a thing for me! The quiet, the retirement of such a life, would have answered all my ideas of happiness.[3]

The selfishness and pomposity of such an unguarded declaration, from a man so obviously unsuited for the Church does not greatly disturb Elizabeth, who rather is churning with anger at Wickham's ungrateful treatment of Darcy. She is upset because she has the secret knowledge that Wickham has already forfeited the living, and not because he never would have been suitable for it. Sharing the attitude of the other characters towards Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice, the characters in Mansfield Park fully accept that a man enters the Church, not as a result of a special divine calling, but because the Church offers a stable and easy competence for

life. W.A. Craik writes in Jane Austen in Her Own Time:

> To be a clergyman [in Jane Austen's novels] is not so much to follow a vocation as to have a job to do, where the onus is on the individual to do it well. The stress is therefore not on forms of worship, or doctrine, but on the whole conduct of life with other men.[4]

Jane Austen's novels take place within the narrow framework of the lives of a few upper-middle-class families in English country parishes. There is an unquestioning portrayal of these people's concern with the round of social engagements, and with the conflicts which arise between the prospects of marriages of interest and those of affection. It is, "...the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush..." to which Jane Austen devoted her art. In 1816 she wrote to her publisher:

> ...I am fully sensible that an historical romance...might be much more to the purpose of profit or popularity than such pictures of domestic life in country villages as I deal in. But I could no more write a romance than an epic poem. I could not sit seriously down to write a serious romance under any other motive than to save my life; and if it were indispensable for me to keep it up and never relax into laughing at myself or at other people, I am sure I should be hung before I had finished the first chapter.[5]

Jane Austen wrote of the life she knew in the parish of Steventon, and at Bath, Southampton and Chawton. Her father was the rector at Steventon and, as his son remembers was, "...not only a profound scholar, but possessing a most exquisite taste in every species of literature..."[6] Jane Austen followed

her family's lead in her political and religious views, which were royalist and conservative.[7] Of her religious belief her brother writes that:

> She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. On serious subjects she was well-instructed, both by reading and meditation, and her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church.[8]

She attended school to the age of nine but must have had most of her education at home from her father.

> On the whole, she grew up with a good stock of such accomplishments as might be expected of a girl bred in one of the more intellectual of the clerical houses of that day. She read French easily, and knew a little of Italian; and she was well read in the English literature of the eighteenth century,

writes Austen-Leigh of her girlhood.[9] Although Jane Austen wrote into the early nineteenth century her novels really describe the life of rural eighteenth-century England. Her experience of life was necessarily limited and so is the scope of occurences in her novels, a factor which drew a rebuke from Emile Brontë, and, unlike George Eliot, she was not radical in her religious views. She never married and lived with her mother and sister till her death. Although Austen lived a quiet and regulated daily life, as Dorothy Van Ghent observes:

> Her letters show in her the ironical mentality and the eighteenth-century gusto, that are the reverse of the puritanism and naïveté that might be associated with the maidenly life.[10]

Jane Austen's novels are full of clergymen and almost none of them are drawn in flattering proportions:

> Modern readers, not sharing either her context or her principles, have been uneasy both when she holds up her parsons to ridicule--because through them she seems to be ridiculing religion--and also when she is clearly delineating an estimable cleric, like Edmund Bertram--because in him she seems either to hold very inadequate views of what a clergyman should be and do, or to have created a prig.[11]

It is questionable if Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park is really Jane Austen's notion of an 'estimable cleric' but certainly it is true that the parsons in her novels have drawn pointed criticism. Henry Tilney in Northanger Abbey, the son of a wealthy land-owner, lives away from his parish and frivously entertains himself at Bath. Mr. Elton in Emma is the parson in Jane Austen's novels who most closely resembles Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice. He is "a young man living alone without liking it," and as Emma scathingly comments "a young man whom any woman not fastidious might like."[12] He is a proud and selfish man who looks after his own interest. Mr. Knightley discloses his real character to Emma:

> Elton is a very good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as anybody. Elton may talk sentimentally, but he will act rationally. He is as well acquainted with his own claims, as you can be with Harriet's. He knows that he is a very handsome young man, and a great favourite wherever he goes; and from his

> general way of talking in unreserved moments, when there are only men present, I am convinced that he does not mean to throw himself away.[13]

Like Mr. Collins he plays the gallant lover to absurd lengths and surely the image the two create, of clergyman as joyous lovers, foolishly overcome with their own bliss, in a position in which the reader knows they will be rejected, is a most devastating satire of the worldly clergy. When accident places Mr. Elton and Emma in the same coach after the party at Mrs. Weston's house, Emma finds,

> --her hand seized--her attention demanded, and Mr. Elton actually making violent love to her: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping--fearing --adoring--ready to die if she refused him; but flattering himself that his ardent attachment and unequalled love and unexampled passion could not fail of having some effect...[14]

Elton is finally matched fittingly with the vainglorious Miss Augusta Hawkins who is devoted to music, drawing and her own pleasure, who Mr. Elton proudly displays to his peers and protects from the vulgar in the parish. In Mansfield Park Edmund Bertram desires to be ordained and his decision is disputed by Mary Crawford, who holds the Church office in contempt, almost as being an unmanly occupation. She says to Edmund:

> You assign greater consequence to the clergyman than one has been used to hear given, or than I can quite comprehend,

and later,

> Indolence and love of ease--a want of all laudable ambition, of taste for good company, or of inclination to take the trouble of being agreeable, which make men clergymen. A clergyman has nothing to do but to be slovenly and selfish--read the newspapers, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine.[15]

Perhaps the only really, 'estimable cleric' in Jane Austen's novels is the kindly and sensible Dr. Grant, the rector of Mansfield and a minor character. He is the sort of clergyman that Sir Thomas Bertram hopes his son will be. Sir Thomas describes the duties of a country parson:

> But a parish has wants and claims which can be known only by a clergyman constantly resident, and which no proxy can be capable of satisfying to the same extent. Edmund might, in the common phrase, do the duty of Thornton, that is, he might read prayers and preach, without giving up Mansfield Park; he might ride over, every Sunday, to a house nominally inhabited, and go through divine service; he might be the clergyman of Thornton Lacey every seventh day, for three or four hours, if that would content him. But it will not. He knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishoners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own.[16]

Certainly Jane Austen knew what would qualify a good country parson, as this passage demonstrates, but she never does successfully draw an 'estimable cleric' in her novels. As noted earlier, some critics have rebuked her for her satirical attitude towards religion and the clergy, believing that her productions sprang from disdain, and not from a feeling that

her powers were inadequate to present the righteous and virtuous and learned country parson. Jane Austen writes in a letter to her sister Cassandra, a month after Pride and Prejudice was published, in 1813:

> I am quite honoured by your thinking me capable of drawing such a clergyman as you gave the sketch of in your note of November 16th. But I assure you I am 'not'. The comic part of the character I might be equal to, but not the good, the enthusiastic, the literary. Such a man's conversation must at times be on subjects of science and philosophy, of which I know nothing....[17]

Craik argues that Mr. Collins, the parson of Hunsford parish, "...is obviously ill-qualified for the Church by being ill-qualified to be a rational man...."[18] After hearing his letter of introduction, Elizabeth asks her father:

> 'Can he be a sensible man, sir?'
> 'No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well.'[19]

Collins is an ignorant and foolish man and his character is rendered completly ridiculous by his show of pride in his early preferment. He is fundamentally a very simple, naïve man although his intelligence is appreciated by the silly characters Mrs. Bennet, and Mr. and Mrs. Lucas. Austen's 'nice' discrimination between people of sense and the characters of fools has been called 'admirable'.[20] One of the manifestations of Collins' folly is that he is quite often overwhelmed in expressing gratitude or in apologizing

and is easily excited and easily pleased, as after the party at Mrs. Philips' house:

> ...Mr. Collins, in describing the civility of Mr. and Mrs. Philips, protesting that he did not in the least regard his losses at whist, enumerating all the dishes at supper, and repeatedly fearing that he crowded his cousins, had more to say than he could well manage before the carriage stopped at Longbourn House.[21]

He is happy as a child when he can show off to Elizabeth his favour with Lady Catherine:

> ...and, as he had likewise foretold, he took his seat at the bottom of the table, by her ladyship's desire, and looked as if he felt that life could furnish nothing greater. He carved....[22]

He lacks all the nobility and natural ease of a gentleman and is tiresomely self-effacing and ridgidly officious. He is entirely a social animal. At his first appearance in the novel he is described as,

> ...a tall, heavy looking young man of five and twenty. His air was grave and stately, and his manners were very formal.[23]

When he attempts to compliment Mrs. Bennet's daughters on the fine meal at his first visit, and finds it is the industry of their cook, we are told that, "he continued to apologize for about a quarter of an hour". It is Mr. Collins' complete lack of self-knowledge, the "...failure of intelligence--the wit to know his own limitations", which renders him hopelessly foolish.[24] He is incapable of any communication other than instantaneous, egotistical self-revelation, "...from which

no thought of consequences, no faintest sense of their possible impact upon other people, deters him".[25] When he attempts to disguise his emotions or underplay his feelings, he is obvious in the attempt to all his listeners. He pretends to be the hot, passionate lover with Elizabeth and,

> The idea of Mr. Collins, with all his solemn composure, being run away with by his feelings, made Elizabeth so near laughing that she could not use the short pause he allowed in any attempt to stop him farther...[26]

Like Mr. Elton in Emma, Mr. Collins is thus at the height of his absurdity when attempting to play the gallant lover. Elizabeth's younger sisters rate a gentleman as a lover on his dancing abilities and in this capacity Collins is particularly inept:

> Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologizing instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give.[27]

The pride that he is so unaware of, causes him to misunderstand Elizabeth's subsequent refusal of his proposal of marriage. He says:

> ...your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these: -It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family of De Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour...I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to

> your wish of increasing my love by suspense.....[28]

Mary Lascalles, in her book Jane Austen and her Art, has very carefully distinguished the ways in which Jane Austen discriminates her foolish characters by their style of speech. She observers that Jane Austen,

> ...allows her tiresome talkers to embark on sentences that are too elaborate for their powers....[29]

Collins, in his attempt to appear formal and proper, often stumbles into this trap, or makes his sentences needlessly long and complex in an attempt to soften what he has to say. Contrasting with the simplicity and ease of Jane Austen's usual narrative style is Collins' use of "stale, unmeaning figures", a sign Lascalles points out, "of insincerity in her disagreeable people".[30] For example, in an attempt to appear elegant and gracious, Collins overstates the breach between his family and the Bennets in his letter and says he hopes they will not, "reject the offered olive branch". He rehearses his eulogies to his patron Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and is an ardent student of the art of flattery. He explains that his compliments,

> ...arise chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give them as unstudied an air as possible.[31]

He is devoted to Lady Catherine and is full of wonderment that she could bestow her favour on one such as him, and in his wonderment is combined inferiority and pride. We are told earlier that Collins's nature is partly the result of his upbringing:

> Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society; the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father; and though he belonged to one of the universities, he had merely kept the necessary terms, without forming at it any useful acquaintance. The subjection in which his father had brought him up, had given him originally great humility of manner, but it was now a good deal counteracted by the self-conceit of a week ahead, living in retirement, and the consequential feelings of early and unexpected prosperity...mingling with a very good opinion of himself, of his authority as a clergyman, and his rights as a rector, made him altogether a mixture of pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility.[32]

In his thankfulness for personal attention and simple praise he is nearly childishly pathetic and could almost raise the tender concern of the reader but he does not. Collins is too absurd and obtuse to arouse deep concern and his excessive pride prevents the reader from ever feeling real pity for him.

Collins is an obsequious parson who worships his patron almost as a deity. This type of mercenary, pedantic country parson was not uncommon in the eighteenth century. In The Spectator, an unidentified writer who signs himself "J.O.", complains of:

> ...several Expressions used by some of them in their Prayers before Sermon, which I am not well satisfied in. As their giving some Titles and Epithets to great Men, which are indeed due to them in their several Ranks and Stations, but not properly used, I think, in our Prayers. Is it not contradiction to say, Illustrious, Right Reverend, and Right Honourable poor Sinners? These Distinctions are suited only to our state here, and have no Place in Heaven. We see they are omitted in the Liturgy, which I think the clergy should take for their Pattern in their Own Forms of Devotion... When a young Man has a Mind to let us know who gave him his Scarf, he speaks a Parenthesis to the Almighty; Bless,'as I am in Duty bound to pray, 'the right honourable the countess; is not that as much as to say, 'Bless her, for thou knowest I am her chaplain?'[33]

We are told that Elizabeth (who is our guide in the novel) when she reflects on Collins's first letter:

> ...was chiefly struck with his extraordinary deference for Lady Catherine, and his kind intention of christening, marrying, and burying his parishioners whenever it were required.[34]

Moreover, she has immediately been startled to find that the parson's priorities in the religious life are badly mis-balanced. In the letter, he had written of how the Right Honourable Lady Catherine De Bourgh,

> ...has preferred me to the valuable rectory of this parish, where it shall be my earnest endeavour to demean myself with grateful respect towards her Ladyship, and be very ready to perform those rites and ceremonies which are instituted by the Church of England.[35]

Jane Austen is always careful to ironically juxtapose Collins' feelings for Lady Catherine and his respect for the Almighty. Regarding the propriety of a man of the cloth singing or

dancing at a ball, we are told,

> ...he entertained no scruple whatsoever on that head, and was very far from dreading a rebuke either from the Archbishop, or Lady Catherine de Bourgh, by venturing to dance.[36]

He explains to Elizabeth that he marries because firstly he feels a clergyman should set this example in his parish, secondly to make himself happy, and thirdly because his patron advises it. He falters at his third reason and thinks that it was one, "perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier".[37] Collins has high ideas of the office of the clergy and feels that he is a perfectly dutiful parson. He outlines what he believes are the duties of a country parson:

> The rector of a parish has much to do. -In the first place, he must make such an agreement for tythes as may be beneficial to himself and not offensive to his patron. He must write his own sermons; and the time that remains will not be too much for his parish duties, and the care and improvement of his dwelling, which he cannot be excused from making as comfortable as possible. And I do not think it of light importance that he should have attentive and conciliatory manners towards everybody, especially towards those to whom he owes his preferment. I cannot acquit him of that duty; nor could I think well of the man who should omit an occasion of testifying his respect towards anybody connected with the family.[38]

Despite his ideals of what a person should be, and possibly as a result of them we are told by the authorial voice that Lady Catherine is really the only figure with power in the parish and Collins will just serve as her pawn, for

> she was a most active magistrate in her own parish, the minutest concerns of which were carried to her by Mr. Collins; and whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty.[39]

It is incredible that anyone could be thankful for the favour of "so much dignified impertinence". After a dinner at her house we are told,

> The party then gathered round the fire to hear Lady Catherine determine what weather they were to have on the morrow.[40]

There is no mistaking the importance of the place which, Jane Austen suggests, Lady Catherine holds in Mr. Collins' life.

Mr. Collins has some pretensions to being a learned man, and at least Mrs. Bennet is impressed with his good sense. To the Bennet family, assembled after dinner, he reads from the Sermons of James Fordyce "with very monotonous solemnity", from which comment we can understand what impression he makes in church. Fordyce (1720-1796) was a Scottish Presbyterian and a famous preacher, who had published such sermons as, "The Folly, Infamy and Misery of Unlawful Pleasures". Collins reading such unsuitable fare after supper is a show and he seems almost relieved to be interrupted by Lydia, which allows him a chance to display his humble condescension to her baser wishes, and he gladly offers himself as Mr. Bennet's antagonist at backgammon. Next morning he follows Mr. Bennet into the library and takes up,

> one of the largest folios in the collection, but really talking to Mr. Bennet, with little cessation, [is] of his house and garden at Hunsford.[41]

Collins is a pedantic and frivolous country parson with mis-balanced ideals, and is a hypocritical Christian.

Craik writes that Jane Austen "is practical about religion and money, and does not theorize about either".[42] Collins' religious belief is never subjected to close scrutiny in the novel and he is ridiculed by the other characters, primarily because he is a foolish man, and not because he is a hypocritical Christian. When we last hear of him in the novel he is writing to dissuade Elizabeth from marrying Darcy, as the marriage "has not been properly sanctioned", and he does not mean by the church, but by Lady Catherine. We see a singular manifestation of his religious belief in his opinion regarding Lydia's marriage. His Christianity is one of "shall-not" morality, guilt and shame. He feels that as a parson he must chide Mr. Bennet on his conduct to his prodigal daughter, one of the only instances in the novel when he uses this perogative.

> I must not, however, neglect the duties of my station, or refrain from declaring my amazement, at hearing that you received the young couple into your house as soon as they were married. It was an encouragement of vice; and had I been the rector of Longbourne, I should very strenously have opposed it. You ought certainly to forgive them as a Christian, but never to admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing.[43]

"'That' is his notion of Christian forgiveness!" cries Mr. Bennet. Collins is not overtly "damned" in the novel, and the satire of bad clergymen which he embodies, is suggested by implication. D.W. Harding writes of Jane Austen's satirical purpose:

> she lived at a time when, as a sensitive person of culture, she could still feel that she had a place in society and could address the reading public as sympathetic equals; she might introduce unpleasant people into her stories but she could confidently expose them to a public opinion that condemned them.[44]

Some scholars have found the portrayal of Mr. Collins too comic and too exaggerated for him to be a "realistic" character. In his essay, "Character and Caricature in Jane Austen", Harding suggests several techniques which he feels Jane Austen uses to distinguish her characters from her caricatures. He points out that the caricatures usually dominate the scene in which they appear and rarely converse in a balanced give and take manner with a fully developed character:

> As a general rule attention is then concentrated on a few features or a small segment of the personality to the neglect of much that would make the figure a full human being, and the understanding is that the reader will accept this convention and not inquire closely into the areas of behaviour and personality that the author chooses to avoid.[45]

Collins fits this classification in that we certainly know relatively little about him, but there is also a strong sense in the novel that what we know is all there is to know of him.

Harding goes on to say that at the end of the novel,

> As the 'real people' are drawn more closely together the caricatures are removed to a greater distance and come in only as echoes.[46]

Certainly Mr. Collins and Charlotte and Lady Catherine are at a distance at the end of Pride and Prejudice, but they have all played a significant role in the movement of the marriage schemes and all have, in part, contributed to helping Elizabeth realize the importance of her marrying Darcy. Malcolm Bradbury writes:

> Jane Austen's novels are domestic novels, novels centered on marriage; most of the commentary and moral discussion is in fact directed toward defining the conditions for a good marriage, and preparing the one good marriage which contrasts with all others in the novel and so dominates it.[47]

Mr. Collins contributes in an important way to the themes of marriage and pride, and is a significant unifying force in the novel. Collins is a minor character and is obviously and deliberately a diminished human being. It is perhaps concerning the danger of dismissing the characters like Mr. Collins as merely simplified farcical entities that Jane Austen writes, in her letter to her sister in February 1813, regarding the novel:

> The work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott,

> or the history of Buonaparte, or anything that would form a contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style.[48]

Pride and Prejudice begins with the famous sentence:

> It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.

This sentence sets the ironical tone of the novel and outlines one of its major thematic concerns. Mr. Collins comes to visit Mr. Bennet's family in order to choose a wife. He is a silly man, and an ignorant man, but he makes a still more ridiculous courtier. Van Ghent writes that in Pride and Prejudice:

> The tale is that of a man hunt, with the female the pursuer and the male a shy and elusive prey.[49]

There is a comic reversal when Collins, who comes to catch a wife, is himself caught by the cynical and mercenary Charlotte Lucas. Elizabeth is shocked that Charlotte "would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage". Charlotte marries Collins for his living and for the house which he forever boasts of and which he attempts to use as a bait to make Elizabeth jealous. He displays,

> the good proportion of the room, its aspect and its furniture, he addressed himself particularly to her, as if wishing to make her feel what she had lost in refusing him.[50]

Collins is severely dealt with in the novel, perhaps in part because of his demeaning ideal that all women must be

absolutely subjected to marrying from purely mercenary motives. His ideal arises from his rather low opinion of women generally. In the novel,

> a high valuation of property is so dominant a culture trait that the word "property" becomes a metaphor for the young man himself,

writes Van Ghent.[51] By Charlotte's demonstrating her mercenary and cautious motives in marriage the ideals of Elizabeth concerning marriage are accentuated, although she too realizes something important about her feelings for Darcy when she sees Pemberly. She says to Jane of Collins' marriage:

> Mr. Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man; you know he is, as well as I do.... You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity....[52]

In a sense Collins is almost a foil to Darcy, as he courts that man's future wife and finally marries her best friend.

Collins is a member of Elizabeth's family and she is particularly disturbed when the parson, ignoring her advice, presents himself to her 'enemy' Mr. Darcy:

> It vexed her to see him expose himself to such a man. Mr. Darcy was eying him with unrestrained wonder, and when at last Mr. Collins allowed him time to speak, replied with an air of distant civility. Mr. Collins, however, was not discouraged from speaking again.[53]

We are able to judge the characters in the novel by their reaction to Mr. Collins. Collins first comes to visit the

Bennets just before Elizabeth meets Wickham and begins to cultivate a hatred for Darcy. He arrives again in the plot, in the second half of the novel, just before she meets Darcy's cousin and she comes to regard Darcy with respect. Collins provides the connection between the Bennet family and Rosings and Lady Catherine, who travels to interrogate Elizabeth on Collins' intelligence. Although he is a character of little wit and shallow personality, Collins furthers the plot of the novel by the natural predisposition of his basic character, for, as Edwin Muir writes:

> The action is created here by those characters who remain true to themselves; it is their constancy which, like a law of necessity, sets the events moving; and through these they gradually manifest themselves.[54]

Mr Collins is a character who is involved with the primary thematic concerns of the novel, and who aids the heroine in realizing her own self-deception, and he functions in unravelling the knot of the novel's story. E.M. Forster in Aspects of the Novel writes of Jane Austen, that, "All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity".[55] While Austen may deal with the most superficial of human beings, Forster says that their make-up is "highly organized", and their lives are inseparably "interdependent" with those of all the other characters in the novel and so their existence is complete and vital.[56]

Mr. Collins serves an important function in the

structure of Pride and Prejudice and embodies the type of man who should never have entered the church. It is perhaps significant with regard to the rising social position of the clergy in the later eighteenth century that a clergyman, like Collins, is included in Jane Austen's novel in the first instance, because, as Leonard Woolf points out:

> There is hardly a single male character in her novels who does any work; to work at all is, indeed, almost incompatible with the status of a gentleman. She recognizes as socially possible only the following professions: the army and navy, the Church, and, with some reservations, the law.[57]

It is a criticism often raised against Jane Austen that she usually presents weak, blood-less men and in Mr. Collins she has designed a character who thinks of himself as a gentleman and a gallant lover and is rendered absurd by these pretentions. Collins lacks an awareness of "the intelligence which informs the emotions", and is perpetually deluding himself, with his pride and his obsequiousness ever at war. Collins is a foolish man but not an evil one. Walter Allen perceptively acknowledges:

> In Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Collins and Lady de Bourgh are figures of fun, monstrous puppets of silliness and snobbery, to be elaborated and laughed at with something like affection....[58]

For Collins, entering the church is not a result of a special private calling, but is regarded as a step to a good,

respectable employment, and as a "practical asset". One criticism of her novels which Jane Austen recorded from her friend's comments, shows that the implication of social satire regarding bad clergymen was noticed in her own day, when it was possibly feared that her portrait would encourage the vice it attempted to expose. A Mrs. Wroughton, Jane Austen records:

> Thought the Authoress wrong, in such times as these, to draw such Clergymen as Mr. Collins & Mr. Elton.[59]

CONCLUSION

Dorothy Van Ghent writes of the distance between historical and literary truth:

> Both the novel and the drama are history in a certain sense: they tell of how people lived or live, their manners, what they held important, how they went about getting what they got, their conflicts, their errors, their heroism. Since some novels look very much like 'real' history, like a factual social record, we need to be rather careful in defining the characterizing differences between novels and history.[1]

She goes on to define the major difference between history and the writings of the novelist by stating that the creative and "hypothetical" aspect of novels alter them fundamentally from historical documents. Broadly speaking, history is concerned with groups and gives "particular facts", and the novel with the individual, divulging "general truths". The recording of history may be regarded as an art and entails the amalgamation of documents and commentaries of a certain period, and their assessment at a later date. History only ever achieves an approximate degree of truth in its conclusions about a particular age. For example, it was only in the twentieth century that the nineteenth century's bias against the eighteenth-century clergy was re-examined and proved to be exaggerated:

> Victorian clergy enthusiastically developed a myth of eighteenth-century ecclesiastical corruption and worldliness, of pastoral apathy and incompetence.... They complained about political bishops, about pluralism and nonresidence, and about gross inequities in eighteenth-century clerical incomes. But they reserved their most vigorous condemnation for the alleged secularity, laziness, and inefficiency of the parish clergy.[2]

Just as a study of the literature of a period is invaluable to the historian, so, for the student of literature, a knowledge of the milieu in which an author's work was composed can be immensely revealing. A study of the times in which a novel was written is particularly rewarding as the novel is a genre devoted to "realism" and many of the novels of the eighteenth century were written, in part, to reform the values and institutions of the age. The novel is "realistic" in that it deals with normal daily life and presents a picture of characters we can identify with. But still the novel achieves its effects by implication and suggestion. To undervalue the complex and enigmatic nature of the novel's effect upon the reader, and to baldly accept the spirit of an age presented in a novel as historical truth would be fallacious. As Percy Lubbock says:

> We are much more inclined to forget, if we can, that the book is an object of art, and to treat it as a piece of the life around us.[3]

The novelist is selective of the details he includes in his art and its creation may by guided by inspiration, personal memory and conscience, and conceptions of craftsmanship, as

well as by any desire to portray the social life of his age. He does not necessarily present a direct reflection of the society of his day in his novel. We cannot assume that,

> ...the novel gives an accurate picture of the surface of life, and shows the dominant interests of the time, not only including everything, but relating everything to everything else in the exact proportions in which they existed. [and that] Any judgement it makes ought to be either valid or typical of the period.[4]

Historical analysis and literary scholarship proceed by cautions examination, for the presentation of an age by a man of that age, even when he writes solely to that end, may well be markedly different from an evaluation by a man of a later period:

> ...Dr. Johnson, for example, thought that no one would ever consider the eighteenth century as a great period of English civilization, but that subsequent ages would be struck by its great humanity to the poor.[5]

As Diana Spearman concludes, "Today we take the opposite view". The novel is the "great book of life" but its presentation of experience and reality is different in quality and effect from that which history discloses.

The rise in the social position of the country parson in the eighteenth century is paralled in the eighteenth-century novels. Between the publication of the novels of Fielding and those of Jane Austen the country parson in the eighteenth century changed from being almost a servant, into the wealthy professional who is practically the social equal

of the country squire:

> In the Restoration period, and at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the social status of the English clergy was far more humble, and recruits to the profession were often sons of shopkeepers and farmers, and sometimes the children of laborers. The incomes of eighteenth-century curates were pitifully low, and the value of most livings quite inadequate to support a gentle style of life.[6]

This low position was to change with the extention of church tithing rights to lands newly brought into cultivation, by the use of new agricultural methods, and by the enclosure movement.[7]

> One consequence of this increased prosperity and social prestige was that the taking of holy orders and the acquisition of a country benefice became much more worthwhile objectives...,[8]

argues Tindal Hart. As the value of livings began to grow, and the duties of the gentleman parson became more clearly defined, the parish office came to be regarded as a "profession". In the nineteenth century the clergy began to be educated in such a way as to meet the specific needs of their parishioners, and the tension between "the traditional understanding of ordained ministry as a divine vocation", and the Victorian idea that it was, "a profession requiring special knowledge and skills and a particular style of life", brought about the Victorian clergy's backlash against their predecessors.[9] Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice is the fully secularized parson of the latter eighteenth century who balances what he must render to the service of God and the

church, with his duty to his patron and his duty to improve his dwelling.

The eighteenth-century novel as a "realistic" mode drew its characters primarily from the middle and lower classes. Fielding writes in the Preface to Joseph Andrews, that his "comic-epic-poem-in-prose", "differs in its characters by introducing persons of inferior rank, and consequently, of inferior manners".[10] The portrayal of the parson in the eighteenth-century novel was less a natural outgrowth of the literary tradition of the clerical figure, than it was a reflection of and a comment upon the position of the country parson in eighteenth-century society.

While the three novels Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Pride and Prejudice cannot be accepted as historical documents, because of the element of selective artistic genius affecting their creation, they were all conceived in part, with the intention of effecting some kind of social reform. The idea of the novel as a "criticism of life" is most apparent in Joseph Andrews. In the Preface to the novel Fielding explains that he intends to "entertain" and "instruct" his readers at once and reform the values and manners of society. He had a similar intention in writing Amelia, expressed in the Dedication of that work:

> The following book is sincerely designed to promote the cause of virtue, and to expose some of the most glaring evils, as well public as private, which at present infest the country.[11]

Fielding had a wide experience of life among all ranks of society and was "well equipped by temperament and experience to portray the contemporary scene".[12] Moreover, he was also a scholar of the classics and a firm believer in Latitudinarian Christianity and viewed contemporary social conditions in the light of these influences. In The Vicar of Wakefield, Goldsmith celebrates the virtues of the simple and honest country life, but it is difficult to know if he is describing the ministry of a vicar in Yorkshire, or if he is presenting a framework for fond memories of his father in Ireland. Harrison R. Steeves writes:

> The rural idyll, the Vicar's simplicity and true goodness, the ingenuous family relations, all confirm Goldsmith's admiration for the simple virtues that we find in the poetry, the plays, and the essays. His humanity, his pathos, his unworldliness, are all manifestations of sentiment, but as free from pretense as a conventional feeling can be at its purest.[13]

Goldsmith wrote to "brighten the lives" of those about him and his creation blends memories of an Irish childhood with very accurate geographical details of Yorkshire. Jane Austen has often been criticized for "denying" the fiercer emotions and for avoiding mention of the chaotic world events of her time in her writing. Diana Spearman points out that Jane Austen was fully aware of the "darker side of life" and of worldly affairs but chose not to include them in her novels, for the sake of her art:

> ...we know that two of Jane Austen's brothers were naval officers, another a banker whose bank failed, and that her first cousin's husband was guillotined. Short of actually participating in the war (and, after all, Mrs. Admiral Croft was quite likely to have been at the Battle of Trafalgar), or of being in Paris during the Revolution, Jane Austen could hardly have been more involved in the main currents of history. A clergyman's daughter could not have avoided the sight of poverty and distress.[14]

She wrote a type of moral, social comedy which attempted, in part to reform manners and values, and to expose by implication the excesses in institutions such as the clergy, and her writing is at its center very serious and compassionate. Walter Allen writes that Jane Austen is,

> with Dr. Johnson, the most forthright moralist in English; and the authority which informs every sentence Johnson wrote, that authority which comes, we feel, from vast experience of life, a massive common sense and an integrity determined to face all the facts of life without seeking refuge in illusion, is hers too.[15]

While the novel is often a "criticism of life", and employs the matter of daily living as its subject, it is not an historical document, and its presentation of life comes after it has been selected and filtered through the author's individual experiences and inspiration. In the portraits of the three country parsons in Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Pride and Prejudice, all these diverse motives of the author are given sway.

As a character the country parson figure has special qualities. Because he is required to be a pious and good man almost by profession, his vanities and hypocrisies are

exaggerated, by contrast. The parson also serves to expose, by contrast, the vices in those around him. There are many "types" of parson figures in the eighteenth-century novel but nearly all are in some dimension comic figures. Parson Adams is an example of the comic "wise-fool" type of parson in whose make-up wisdom and folly share an equal measure. Adams, who believes in the "cure of souls", has a nearly Medieval idea of the importance of the church in men's lives which contrasts with the decline of the church's influence in eighteenth-century society. He is also, as Martin Battestin has shown, a type of "Christian hero", an amalgam of different Biblical figures. He is the core of the novel and his example sets the mould for this type of parson in later literature. As Walter Allen says,

> Perhaps he owes something to Don Quixote, but he is in every sense an original character, one of the archtypal characters in English fiction; and the secret of the pleasure he gives can no more be reduced to a critical formula than Falstaff's can.[16]

Parson Adams has an abundance of the fatherly love of children, which marks the purity of his heart, as does Vicar Primrose in The Vicar of Wakefield, and both men have the stamp of the parson in their very nature. Vicar Primrose is a parson who enjoys and yet disdains the world, and is foolish and yet strangely aware of his own folly. He is a flawed but benevolent shepherd to his family and his parish, and the flaws in his character form the basis for the plot of the novel.[17] Mr. Collins stands in obvious contrast to Parson

Adams and the Vicar. He is a superficial, "humorous" man who lacks imagination. Collins is the "type" of parson who entered the church for worldly reasons. While it dangerously leans towards over-simplification to name "types" of parsons in these novels (for as Samuel Beckett writes, "Literary criticism is not book-keeping")[18], categories do arise, and an awareness of common qualities shared by country parsons in the eighteenth-century novel is an aid in understanding various individual novels of the period, and observing the development of the novel as a whole. Observing "types" of country parsons in eighteenth-century novels also is useful in plotting the progress that has taken place in the novel form since the eighteenth century.

In the novels of the nineteenth century echoes can be found of the parson "types" of eighteenth-century fiction. Oftentimes the characters are significantly different from the eighteenth-century parson but they are often composed of the same basic qualities and properties although in different proportions. As an example of this we may look at two of George Eliot's novels. In The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton, Eliot explains that she intends to present the curate Barton as an example of the ordinary suffering man who "gets himself into the wrong place",

> ...a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him,but was palpably and unmistakbly commonplace; who was not even in love....[19]

The misunderstood Barton is intensely involved in the religious societies and controversies of the day and is perhaps too zealous in his ministry. One of his parishioners complains to another:

> When Mr. Barton comes to see me, he talks about nothing but my sins and my need o' marcy. Now, Mr. Hackit, I've never been a sinner.[20]

The real thrust of the portrayal lies not in Barton's theological differences with his predecessor, Mr. Gilfil, but in his inability as a man to deal with his situation in life and the tragedy that results. There is mention in the story that Mr. Barton's parishioners,

> ...were more likely to have a strong sense that a clergy-man needed their material aid, than that they needed his spiritual aid.[21]

This ambivalent attitude towards the parson is a manifestation of the slow swing away from the church-ruled society of the Middle Ages which can be found in earlier stages in eighteenth-century fiction. In much the same way, many of the excesses of the eighteenth-century church were still to be found in the nineteenth century. In Middlemarch the Reverend Edward Casaubon is as rich as Barton is poor and does nothing for his living but preach the Sunday sermon. He has devoted his life to researching the "Key to all Mythologies" a study which involves him in "questionable riddle-guessing" --a misfortune even he can feel:

> I feed too much on the inward sources; I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient,

> wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be, in spite of ruin and confusing changes.[22]

Both Casaubon and Amos Barton suffer from deception in their view of themselves and the world and both are largely misunderstood by others. Like the parsons of the eighteenth-century novels they are imperfect but realistic men. The ideal parson, like Mr. Cleves in Amos Barton, "a clergyman who is not associated with the undertaker", soon drops out of the story, as if such a model of perfection is unsuitable and cannot be sustained as a character in the mode of the novel.

The country parson is a centrally important figure in the novel of the eighteenth century. The parish was the key unit of society in that age and the parson was in many ways the head of the parish. In John Galt's Annals of the Parish, the Rev. Micah Balwhidder says to his wife "...for what happened in my parish was but a type and index to the rest of the world".[23] In the hamlets and villages of England the parson was often the magistrate (an office Mr. Collins gives up to Lady Catherine), the local doctor, the school teacher, the settler of disputes and the leader of Sundays and holidays.[24] He was known to all and was party to the affairs and fortunes of his parishioners. The parson was the central figure in his parish and yet was raised by education and wider experience above the concerns of the greater part of his flock. Parsons abound in the writings of the eighteenth-century novelists, in Richardson

and Sterne, and form the basis of some of the greatest novels of the century in Joseph Andrews and The Vicar of Wakefield.

It is very difficult to determine just to what extent it is necessary or important to understand the society and the age in which an author wrote in order to appreciate his work. In a study of the country parson figure in the eighteenth-century novels an awareness of the ecclesiastical history surrounding his counterpart in society is vital, for the church living is not merely the job of the parson, but defines the very nature of his existence. The creative works of men in other countries aid us in understanding the way men lived and thought and felt in those ages but also offer us an appreciation of something in mankind which is not limited in time. The artistic value of the portraits of the country parsons in Joseph Andrews, The Vicar of Wakefield, and Pride and Prejudice, transcend any lesser historical value they might have. The Rev. William Hazlitt wrote, speaking of the novel:

> If poetry has 'something more divine' in it, this savours more of humanity.[25]

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