A STUDY OF THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

PLOT AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES

For two centuries the plot and narrative techniques of Oliver Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield have inspired copious critical commentary. Because Goldsmith utilized such sensational plot elements as kidnapping, protracted family misfortune, and deception of a virtuous girl by a villain, The Vicar gained immediate popularity with the reading public of the eighteenth century. Within six months following its publication in 1766, The Vicar went through three editions. So popular was this work during the nineteenth century that it averaged nearly two editions annually and was translated seven times into French and at least once into all the major European languages as well as Hungarian, Rumanian, Bohemian, Hebrew, and Icelandic.[1] Typical of late nineteenth-century reaction to this book is an anonymous reviewer's opinion that it lacked literary merit but deserved praise for its moral tendency.[2] Current criticism, however, is more concerned with the artistic achievement of The Vicar than with

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[1]Ralph M. Wardle, Oliver Goldsmith (Lawrence, Kansas, 1957), pp. 168-170.

[2]Robert Hopkins, "The Vicar of Wakefield, A Puzzler to the Critic," Notes and Queries, V (March, 1958), 113-114.

its morality. In creating a plot for The Vicar of Wakefield, Goldsmith attained a relatively high degree of artistic success. Its plot, ingenious in many respects, is not exceedingly complicated.

The Vicar opens his tale by describing for the reader the pleasures of rural life, the characteristics of his family, and his views on monogamy. After presenting this background material, he opens the narrative with an account of the romance between his eldest son, George Primrose, and Arabella Wilmot. The first conflict of the plot occurs when the Vicar tells Mr. Wilmot his views on monogamy and informs him of the loss of his fortune. This revelation results in the separation of George and Arabella, George's being sent to the city, and the migration of the family from Wakefield to the estate of Squire Thornhill. At an inn on the route of their journey, the family meets Mr. Burchell, who relates the reforming of Sir William Thornhill and who later rescues Sophia, the Vicar's younger daughter, from a rapid stream.

Soon after they establish themselves in their new home, the Primroses are honored with a visit from Squire Thornhill, their young landlord. Following the Squire's departure, Burchell stops at the Primrose home and is offered a bed for the night. Refusing the offer, Burchell leaves, and the family is free to discuss the latter's merits. A second call from the Squire follows the next day, during which the Squire attempts to be witty on the subject of the Church,

successfully debates the same subject with Moses, the second son, and arouses the ambition of Mrs. Primrose by his attention to Olivia, her older daughter. The ensuing morning Burchell joins the family for lunch, during which he comments on pathos in contemporary literature. The arrival of the chaplain, announcing the Squire's ball, interrupts the peaceful meal. At the ball Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, two ladies of distinction, encourage Olivia and Sophia to visit London, but the Vicar, suspicious, refuses to approve the plan. A fortune-teller's prediction that Olivia shall marry a Squire and Sophia, a Lord raises the genteel ambitions of Olivia and Sophia even higher. However, the futile attempts of Mrs. Primrose and the children to ride the horses to church on a Sunday morning have a somewhat humbling effect on the family. The Michaelmas Eve celebration of the next day presents a second opportunity for the Primrose family to associate with Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs. As a result of this encounter, Mrs. Primrose suggests that the colt be sold immediately to buy a horse. Moses is sent to the fair for this purpose but returns, not with a horse, but with green spectacles. When Burchell expresses disapproval of the girls' visit to town, Mrs. Primrose expels him from the house. The Vicar, now approving the proposed London trip for his daughters, resolves to sell the remaining horse himself, but he, like Moses, returns home without horse or money. At home he finds more misfortune, for a malicious

letter from Burchell to Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, a copy of which the family find the next morning, has cancelled his daughters' intended excursion. Burchell, appearing on the morrow, reluctantly confesses his guilt. After expelling the alleged scoundrel, the Vicar sermonizes on Guilt and Shame.

The attention of the family is now focused on persuading the Squire to marry Olivia. A family portrait falls short of being a successful undertaking, since the neighbors ridicule its enormous size and envy the Squire's being portrayed therein. Even the suggestion that Olivia may marry Farmer Williams appears only questionably successful in arousing the Squire's interest. Olivia promises to marry Williams if the Squire fails to propose by a specified date. The family seems content with the prospects of her marriage to Williams but is aroused from complacency by the announcement that Olivia has been taken away by a stranger fitting the Squire's description. The Vicar, determined to find her, goes to the estate of the Squire, who leads him to believe that Burchell has taken her away.

At Wells, where Olivia was reported to be seen, the Vicar falls ill but after three weeks is able to return home. He meets a company of strolling players, with one of whom he is invited to the home of a gentleman. Reaching the gentleman's home, he is led into a discussion on "modern politics," which is soon interrupted by the arrival of Mr.

and Mrs. Arnold, owners of the house, and their niece Arabella Wilmot. Following dinner the next night, the Vicar accompanies the ladies of the Arnold household to the theater, where he finds George, his eldest son, to be a sensational new player. Brought to the Arnolds' home, George, after much persuasion, gives an account of his travels. The arrival of the Squire in town proves to be an obstacle to the renewal of the relationship between George and Arabella. The Squire successfully disposes of his rival by securing a commission to the West Indies for George. The Vicar, continuing his journey home, finds Olivia at an inn, impoverished and abandoned. Leaving her at another inn, he approaches home only to find his house ablaze. After he has comforted his family, the Vicar sends for Olivia, who is welcomed sarcastically by her mother.

Since Olivia seems depressed, the Vicar tells the story of Matilda and resolves to prevent the Squire's marriage to Arabella. In the midst of breakfast the following morning, Squire Thornhill arrives only to be confronted with the Vicar's condemnation. The Squire's proposal to marry Olivia to another arouses the father's insolence, whereupon the Squire warns that the Vicar may be compelled to pay his rent or suffer the consequences of not paying. The next day Squire Thornhill's steward calls for the rent; in default of payment, the steward brings officers to arrest the debtor.

Willingly, the Vicar goes to jail, where in a conversation with a fellow prisoner, he discovers the man to be Jenkinson, his deceiver at the fair. After the Vicar preaches to the other prisoners on the folly of serving the devil, he invites Jenkinson to partake of the supper which the family had brought. The next day he presents a plan for reforming the prisoners and preaches against the penal code. Jenkinson advises approval of the approaching marriage of Squire Thornhill, and upon the news of Olivia's death, the Vicar finally acquiesces. The kidnapping of Sophia and a letter from George which brings hope for a change of fortune are followed by the disheartening appearance of George himself in fetters. To comfort his son, the Vicar preaches on the subject of religion versus philosophy.

Upon finishing his sermon, the Vicar is told of Sophia's arrival with Burchell. Slowly Burchell reveals his true identity: Sir William Thornhill. He then secures permission for Jenkinson to produce Sophia's kidnapper. At that moment Squire Thornhill arrives to defend himself. His defense is successful until Jenkinson returns with Baxter, Sophia's kidnapper, and exposes the Squire's part in the kidnapping. Miss Wilmot appears now and is reunited with George. When the Squire threatens to hold Arabella's fortune, Jenkinson produces Olivia, alive, as the Squire's lawful wife. Sir William Thornhill assigns a punishment for his nephew and proposes marriage to Sophia. The double wedding and the

gathering of the family around the fireside conclude the narrative.

The plot of The Vicar of Wakefield is conventional in its chronological arrangement of events. Like many such plots, however, extensive use of flashback or retrospect[3] is made. The flashbacks of The Vicar are related by a person involved in the episode and not by an omniscient author or the narrator. The first example of this departure from the normal chronological arrangement of events occurs when Burchell, accompanying the Primroses to their new home, tells the story of Sir William Thornhill--his excessive generosity in youth, his subsequent loss of fortune, and his renaissance through his exercise of prudence.[4]

Flashback is used again when Moses, returned from the fair, relates that he has sold the colt for three pounds, five shillings, and two pence and has returned not with money or another horse, but with a gross of green spectacles. All of Chapter Twenty, one of the longest of the novel, is a flashback. George Primrose, resembling the picaro of the picaresque novel, leads the reader from one adventure to

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[3] A flashback or retrospect is "an interruption in the chronological arrangement, presenting an earlier episode than the one that has just been presented." (Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto, The Study of Literature, A Handbook of Critical Essays and Terms, Boston, 1960, p. 325.)

[4] Oliver Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield, "Everyman's Edition" (London, 1908), pp. 15-17. (All subsequent references will be to this edition.)

another as he gives an account of his travels after leaving Wakefield.[5] The next flashback occurs when the Vicar, stopping at an inn, finds Olivia and asks her to relate the circumstances of her mysterious disappearance. Olivia, in this account, tells of her marriage to the Squire which, both at first thought was false, her efforts to forget infamy in a tumult of pleasure, and her final desertion by the Squire. Ephraim Jenkinson's autobiographical sketch is the next instance of flashback. The occasion for this flashback is Moses' comment that the narrative of Jenkinson's life "must be extremely instructive and amusing."[6]

On entering the jail, George Primrose in a brief flashback relates the incidents that led to his imprisonment--the receipt of his mother's letter, his challenging the Squire to a duel, and his arrest by four domestics. The final flashback of the novel is inserted immediately after Sophia's appearance at the jail with Burchell. During this reunion with her family, Sophia has occasion to relate the details of an attempt to kidnap her and her rescue by Mr. Burchell.[7]

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[5] Ibid., pp. 63-64, 116-131. (For a summary of George's travels see below p. 9.)

[6] Ibid., pp. 139-140, 169-170.

[7] Ibid., pp. 186, 194-195.

Another consideration in the plot analysis concerns the author's use of other breaks in the narrative which do not carry the action forward. In view of the contributions which such breaks in The Vicar make to theme and characterization, these digressions cannot be classified as defects in the novel, although they may, perhaps, be considered defects in the structure of a closely knit plot. The breaks in narrative fall into four categories: (1) allegories and other types of stories, (2) sermons not containing stories, (3) conversations not containing stories, and (4) a long account of George Primrose's search for fortune.

George opens his odyssey by relating how he became discouraged in his attempt to become an usher at an academy. He continues by describing his experiences as a neglected author, his service in Squire Thornhill's household, his visit to the office of Crispe (a man who offered £30 a year to anyone who would become a slave in America), his attempt to teach English to the "Dutch" and Greek to the students at the University of Louvain, his trip through Flanders and France and by explaining why he joined a company of strolling players.[8] Unlike Olivia's account of her experiences, the events described by George do not contribute to the essential action of the story.

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[8] Ibid., pp. 116-131.

The sermons not containing stories are best illustrated by the two which the Vicar delivers to his fellow prisoners. The first is a short exhortation on the folly of serving the devil, who has led them into their wretched condition without promising relief. The second sermon is a comparison of religion and philosophy and an invitation for the prisoners to accept the comforts of religion.[9]

The conversations not containing stories are best illustrated by a discussion on modern politics between Dr. Primrose and the servants of the Arnold home. On being asked his views concerning liberty, "that glorious privilege of Britons," the Vicar presents a convincing defense of monarchy. Another example is the conversation on modern drama between Dr. Primrose and the strolling player that he meets on his journey from Wells. The pleasures and aversions of the contemporary playwright and his audience are the principal topics of debate.[10]

The most frequently used departure from the main action is the story. The first of these stories is told in the form of a ballad by Burchell and concerns the hospitality of a hermit to a girl in the disguise of a young man. The revelation that the two are parted lovers who become happily

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[9] Ibid., pp. 167-168, 188-192.

[10] Ibid., pp. 102-103, 105-110.

united concludes the story. A second illustration is the story of the Dwarf and the Giant told by Dick Primrose. This tale, told at the request of the Vicar, is intended to serve as a point of departure for a homily on the futility of the attempts of the poor to gain a station in life commensurate with that of the rich. A third illustration is the allegory of Guilt and Shame. This story relates that Guilt and Shame were companions at first but separated in a short while, Guilt taking Fate as its companion and Shame returning to accompany Virtue. A fourth break fitting this category is the story told in "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog." At the request of his father, Bill Primrose sings an account of the mad dog who bit a man but died as a result of its action. The final illustration of this type of digression is the story of Matilda, which is recounted by the Vicar for the benefit of Olivia and is concerned with a young Italian widow who believed her son to be lost in the river Volturna but found him many years later to be a general in the Italian army.[11]

Despite these breaks in the plot, which do not carry the action forward, The Vicar maintains its unity. One of Goldsmith's favorite devices for unifying the plot is the foreshadowing of future events. For example, the Vicar speaks of an "expected" alliance between George and Arabella.

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[11] Ibid., pp. 38-43, 66-67, 82, 93-94, 148-149.

This comment portends the imminent sundering of their wedding plans. A few pages later the Vicar admonishes George to act "a good part" in the "amphitheater of life." The use of terms dealing with the theater foreshadows George's association with the company of strolling players.[12]

In Chapter Three Burchell, telling his story of Sir William Thornhill, makes this significant slip of the tongue: " . . . he now found that a man's own heart must be ever given to gain that of another. I now found that--that--I forgot what I was going to observe; in short, sir, he resolved to respect himself . . . ."[13] According to Carl Grabo, the slip is made for the benefit of the reader so that he may know Burchell's true identity;[14] however, the slip is too obscure for most readers to notice.

The fortune-teller's prediction that Olivia shall marry a Squire and Sophia a Lord presages the actual marriage of Olivia to Squire Thornhill and the marriage of Sophia to Sir William Thornhill. Olivia's marriage is also heralded when her mother, commenting on the looks and conversation of the Squire directed toward her, says: " . . . for who knows how this may end?" The Vicar's observation that Olivia seemed pensively tranquil after the

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[12] Ibid., pp. 7, 13.

[13] Ibid., p. 17.

[14] Carl Grabo, The Technique of the Novel (New York, 1928), p. 35.

Squire stopped paying visits to her foreshadows her departure with the Squire a few nights later. The references to the Squire as Olivia's "fancied admirer" and to Burchell as Olivia's "fancied deluder" augur the revelation to Olivia that the Squire is false in his admiration and the realization of the Vicar that Burchell is not Olivia's deluder. A final instance of foreshadowing is the Vicar's statement of optimism that the family "may yet see happier days," and within a few hours these words of hope are fulfilled.[15]

Another unifying technique of the plot is the element of mystery or suspense which it contains. E. M. Forster says, "Mystery is essential to a plot. . . ."[16] In relation to this essential characteristic, The Vicar's plot may be classified as artistically successful. In creating the characters of Jenkinson and Burchell, Goldsmith inserts mystery into his plot. Soon after meeting Burchell, the reader begins to wonder where this seemingly learned vagabond secured his insight into mankind and contemporary affairs. Likewise, Jenkinson's actions in producing Sophia's kidnapper and in asserting that the Squire has a wife leave the reader puzzled for a moment. The kidnappings produce an atmosphere of mystery equal to that aroused by any kidnapping account in

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[15] Goldsmith, pp. 35, 48, 91-92, 100, 176.

[16] E. M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (London, 1928), p. 118.

a modern newspaper. The greatest mystery of the plot concerns the family's continued loss of fortune. Because the reader sympathizes with the Vicar and his family, he wonders how much more suffering the Primroses will be able to undergo. While Forster asserts that mysteries are essential, he adds that they must be solved.[17] As in any successful plot, the mysteries of The Vicar are solved.

According to Aristotle, a successful author selects and arranges the events of his plot so that they form a unified action. The terms rising action, climax, and falling action, often used to describe the unified action of a five-act play, may also apply to a novel.[18] Louis Cazamian, who has studied The Vicar with a view to these considerations, concludes: " . . . the plot, though loose at some moments, concentrates and unifies itself in a true action. It is handled by one who has a keen sense of situations, and here the playwright is recognizable. . . ."[19] In unifying his rising action, Goldsmith incorporated two plot devices: the use of disguise and the reversal of fortune, both of which are common to many other pieces of literature.

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[17] Ibid., p. 129.

[18] Barnet, pp. 326-327.

[19] Emile Legouis and Louis Cazamian, A History of English Literature (New York, 1930), p. 877.

Disguise, especially in drama, has been a favorite plot device of English literature for many centuries. Shakespeare made very effective use of disguise in The Merchant of Venice and Twelfth Night. The first instance of disguise in The Vicar resembles that found in these plays, a young girl disguising herself as a young man. Burchell's ballad of the "gentle Hermit of the dale" provides the description of this deception. The young man, graciously offered the hospitality of the Hermit's home, proves in reality to be the rich young maiden who spurned the Hermit's love in her youthful days but who has come now to the dale to find the solitude that he sought.[20]

The Primroses' encounter with the two ladies of distinction (Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilelmina Amelia Skeggs) is another example of women employing a disguise. These women are first described as "young ladies richly dressed, whom he [the Squire] introduced as women of very great distinction and fashion from town." Although the reader strongly suspects these "ladies," it is not until after her abandonment by the Squire that Olivia reveals to her father that the distinguished ladies are in reality "abandoned women of the town" who, having no pity or breeding, were employed by the Squire to lure Olivia and Sophia to London.[21]

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[20]Goldsmith, pp. 38-43.

[21]Ibid., pp. 45, 138.

Another minor instance of disguise is the appearance of the Arnolds' butler as the master of the house. By leading the Vicar into the assumption that he is the master of the house, he is able to provoke a discussion on modern politics in which, says the Vicar, "he talked politics as well as most country gentlemen do."[22]

The two most prominent instances of ruse are those of Jenkinson and Burchell. Jenkinson first appears as a "reverend-looking man" who pretends to have a horse to sell. In this role he appears to Moses Primrose and finally persuades the young man to buy a gross of green spectacles with silver rims and shagreen cases. In similarly tricking the Vicar, Jenkinson appears as a benevolent old man who speaks wisely on the subject of the world's creation. Upon entering into conversation with a fellow-prisoner following his incarceration, the Vicar discovers that the fellow-prisoner, speaking again on cosmogony and creation, is the deceiver of both himself and Moses.[23]

Burchell, in his first appearance to the Vicar, is described as "a gentleman who seemed to be about thirty, dressed in clothes that once were laced." From the host and hostess of the inn, the Vicar learns that the young

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[22] Ibid., pp. 110-111.

[23] Ibid., pp. 64-65, 72-73, 162.

gentleman on the preceding day had paid the town beadle three guineas to spare a broken old soldier but that he now lacked money with which to pay his rent. Burchell's real identity finally is revealed to the Primrose family in Chapter Thirty, in which Burchell orders "the best dinner," the jailer's servant announces that a person of distinction awaits an audience with Burchell, and Burchell declares his identity as Sir William Thornhill in an admonitory speech to George Primrose.[24]

Reversal of fortune, a plot device used extensively in eighteenth-century drama and prose fiction, refers not only to the losing of wealth but also to disappointments in love and to the loss of family and friends. Albert Baugh, in summarizing the plot of The Vicar of Wakefield, has this to say about the family's reversal of fortune: " . . . clouds gather more and more blackly over the poor Primroses; finally when their complete misery seems absurd, the sun shines out, all woes vanish, and we leave the family living happily ever afterwards."[25]

Like Job of the Old Testament, Charles Primrose, the Vicar of Wakefield, is a happy and prosperous man in his first appearance to the reader. He has at that time

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[24]Ibid., pp. 14, 196-199.

[25]Albert Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England (New York, 1948), p. 1060.

sufficient wealth, a well-bred wife, and six virtuous children. The first blow to the family's fortune comes when Mr. Wilmot, aroused by the Vicar's views on monogamy, threatens to sunder the wedding plans of George and Arabella. Plans for the wedding are completely shattered by the announcement that the merchant who holds the Vicar's money has left town to avoid bankruptcy.[26]

As a result of losing his wealth, the Vicar is forced to move his family to the estate of Squire Thornhill. Making an effort to appear genteel in their new home, the family are met on every side by disasters. First, Moses is victimized. Then the Vicar is hoodwinked into exchanging his horse for a note payable on his neighbor Flamborough. A few days later it is discovered that the new family portrait is too large for the house and is an object of the neighbors' ridicule.[27]

The really serious disasters begin with the report that Olivia has left home in the company of an unknown man. In searching for Olivia, the Vicar falls ill. Returning home, he finds the house ablaze and is burned himself in saving his youngest sons. As a result of failure to pay his rent, the Vicar is imprisoned soon thereafter. Within the confines of the jail, he is told that Olivia is dead, that Sophia

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[26]Goldsmith, p. 9.

[27]Ibid., pp. 64, 75, 85-86.

has been kidnapped, and that George is to be tried for the capital offense of sending a challenge.[28]

Chapter Twenty-Nine, with its many misfortunes, is the climax of the novel. The title of Chapter Thirty, "Happier Prospects Begin to Appear," indicates that the family fortunes at last will change. Two devices are used to bring the plot from its climax to its conclusion or, in other words, to carry the falling action of the novel to a conclusion. These devices are the use of a final revelation scene and a deus ex machina for the restoration of good fortune and happiness.

Goldsmith made effective use of revelation scenes not only in The Vicar but also in She Stoops to Conquer. Like Miss Hardcastle, who assumes the position of a poor relation of the family to win the heart of Mr. Marlow, Sir William Thornhill has doffed his gentlemanly clothing to win the hearts of Sophia and of her family. Burchell reveals his true identity in this statement: "It would be wronging him [the Squire] and you [George] to condemn him without examination: if there be injury, there shall be redress; and this I may say, without boasting, that none have ever taxed the injustice of Sir William Thornhill."[29] From this

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[28] Ibid., pp. 96, 144, 157, 179, 181, 186.

[29] Ibid., p. 199.

statement, the family learns that Burchell is in reality Sir William Thornhill.

The second revelation concerns the uncovering of Squire Thornhill's personality disguise. Timothy Baxter, Sophia's kidnapper, reveals to the people congregated in the jail that Squire Thornhill had planned the whole affair, intending to rescue her and thus appear as her champion. Ephraim Jenkinson further exposes the Squire's character: " . . . he commissioned me to procure him a false license and a false priest, in order to deceive this young lady [Olivia Primrose]."[30] Jenkinson adds that the license and priest which he procured were real; and, as a result, Olivia became the true wife of the Squire.

Two other revelations are concerned with love affairs of the novel. Arabella reveals that she still loves George and that she would not have accepted the Squire's affections if he had not told her that George had gone to America with a new wife. Sir William Thornhill, by offering Sophia to Jenkinson, discovers that he himself is the desired object of Sophia's affection.[31]

The employment of a _deus ex machina_ in bringing a plot to its conclusion dates back to the ancient Greek theater. The _deus ex machina_ of _The Vicar_ takes the form of two

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[30] _Ibid._, pp. 204-206, 214.

[31] _Ibid._, pp. 208, 217.

persons--Sir William Thornhill and Ephraim Jenkinson. Ephraim Jenkinson's role is to produce the kidnapper of Sophia, to expose the true character of the Squire, and to be the means by which the Squire and Olivia are actually united in marriage. Sir William Thornhill's role is to rescue Sophia from her kidnapper, to be the instrument through which Jenkinson is allowed to leave the jail and produce Baxter, to be the agent through whom George is freed and reunited to Arabella with prospects of fortune, to serve as a judge of his nephew's actions, and to become Sophia's husband.

The use of a deus ex machina is considered by many critics to be a serious plot defect. For instance, one critic says that its use "to solve a complication is now generally condemned as a weakness in plot structure since it is so generally conceded that plot action should spring from the innate quality of the characters participant in the action."[32] If the reader applies this criticism to The Vicar, he is likely to conclude that its plot is weak, because the action is carried forth principally by the author's use of accidental meeting and his employment of Mr. Jenkinson and Sir Thornhill as manipulators of the plot. Carl Grabo calls The Vicar's plot, "a tangle of inconsistencies

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[32]William Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature (New York, 1936), p. 317.

and coincidences."[33] On what episodes of the narrative might Grabo base his opinion? First, the theft of the Vicar's wealth at the moment of George's anticipated marriage to Arabella is a coincidence, in that the Vicar's character had nothing to do with his loss of fortune. A second coincidence is the introduction of the Vicar to Burchell. Although the two are brought together because the Vicar desires to see "the stranger of so much charity," the fact that they are lodging in the same inn on that particular night is a coincidence.[34]

Another coincidence is the coming of the Vicar to the Arnolds' home. The accidental meeting of the Vicar and the Arnolds' butler, which provides the source of this coincidence, cannot be attributed to the character traits of either the Vicar or the butler. Another incident closely connected to the preceding is the Vicar's finding George at the playhouse, which also must be attributed to accident. Continuing his journey home, the Vicar accidentally finds his eldest daughter, Olivia. By his recognition of her voice as she speaks to the landlady from an upstairs room, the father and daughter are reunited. The Vicar's arrival home just in time to save his sleeping family from the

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[33]Grabo, p. 39.

[34]Goldsmith, pp. 9, 14.

burning house is another occurrence which must be attributed to coincidence.[35]

In the scenes which follow the Vicar's imprisonment, many instances of coincidence are found. The Vicar's meeting of Ephraim Jenkinson in the jail is wholly unexpected. Once in the jail, Jenkinson's native friendliness and the Vicar's willingness to converse naturally bring the two together, yet the confinement of the two in the same jail must be attributed to accident.[36] Other instances which illustrate Goldsmith's use of coincidence are the bringing together of Sophia and Burchell so that the latter may rescue her from the kidnapper, the employing of Jenkinson as the producer of both Sophia's kidnapper and the "resurrected" Olivia and as the deceiver of the Squire in his marriage with Olivia, and the coming of Arabella Wilmot to the prison as a result of seeing the young Primrose sons playing in the street.

That the episodes described above must be attributed to coincidence or the use of a _deus ex machina_ is indisputable. But that Goldsmith's use of coincidence is a plot defect does not necessarily follow. Three considerations seem to justify this technique in the plot of _The Vicar_. First, _The Vicar of Wakefield_, if it is to be considered a

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[35] _Ibid._, pp. 103, 113, 136, 143.

[36] _Ibid._, pp. 161-162.

melodramatic romance (and Wardle says that it may be so considered[37]), must end happily and must be based on a plot which "is in accordance with our wishes, not with our knowledge."[38] Second, Goldsmith prepared the reader for the startling scenes of revelation and restoration to good fortune at the end of the novel by interspersing in the preceding narrative stories of fairy-tale quality such as the ballad of Edwin and Angelina and the story of Matilda. Frederic Hilles defends the artistic structure of The Vicar's plot in this way: "Many of the apparently extraneous incidents are inserted in order to heighten the verisimilitude of the melodramatic main narrative by setting against it even more improbable and unbelievable tales."[39] The third consideration is the author's attitude toward his use of coincidence. Goldsmith considered coincidences to be a natural part of life. Through the mouth of the Vicar, Goldsmith expressed the idea that "many seeming accidents must unite before we can be clothed or fed! The peasant must be disposed to labor, the shower must fall, the wind

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[37] Wardle, p. 171.

[38] Edwin Muir, The Structure of the Novel (New York, 1929), p. 19.

[39] Quoted in Curtis Dahl, "Patterns of Disguise in The Vicar of Wakefield," ELH, XXV (June, 1958), 90-91.

fill the merchant's sail, or numbers must want the usual supply."[40]

Although nineteenth-century critics praised The Vicar for its moral tendency, twentieth-century critics are interested primarily in determining its artistic success. The plot of The Vicar is conventional in its chronology of events and in its retrospective passages, which the persons involved in the episodes relate to the reader. There are frequent breaks in the narrative which contribute to the development of theme and character. These digressions fall into four categories: allegories and other types of stories, sermons not containing stories, conversations not containing stories, and a travel account. Although the plot is interspersed with these extraneous passages, its coherence is maintained. In unifying the plot, Goldsmith foreshadowed future events and inserted elements of mystery which the denouement explains. Other plot devices are Goldsmith's use of disguise and reversal of fortune in the rising action and use of a scene of revelation and a deus ex machina in the falling action. The author's employment of coincidence and accidental meeting is called the greatest plot defect of the novel. That there are unexpected occurrences is unquestionable, but the view that they constitute a defect does not follow.

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[40]Goldsmith, p. 207.

CHAPTER II

CHARACTERIZATION

The method of characterization which Goldsmith used in The Vicar of Wakefield has been censured by some and commended by others. A contemporary evaluation of The Vicar appearing in the Critical Review praised the characterization.[1] A late nineteenth-century critic found that the description of characters is masterly in perception and delineation, that the characters are drawn by a few strong strokes, that the character traits described are those which "make us feel at home with the characters," and that consistency of character is maintained fairly well except in the case of Burchell.[2] Another critic of the same period commented that the characters of this novel appear "faulty and superficial" by contrast with those of later novels; only to the Vicar himself does this critic attribute "typical human naturalness." The characters, he believed, are treated too objectively and appear isolated and insufficiently motivated.[3]

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[1] Wardle, p. 170.

[2] R. Adelaide Witham, "Introduction," The Vicar of Wakefield, The Academy Classics (New York, 1899), p. 13.

[3] H. A. Davidson, "Aids to Study," The Vicar of Wakefield, Riverside Literature Series (Boston, 1895), p. 242.

Of primary concern to this character analysis is the possible origin of personages in The Vicar of Wakefield and their naturalness and consistency. Two critical terms are used in the following discussion: flat character and round character. The flat character is one who is "constructed round a single idea or quality" and who "can be expressed in one sentence."[4] The round character is one who develops and who has a capacity for surprising the reader convincingly.[5]

Although attempts are often made to characterize the Vicar of Wakefield in one sentence, such attempts fall short of their purpose, because a thorough study of his speech and action reveals that Charles Primrose is not a flat character. With "human naturalness" the Vicar repeatedly surprises the reader by his inconsistency. He has no one personality trait without possessing, at least to a small degree, its opposite. The Vicar is a preacher, and to a great extent he acts and speaks in accordance with his sermons. His inconsistencies arise from the fact that he "unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth: he is a priest, a husbandman, and the father of a family."[6] When the duties attached to these occupations

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[4]Muir, p. 135. [5]Ibid., pp. 139, 141.

[6]"Advertisement to First Edition," The Vicar of Wakefield, Riverside Literature Series (Boston, 1895), p. 14.

come into conflict, the reader may expect to find the Vicar inconsistent.

Amiability is a prominent characteristic of which the Vicar boasts. Speaking of himself and his family, he says, "There was in fact, nothing that could make us angry with the world or each other."[7] He demonstrates this quality by his act of intercession for the butler who, masquerading as the owner of the home in which he worked, had duped the Vicar into conversing on the subject of "modern politics." At the request of Dr. Primrose, the butler's master forgives him for the masquerade. Another instance of his amiability is his willingness to converse with Jenkinson in the jail. The Vicar tells the reader: "It was my constant rule in life never to avoid the conversation of any man who seemed to desire it. . . ."[8] An even stronger indication of his kind disposition is his promise "to soften, or totally suppress" Mr. Flamborough's evidence against Jenkinson as a coiner.[9] In view of the trickery used earlier by Jenkinson to obtain the horse that the Vicar had brought to the fair, Dr. Primrose's act of forgiveness certainly must be applauded.

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[7]Goldsmith, p. 1.

[8]Ibid., pp. 111, 161. The Vicar's willingness to converse is a contrast to Goldsmith's own aversion to conversation. Johnson says of Goldsmith: "He was not a social man. He never exchanged mind with you" (James Boswell, Life of Samuel Johnson, "Modern Library" [New York, 1952], p. 305).

[9]Ibid., p. 163.

His expressions of pleasure at the hospitality shown by his family are also indications of his good nature. For example, his sons' sacrificing their bed to the use of a guest highly pleases the Vicar.

Although amiable and good-natured in most of his actions, the Vicar could be vexed. Troublesome guests, the robbing of his orchard by schoolboys, and the falling asleep of a squire during his sermon are a few of the "accidents" which aroused his ire at Wakefield. In his new home the Vicar continues to be annoyed by small matters such as the wearing of "laces, ribbons, bugles, and catgut" by his daughters and of "crimson paduasoy" by his wife. Feeling the duties of the husbandman, he says, "I do not know whether such flouncing and shredding is becoming even in the rich, if we consider, upon a moderate calculation, that the nakedness of the indigent world may be clothed from the trimmings of the vain."[11] The fortune-hunting adventures of Mrs. Primrose and her daughters also provoke contemptuous remarks from the Vicar, who expresses annoyance with fortune hunters of either sex. The Vicar, however,

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[10] Ibid., p. 29. (Other examples may be found on pp. 2, 21.)

[11] Ibid., pp. 3, 21-22. Mr. Hardcastle resembles the Vicar in his view on superfluous dress: "I could never teach the fools of this age that the indigent world could be clothed out of the trimmings of the vain" (Oliver Goldsmith, She Stoops to Conquer, edited by Dudley Miles [Boston, 1917], p. 8).

acts in a contradictory manner when he agrees as a father to set a trap by which Olivia may win Squire Thornhill, their rich young landlord. The Vicar's duties as a father also cause him to grow displeased with the frequent visits of Burchell. Desiring for Sophia a more stable and prosperous husband, he admits that he is secretly pleased to be "rid of a guest" whose motives he had reason to suspect. As a priest who must receive the unfortunates of the world, Dr. Primrose scolds his wife and states that he feels a pang of conscience for their "breach of hospitality" to Burchell. The Vicar's role as a priest also causes him to be "entirely displeased" with the laughter of the company on the day of the double wedding. He reminds them "of the grave, becoming, and sublime deportment they should assume upon this mystical occasion," but they so disregard his sermon while going to the church that he threatens "to turn back in indignation."[12] His occasional tendency to outbursts of anger is best exemplified by his reaction on three occasions: Olivia's leaving home, the kidnapping of Sophia, and the appearance of George in fetters.[13]

Another character trait of the Vicar is resignation to the will of God. He regrets the loss of his fortune only

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[12]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 26, 37, 69, 219-220.

[13]See below, pp. 31-32 for comments on these outbursts.

because his family has not been educated to accept the contempt which comes to the "humble." He preaches to his family, who have been frustrated in their genteel ambitions:

> You see, my children . . . how little is to be got by attempts to impose upon the world in coping with our betters. . . . Unequal combinations are always disadvantageous to the weaker side, the rich having the pleasure, and the poor the inconveniences that result from them.[14]

But his resignation is not complete; at the news of Olivia's elopement he exclaims: "Now, then . . . my children, go and be miserable; for we shall never enjoy one hour more. And oh, may Heaven's everlasting fury light upon him [the Squire] and his!--thus to rob me of my child!"[15] Not only does the Vicar curse the Squire, but he also threatens to pursue the villain with his pistol. At the insistence of Mrs. Primrose and Moses, he resumes his submissive role: "Blessed be His holy name for all the good He hath given, and for all that he hath taken away."[16] His trust in God is again exemplified when he observes to Olivia that often Heaven is kinder to us than we are to ourselves and when he says to his family while the flames destroy their home: " . . . now let the flames burn on, and all my possessions perish. Here they are; I have saved my treasure [his children]."[17] The Vicar,

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[14]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 11, 66.

[15]Ibid., p. 96. [16]Ibid., p. 97.

[17]Ibid., pp. 142, 144.

too, humbly accepts imprisonment for his debts. When his parishioners try to free him, he admonishes them to heed his instructions from the pulpit and not to fly in the face of justice.

Sophia's kidnapping, however, ends this period of passive acquiescence in his fate. The Vicar becomes emotional: "Now . . . the sum of my miseries is made up, nor is it in the power of anything on earth to give me another pang."[18] The efforts of Mrs. Primrose and Moses bring the Vicar temporarily to patient submission: "How unjustly did I complain of being stripped of every comfort, when still I hear that he [George] is . . . kept in reserve to support his widowed mother, and to protect his brothers and sisters."[19] But this trust in Providence is short lived. At the appearance of George in fetters, the Vicar says, "Oh that sight could break my heart at once, and let me die. . . . May all the curses that ever sunk a soul fall heavy upon the murderer of my children!"[20] At George's bidding, however, the Vicar becomes resigned once more, and in a sermon to his fellow prisoners he points out that no man can be completely happy in this life; indeed, he may be completely miserable. But he who knows no joy in this world may be comforted by

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[18] Ibid., pp. 160, 182. [19] Ibid., p. 183.

[20] Ibid., p. 185.

thoughts of the eternal rewards reserved for those who trust in God.[21]

If any explanation may be given for the Vicar's occasional failure to see justice in the acts of Providence, it is that he fears no misfortune for himself; only when calamity is directed primarily toward his children does he find occasion to rail. The Vicar excuses this inconsistency of his character in this way: "There is but one way in this life of wounding my happiness, and that is by injuring them [his children]."[22]

Another trait often attributed to the Vicar is humility. One commentator has suggested that the reader of Goldsmith's day probably criticized Goldsmith for making the Vicar excessively humble in order to heighten the novel's effect.[23] Although this criticism may seem valid to the casual reader, it is easily refuted. To a great extent the Vicar lives up to the common saying that there was at Wakefield "a parson wanting pride." But very early in the novel the Vicar admits pride. First, as a father, he is proud of his children. He compliments the beauty of his daughters and later states, "I have no apprehensions from the conduct of my children." Secondly, the Vicar confesses that vanity had led him to

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[21] Ibid., pp. 188-192. [22] Ibid., p. 169.

[23] Davidson, p. 10.

show Wilmot his tract on monogamy, "a masterpiece both for argument and style."[24]

The loss of fortune has an immediate humbling effect on the Vicar; before leaving Wakefield, he tells his family: "We are now poor, my fondlings, and wisdom bids us conform to our humble situation." Not even the Vicar, however, displays complete humility, for he eventually joins his family in their ambition to ensnare Squire Thornhill. As a part of the scheme, Mrs. Primrose suggests that the Vicar sell their remaining horse. In pondering this task, the Vicar vainly asserts, "Though this was one of the first mercantile transactions of my life, yet I had no doubt about acquitting myself with reputation." The Vicar continues to preen himself on his ability as a pamphleteer; in the family portrait painted by a travelling painter, the Vicar chooses to be portrayed in his "gown and band," presenting his books on the Whistonian controversy to Venus, his wife.[25]

The "death" of Olivia brings the Vicar to self-abasement again. Upon Jenkinson's announcement of her death, the Vicar declares, "Heaven be praised . . . there is no pride left me now: I should detest my own heart if I saw either pride or resentment lurking there." In offering Sophia to Burchell

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[24]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 6, 8, 26.

[25]Ibid., pp. 12, 70, 85. (Other examples of the Vicar's pride may be found on pp. 70, 73.)

before he knows the latter's true identity, the Vicar also demonstrates extreme humility.[26] But the reader is not convinced that Dr. Primrose has, indeed, overcome pride. His position as a father will cause him to worship his children. And as a pamphleteer he will proudly maintain monogamist views.

The most common criticism of the Vicar's character is that he "is an impossible mixture of folly and wisdom."[27] And truly his alternating perception of and blindness to reality often appear inexplicable. For instance, Primrose recognizes even in their first meeting that Burchell has a superfluity of wisdom and amiability, but Burchell's poverty and attachment to Sophia blind the Vicar for a time to his true worth. Primrose also seems to perceive the depraved character of Lady Blarney, Miss Skeggs, and Squire Thornhill in his first encounters with them. After Squire Thornhill's first visit to the Primrose home, the Vicar comments that "he has not prepossessed me in his favour." Yet later, under temptation to dispose of Olivia advantageously, he recalls evidence of the Squire's "sincerity." The gross speech and finery of the two "ladies" prejudice the Vicar against their initial efforts of friendliness. Their "very discreet and serious dialogue upon virtue," however, pleases the Vicar

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[26] Ibid., pp. 179-180, 196. [27] Grabo, p. 36.

to such an extent that he later approves their proposal that his daughters accompany them to London.[28]

The Vicar's blindness appears to be disappearing when he comments on Burchell's letter to the "ladies": "There seemed indeed, something applicable to both sides in this letter, and its censures might as well be referred to those to whom it was written, as to us. . . ."[29] But he applies the censures to his family, only momentarily conjecturing that the "ladies" may be the "lewd" ones referred to in the letter. He shows true perception into the Squire's character after the latter's proposal to marry Olivia to another: "Thou hast once woefully, irreparably deceived me. I reposed my heart upon thine honour, and have found its baseness."[30] The Vicar again reveals acute insight into Burchell's character when he offers Sophia to him, recognizing that even in poverty "honest brave Burchell" is a worthy man.[31]

There are two explanations for the Vicar's wavering perception and blindness. First, the Vicar is "a thorough sentimentalist in his trust of man,"[32] an attribute perhaps closely allied with his decision to become a priest. The second explanation concerns his role as a father. Michael Macmillan suggests that the Vicar is

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[28]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 26, 37, 48, 60.

[29]Ibid., p. 78. [30]Ibid., p. 155. [31]Ibid., p. 196.

[32]W. F. Gallaway, Jr., "The Sentimentalism of Goldsmith," PMLA, XLVIII (December, 1933), 1168.

> far wiser than his wife and daughters but he does not always exert, as he ought to do, his authority as the father of the family. He is 'tired of being always wise,' when his wisdom seems to put him out of sympathy with those whom he dearly loves.[33]

If the Vicar consistently manifests one character trait, it is benevolence, which Macmillan describes as his "chief character element."[34] The charity of Dr. Primrose has its origin in his being "by nature, an admirer of happy human faces." As the priest of Wakefield, the Vicar gives all the profits of his parish to the widows and orphans. Even after the loss of his fortune, he continues his benevolence by giving the needy stranger Burchell his purse. Primrose's plan to relieve the suffering of his fellow prisoners indicates, too, that he finds pleasure in making the human heart happy. Not only does the Vicar perform charitable deeds, but he also desires friendship with people who themselves are charitable. Both Burchell's payment of the beadle to spare the old soldier and Jenkinson's gift of £5 to "the modest youth" cause the Vicar to initiate an acquaintance with these two men.[35] An instance in which the Vicar's kindhearted attitude may be questioned is his

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[33]Michael Macmillan, "Introduction," The Vicar of Wakefield (London, 1950), p. xxii.

[34]Ibid., p. xx.

[35]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 2, 6, 14, 72.

acquiescence in the scheme to use "honest Farmer Williams as a decoy"[36] to trap Squire Thornhill into marriage. The reason for the Vicar's inconsistency may be the human frailty he often shows when opposed by members of his family.

According to various commentators, the Vicar's prototype in real life could have been Goldsmith's father, his uncle Contarine, or his brother Henry. Davidson suggests that the "village preacher of real life sits for the portrait" and that the Vicar assumes the place in literature of the "parson" or the "conventional good man."[37] Cazamian believes that the Vicar "is a moral figure of which English literature offers us many close and distinct replicas,"[38] Fielding's Parson Adams, Sterne's Uncle Toby, and Addison's Sir Roger de Coverley. Whiteford considers Dr. Primrose a "compact composition" of the three literary characters mentioned above and the optimistic Job of our times being portrayed in simplicity of narrative to set off the good individual in life for whom the snares are set.[39] Witham qualifies his own comparison of Dr. Primrose and Job by stating that "the deep despair and complaints of Job have no parallel in the Vicar's attitude."[40]

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[36]Macmillan, pp. xiii-xiv. [37]Davidson, p. 238.

[38]Legouis and Cazamian, p. 879.

[39]Robert Whiteford, Motives in English Fiction (New York, 1918), pp. 139-140.

[40]Witham, p. 13.

Like the Vicar, Mrs. Primrose is often a stereotype. Davidson says she is "fussy, small-souled, intriguing."[41] That she possesses these characteristics is undeniable; however, to say that these are her only traits does not follow. The close observer finds that she develops to a certain degree within the novel and must be classified as a round character. The reader's first impression of her is very favorable. In the first paragraph of the novel the Vicar describes her as a "good-natured, notable woman" who is well-bred and relatively well-learned. The instances, however, in which she displays amiability and wisdom are very few. Poverty teaches her only humility.[42]

Pride is the source of Mrs. Deborah Primrose's weakness. Her failure to recognize the worth of the disguised Burchell stems from her desire to see Sophia well married. In several conversations with Burchell, the Vicar's wife attempts to display her superior wit. On one of these occasions she raises her voice to compensate for her lack of reasoning power. On two other occasions, the Vicar, seeing that her attempt at intellectual humor is failing, replaces her in the conversation. Her blindness to the real character of the Squire also stems from vanity. By a display of genteel manners and affected speech, the Squire raises the

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[41]Davidson, p. 10. [42]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 1.

ambition of Mrs. Primrose so high that she begins to believe her ingenious tricks for trapping the Squire into marriage are successful.[43]

Mrs. Primrose demonstrates that she finally has acquired humility as a result of misfortune in at least two closing episodes of the novel. While eating breakfast on the honeysuckle bank one morning immediately following Olivia's return, the Vicar's wife, forgetting her wounded pride, breaks into tears and expresses love of "her daughter as before." The second instance in which she demonstrates humility occurs during the Vicar's incarceration. Feeling a sense of guilt for her breach of hospitality to Burchell, she says, "The slights you received from me the last time I had the honour of seeing you at our house, and the jokes which I audaciously threw out--these jokes, sir, I fear, can never be forgiven."[44]

George, the Vicar's eldest son, is a prime example of the young man who leaves home to make his living, "sows his wild oats," and emerges a wiser man. Johnson says of Goldsmith: "He has been loose in his principles, but he is coming right."[45] This statement might apply equally to George Primrose. The account of George's vagabondage is similar in many respects to Goldsmith's early wanderings. Both men achieve little success in their youthful travels,

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[43] Ibid., pp. 63, 68, 79. [44] Ibid., pp. 153, 199.

[45] Boswell, p. 113.

but both learn a great deal about human nature and learn to patronize "the childhood world of the family."[46]

Describing the character traits of his family, the Vicar says that his sons are "hardy and active." By his own statement, George disproves in part the Vicar's generalization: " . . . I was unqualified for a profession where mere industry along was to ensure success."[47] George's aversion to labor, however, is not so strong that he sinks to earning his bread by flattery of the rich. Instead of joining the "writers" who live off the subscriptions of a patron yet never write, George attempts to become an author but fails because he expects the praise of the world without long periods of labor. In the household of Squire Thornhill, George refuses again to use flattery as a means of obtaining favor.[48] George is commendably active in, at least, one area of his life; he is a dutiful son. His efforts to relieve the family's distress at a time when he is about to achieve worldly success demonstrate that he has learned to value his home and feels the necessity of defending its honor. By developing a commendable value system, he emerges from the novel as a round character.

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[46]Morris Golden, "The Family-Wanderer Theme in Goldsmith," ELH, XXV (September, 1958), 187.

[47]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 3, 119.

[48]Ibid., pp. 119-121.

Moses Primrose, the Vicar's second son, is portrayed as a youth of sixteen who is "proud of his new-acquired book-learned skill, and utterly ignorant of the world."[49] Upon first meeting Squire Thornhill, Moses endeavors to impress him by "a question or two from the ancients." On another occasion the young son agrees to debate the worth of church tithes against Squire Thornhill. In both instances Moses' display of learning is rewarded by laughter.[50] It is interesting to note that the following passage from the first edition was omitted later because it described Goldsmith himself too closely: " . . . for he Moses always ascribed to his wit that laughter which was lavished at his simplicity."[51] The inability of Moses either to detect Jenkinson as an impostor or to argue successfully against experienced men of the world proves that he is essentially "ignorant of the world." Because Moses seems to show little, if any, development during the story, he may justifiably be classified as a flat character.

Of the Primrose daughters, Olivia undergoes the greater change in character. At Wakefield the Vicar describes her as "open, sprightly, and commanding." In the family portrait she is "an Amazon, sitting upon a bank of flowers, dressed in a green joseph, richly laced in gold, and a whip

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[49]Macmillan, pp. xviii-xiv.

[50]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 25, 35. [51]Davidson, p. 9.

in her hand."[52] Although Olivia proudly believes she can command the young landlord by her beauty and sprightliness, she discovers that these qualities will not secure the love of so mercenary a man as he. When the Vicar finds her at the inn, he beholds an humbled Olivia, whose instant concern is her father's pallor. During the days of her infamy, Olivia's vivacity disappears, and her beauty seems "impaired." Feelings of regret for her family's concern alternate with the emotions of envy and jealousy. Words of optimism from the Vicar provoke her despair: "Happiness, I fear, is no longer reserved for me here; and I long to be rid of a place where I have only found distress."[53] The flush of pleasure drawn to her face by the news that she is an "honest woman" causes the Vicar to surmise that she will again be vivacious,[54] but equally valid is the assumption that she remains the "fair penitent" who has learned a lesson from her adventure and escaped the penalty of death imposed on the "lovely woman" who "stoops to folly."[55]

The Vicar's younger daughter, Sophia, is more nearly a flat character than her sister, because her character, wholly admirable, is consistent. Early in the novel her

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[52]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 4, 85.

[53]Ibid., pp. 137, 147, 158, 176. [54]Ibid., p. 214.

[55]Robert Utter and Gwendolyn Needham, Pamela's Daughters (New York, 1936), pp. 259-260.

father comments that, unlike Olivia, she "repressed excellence, from her fears to offend" and that she "entertained" him with her "sense" when he was serious. Sophia's early disdain of the Squire and her ability to see the superior qualities of Burchell's character readily demonstrate that she has "almost the wisdom of an angel." Her fear of Burchell's being a scoundrel, experienced after her father reads Burchell's letter to Miss Skeggs and Lady Blarney, is evidently only momentary, for in seeking a defender from Baxter, her kidnapper, she immediately calls on Burchell. Her ability to perceive what constitutes goodness resembles that of her father, and for this reason he calls her "the child that was next my heart."[56]

Major characters outside the family group are Sir William Thornhill, his nephew Ned Thornhill, and Ephraim Jenkinson. Of these three, Burchell, or Sir William Thornhill, has received the greatest amount of consideration from the critics. Baker asserts the ideal nature of Lord Thornhill's character: "The conduct and opinion of Burchell are always to be approved. His insight is never wrong; he sees all the pitfalls of life. The follies and excesses of his youth have taught him to see the world as it is."[57] Seitz conjectures that this English nobleman was

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[56]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 4, 26, 182.

[57]Ernest A. Baker, The Novel of Sentiment and the Gothic Romance, Vol. V of The History of the English Novel, 10 vols. (New York, 1929), p. 82.

fashioned after the ideal Irish landlord.[58] Other critics voice opposite opinions. One says that the reader of Goldsmith's day probably considered Burchell "too fantastically eccentric."[59] Macmillan denies Burchell's perfection: "His high reputation for wisdom is hardly consistent with the conduct attributed to him when he is traveling through the country incognito and neglects to take the proper measures to save his friends from impending disgrace and ruin."[60]

Baker's views of Lord Thornhill's faultlessness are valid. If the reader disregards the mistakes of Burchell's youth, which occur before the novel opens, Burchell emerges as a consistent character possessing the qualities of generosity, justice, and wisdom. His failure to restore the Vicar at once to good fortune, a weakness ascribed to him by Macmillan, is in reality an act of generosity qualified by wisdom. From experience Sir William Thornhill has learned that a man must "respect himself" by limiting his charity to those who will use the gift wisely. By delaying the Vicar's restoration to good fortune, he allows Primrose to acquire self-respect. His just punishment of his nephew likewise may be attributed to wisdom. Lord Thornhill does

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[58]Robert Seitz, "The Irish Background of Goldsmith's Social and Political Thought," PMLA, LII (June, 1939), 406.

[59]Davidson, p. 10. [60]Macmillan, p. xviii.

not decree that the Squire must suffer trial and imprisonment but that he, humiliatingly, must depend for his sustenance on the wife he has abandoned. Burchell's desire to marry Sophia (a sensible but poor young woman), his immediate recognition of deceit in Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, and his aversion to a prevalence of epithets in contemporary English literature, all indicate his ability to perceive worth.[61]

Ned Thornhill, like his uncle, is a consistent character. By showing little change or development, both emerge as flat characters. No two men, however, offer greater contrasts. The Squire's evil, extravagant nature finds its antitype in the loving but prudent nature of his uncle. Seitz suggests that the prototype for the younger Thornhill is the villainous Irish landlord who was called "squireen" or "middle man."[62] Typical of Squire Thornhill's villainy is his deception of Olivia by a false promise of marriage, his imprisonment of the Vicar and of George, and his plan to kidnap Sophia. Macmillan states with some reason that there is no redeeming trait in this villain, unless we are inclined to give any credit to George Primrose's assertion that "'Ned Thornhill was at the bottom a very good-natured fellow,' an assertion that . . . has no foundation in fact."[63] Yet Moses' report that the people

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[61]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 15-16, 38, 56, 215.

[62]Seitz, p. 406. [63]Macmillan, p. xviii.

of the countryside praise the Squire for his "fine person" suggests that Ned Thornhill had some general attractiveness, however superficial it may have been.[64]

The Squire's dependence on memory and ceremony is in direct contrast to his uncle's display of spontaneous wisdom and hatred of ceremony. When the young landlord attempts to impress the Primrose family with a memorized arguement, the Vicar easily detects his real ignorance. Primrose, moreover, immediately recognizes wisdom in Burchell's literary views and wit in his unrehearsed arguments with Mrs. Primrose. A "set speech" of gratitude which the Squire begins to recite in apology is cut short by his uncle, who "seemed not to understand ceremony, or to despise it."[65]

Of all the personages in the novel who undergo a change of character, Ephraim Jenkinson's development is the most unrealistic. Macmillan describes him as the "versatile rogue" who atones at the end of the story for his misdeeds.[66] Being confined chiefly to unethical business practices, Jenkinson's villainy never reaches the seriousness of Squire Thornhill's. And, unlike the Squire, Jenkinson appears to become genuinely penitent. Instead of deceitfully arranging events that he may receive benefit, Jenkinson works without

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[64]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 151. [65]Ibid., pp. 14, 34, 215.

[66]Macmillan, p. xix.

expecting reward for the restoration of the Vicar to good fortune. His confession that he secured a true priest and license so that he later could prove the validity of Olivia's marriage to the Squire in order to blackmail him is the clearest evidence of his reformation.[67]

The variety of characters in this novel indicates that Goldsmith learned much of human nature from his travels on the Continent. His Vicar, whose amiability could be stirred to anger, whose resignation to God's will could change with circumstances to railings against Providence, whose insight into truth could be dimmed, and whose pride could be humbled, is the most natural and believable character in the novel. Deborah Primrose, whose pride in family and former wealth prevented her from facing realistically her altered circumstances, also approaches natural presentation, although her eventual humility seems somewhat artificial. A comparison of the Vicar's two older sons reveals that George receives the more extensive treatment and emerges as a more believable character. Unlike his brother Moses, George learns that the favor of the world is not won by an ostentatious display of learning. Primrose's daughters are also effectively portrayed as opposites. The exuberant but shallow Olivia, who matures through severe experiences, forms a direct contrast to Sophia, whose wisdom is unvarying.

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[67]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 214.

Other antitypes are Sir William Thornhill, who exhibits wise benevolence, and his nephew Ned, who loves money and licentious pleasure, however obtained. Ephraim Jenkinson, another antitype of the Squire, develops, perhaps capriciously, from a deceitful robber of the Vicar and Moses into their generous and truthful friend. Such varied and complex portraiture persuasively attests Goldsmith's skill and explains the perennial appeal of his novel.

CHAPTER III

THEMES

Equal in importance to the narrative structure and characterization in The Vicar of Wakefield are the themes Goldsmith develops. What they are, why Goldsmith enlarged them, and how consistently Goldsmith treated them are questions a close analysis of the novel answers. To choose a central theme for the novel is difficult, but some scholars have attempted the feat. Witham contends that the theme of the story is "the struggle of a man, in the face of successive afflictions, to keep his faith in the divine guidance of the world."[1] Dahl maintains that disguise is the pervading theme and serves as the clue to the strong artistic impression which The Vicar makes.[2] Cazamian comments that "everything resolves itself into the teaching of goodness. Sentiment raised to the status of a doctrine and a rule finds the centre from which it will henceforth radiate over English life . . . ."[3] Baker and Gallaway, however, believe that

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[1]Witham, p. 14.

[2]Curtis Dahl, "Patterns of Disguise in The Vicar of Wakefield," ELH, XXV (June, 1958), 91.

[3]Legouis and Cazamian, p. 877.

this novel is a reaction against sentimentalism rather than an apologia for "complacent trust in the supremacy of good."[4]

Dahl's theory that disguise is the source of The Vicar's thematic unity is convincing. He divides the theme into two parts--literal disguise and figurative disguise. Although subtle in its ramifications, physical disguise is the most obvious manifestation of the theme. Sir William Thornhill disguises himself so that he may see people as they really are. Jenkinson disguises himself as a "reverend-looking man" so that he may deceive Moses.[5] Jenkinson, whose "green old age seemed to be the result of health and benevolence,"[6] persuades the Vicar by flattery (false, not true admiration) and specious learning to accept a forged draft on Flamborough. Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs adorn themselves with "high-sounding names, fancy clothes, and fashionable conversation." To terrify Sophia by pretending to carry her off, Baxter dresses as a gentleman. The real kidnapper, Squire Thornhill, plans to arrive "as if by accident" and to pretend to be Sophia's defender. Sir William, posing as Burchell, her supposed enemy, rescues her from this alleged protector.[7]

Members of the Primrose family employ literal disguise. On the first Sunday morning following their departure from

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[4]Baker, p. 81; Gallaway, p. 1168.

[5]Dahl, pp. 91-92.

[6]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 71.

[7]Dahl, pp. 91-92.

Wakefield, the women, not humbled to their present situation, appear in "all their former splendour; their hair plastered up with pomatum, their faces patched to taste, their trains bundled up into a heap behind, and rustling at every motion."[8] The entire family appears metamorphosed in its portrait. Mrs. Primrose is Venus, and the two smaller sons are Cupids at her side. Olivia appears as an Amazon and Sophia, as a shepherdess. Moses is "dressed out with a hat and feather," his father, in a "gown and band."[9]

Though less obvious, examples of figurative disguise are more numerous than those of physical disguise. The Squire belittles Moses' true reasoning with false sophistication. Mrs. Primrose exults over what seems to be Olivia's success in gaining the Squire. The Vicar, who sees through the grossness of Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs' speech and the "fashionable cant" of Squire Thornhill's proposal to Olivia, is blind to his visitors' insincere talk about virtue. The prisoners, from whom the Vicar expects to hear lamentations, hide their true misery in uproarious mirth. Squire Thornhill attempts to cover his evil motives for imprisoning George and the Vicar by maintaining to his uncle that he has acted virtuously. Jenkinson, appearing to be a villain, virtuously reveals Squire Thornhill's plots. The Vicar's wealth, thought to be lost, is not lost at all.[10]

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[8]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 21. [9]Ibid., p. 85.

[10]Dahl, pp. 92-93.

Additional examples of figurative disguise are the Primroses' hypocritical kindness to Burchell after finding his letter, Olivia's pretence in lavishing attention on Farmer Williams, the Squire's feigned purpose in securing George's army commission, and the devil's clever tricks in deceiving the prisoners.[11]

By word and deed, the Vicar preaches sincerity, honesty, and truth, the opposites of hypocrisy. He contrasts the man who rears a large family with the man who only talks about increasing population. He prefers conventional, not romantic, names for his daughters. His argument on the Whistonian controversy shows that he believes a clergyman should not treat an eternal sacrament as if it were temporal. After losing his fortune, the Vicar does not misrepresent his situation to Mr. Wilmot.[12] In a wife and daughters, he prefers "such qualities as would wear well" to superficial beauty.[13]

Dahl finds "patterns of disguise" even in those passages of the novel which often are called extraneous.

> . . . the fact that through the theme of disguise the apparently extraneous parts can be closely fitted into the whole structure of the Vicar helps support the thesis that disguise-and-reality is the book's central theme.[14]

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[11]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 79, 90, 104, 133, 167. (Other examples may be found on pp. 128, 151, 159, 202, 208.)

[12]Dahl, pp. 93-94. [13]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 1-2.

[14]Dahl, p. 96.

The "gentleman" who suspects that the Vicar is masquerading as a clergyman is really only Mr. Arnold's butler; his sprightly expatiations on politics lead the Vicar to believe this servant "nothing less than a parliament-man."[15] Ephraim Jenkinson boasts of his skill in "counterfeiting every age from seventeen to seventy" but notes that if he had been honest like Flamborough, his fortune might now be greater. Burchell comments on "false taste in poetry." The chief actor of the playing company says that current theatrical taste demands imitations of Jonson and Shakespeare. In the story of Matilda, the Italian general turns out to be Matilda's long lost son. In the ballad of Edwin and Angelina, both hero and heroine appear in disguise. Dahl also finds "patterns of disguise" in George's travel account. George discovers that the usher of a school needs no learning and that the least imaginative fellows are the best authors. George writes a book on paradoxes. His false friend Squire Thornhill "draws him into a duel over the pretended seduction of a pretended gentleman's pretended sister." Crispe promises to make George a secretary to the Chickasaw Indians but really intends to sell him in America as a slave.[16]

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[15]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 104. [16]Dahl, pp. 96-99.

Early in The Vicar Dr. Primrose says that he "was never much displeased with those harmless delusions that tend to make us more happy." Yet he later contradicts himself:

> Oh, my children, if you could but learn to commune with your own hearts, and know what noble company you can make them, you would little regard the elegance and the splendour of the worthless.[17]

According to Dahl, the principal teaching of The Vicar is that "unhappiness springs from an imperfect perception of truth while happiness is born of a capacity to see the real truth that lies behind appearance and disguise."[18] By observing that Dr. Primrose, Lord Thornhill, and Jenkinson find happiness in the perception of truth and that Squire Thornhill suffers punishment for a false sense of values, one may conclude that Dahl's assertion is valid.

Another pervading theme in the novel is insistence upon the necessity of an equilibrium between reason--connoting prudence and temperance--and passion. Primrose often recommends the use of reason. He exhorts "the married men [of Wakefield] to temperance." In his new home the Vicar observes that his family ignores his "painful lectures" on the tempering of their ambition. Later he and his wife send Moses to sell the colt, because they believe he possesses prudence. To teach Sophia to discriminate in the

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[17] Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 18, 151. [18] Dahl, p. 101.

choice of a husband, the Vicar hopes to lodge her in town for a winter. Seeking the lost Olivia, he finds himself "driven to that state of mind in which we all are more ready to act precipitately than to reason right." After George's incarceration, his father pleads to Sir William Thornhill that George challenged the Squire in obedience to an imprudent mother.[19] Other family members exercise reason less frequently. They discuss "the pleasures of temperance" with Squire Thornhill, Lady Blarney, and Miss Skeggs. Later Moses asserts that his bargain with Jenkinson is justified by "reason," and Olivia struggles between prudence and passion in consenting to elope with the Squire. Mrs. Primrose frequently fails to utilize her mind in wit combats with Burchell; the Vicar's comment is that "instead of reasoning stronger," she talked louder.[20]

Many characters outside the family often advocate the use of reason. Lord Thornhill commends the Squire's prudence in refusing to accept George's challenge. The Squire himself approves the Vicar's wisdom in not communicating the news of Olivia's disappearance to George and Arabella. Earlier he observed to Mrs. Primrose that a husband for Olivia should possess "prudence." Jenkinson too recommends rationality in telling Primrose that "reason"

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[19]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 6, 49, 61, 69, 99, 198.

[20]Ibid., pp. 48, 64, 68, 92.

obliges him to attempt reconciliation with the Squire. Minor characters advocating the use of reason are the Vicar's friend who assumes that the clergyman will exercise prudence by not informing Wilmot of his lost fortune and Wilmot himself, who exercises "prudence," his one perfect virtue, by breaking off the engagement of George and Arabella.[21]

Although he frequently preached the use of reason, Primrose was often motivated by passion. "Careless of temporalities," the Vicar expresses the benevolent feelings of his heart by giving "the profits of his living" to the widows and orphans at Wakefield. A desire to see his daughters happy leads him to give them a shilling apiece that they may hear the predictions of a fortune-telling gypsy. Although the Vicar states that his "tenderness as a parent" shall never alter his "integrity as a man," passion masters his reason in outbursts following the announcement of Olivia's elopement, the news of Sophia's abduction, and the sight of George in shackles. Burchell's bold threat that he could have the Vicar hanged for opening his letter to Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs causes the Vicar to reply that "insolence raised me to such a pitch, that I could scarcely govern my passion." In making this statement, Primrose contrasts himself to Burchell, who, "shutting the

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[21] Ibid., pp. 9-10, 88, 132, 179, 202.

clasps [of his pocketbook] with the utmost composure, left us [the Primroses] quite astonished at the serenity of his assurance." Again unlike the Vicar, Burchell restrains his own charity, because "he carried benevolence to an excess when young; for his passions were then strong, and as they were all upon the side of virtue, they led it up to a romantic extreme."[22] Goldsmith also speaks of the emotions of Mrs. Primrose, Olivia, and Squire Thornhill. During Olivia's attempts to attract the Squire, Primrose tells her that he will not allow Farmer Williams to be the "dupe" of her "ill-placed passion" for the young landlord, whose "passion," the Vicar says, is "all a dream." At the news of Olivia's elopement, Mrs. Primrose, "whose passions were not so strong" as the Vicar's, suggests that her husband read from the Bible.[23]

In advocating a balance between reason and passion, Goldsmith assuredly did not place the emphasis on passion. In one of his essays he stated that the "preacher must address the heart, not the head, for vice is the child of passion."[24] From this statement, the reader may assume that Goldsmith saw less danger in a superfluity of reason than he saw in an abundance of its antithesis; however, the

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[22] Ibid., pp. 6, 15-16, 49, 81-82.

[23] Ibid., pp. 90-91, 96.

[24] Quoted from Gallaway, p. 1172.

prudence which he exalts is that of Sir William Thornhill, not that of Mr. Wilmot, for in Thornhill the gifts of the mind and of the heart grow equally.

The struggle between pride and humility is another prominent theme in The Vicar. All members of the family are at one time or another affected with pride. Dr. Primrose boasts of the family's skill in making gooseberry wine, and the Vicar's wife and daughters vainly "gazed at themselves in the glass" during the hours between breakfast and dinner. When Mrs. Primrose states that Burchell has defeated the Vicar in argument, her husband retaliates: "You mistake there, my dear; I believe there are but few that can do that; I never dispute your abilities at making a goose-pie, and I beg you'll leave argument to me."[25] The Vicar is proud also of his daughters' beauty and of his ability as a pamphleteer. Mrs. Primrose shows her vanity by surmising that she herself is the source of Olivia's dancing skill and little Bill's fine voice. The children, too, have acquired their parents' weakness. In London George sits "self-collected" waiting for "the whole learned world" to oppose his book of paradoxes. Similarly believing justifiably that his reasoning power surpasses that of the Squire, Moses attempts to prove the worth of church tithes. When a landlord remarks that Squire Thornhill has been

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[25] Ibid., pp. 2, 8, 28.

successful with and then faithless to, almost every farmer's daughter within ten miles, the features of both Olivia and Sophia "seemed to brighten with the expectation of an approaching triumph."[26]

In the last half of the novel, however, the family as well as some of the minor characters acquire humility. The family's "mortification" in not being able to ride the horses successfully on a Sunday morning humbles them into accepting modest Flamborough's invitation "to burn nuts and play tricks" on Michaelmas Eve. At the same time, many miles away, George's intellectual pretensions are mortified by neglect. As misfortunes mount, the destruction of her home by fire humbles Mrs. Primrose. With no "pride or resentment" in his heart, the Vicar, thinking Olivia dead, agrees to submit to Squire Thornhill. The Squire himself, the proudest character of all, finally begs in "utmost humility" that Jenkinson and Baxter "not be admitted as evidences against him."[27]

According to Samuel Johnson, Goldsmith attributed the vices and the virtues of his own life to vanity.[28] Knowing Goldsmith's attitude toward pride and observing his treatment of this theme in The Vicar, one may conclude

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[26] Ibid., pp. 13, 33, 46, 94, 117.

[27] Ibid., pp. 53-54, 118, 145, 180, 205. (Humility is mentioned also on pp. 121, 156.)

[28] Boswell, p. 305.

that Goldsmith did not completely condemn vanity; in fact, he commended the self-respect of Sir William Thornhill. He condemned false pride, not defensible self-esteem.

Sentimentality has received more varying comment than any other theme in The Vicar.[29] As most eighteenth-century humanitarians, Goldsmith believed that man was innately good.[30] Certainly if the words of Dr. Primrose reveal Goldsmith's mind, the reader may find justification for this critic's view. After the first of two sermons to his fellow prisoners, Dr. Primrose states "that no man was past the hour of amendment, every heart lying open to the shafts of reproof; if the archer could but take a proper aim." Still referring specifically to the prisoners, he says, "If these wretches, my children, were princes, there would be thousands ready to offer their ministry; but in my opinion, the heart that is buried in a dungeon is as precious as that seated upon a throne."[31] Like Cazamian, Macmillan believes that Goldsmith

> contrives to reconcile us to human nature, and shows his belief in the inherent goodness of his fellow-men by ascribing kindly acts and feelings to those who are commonly represented as brutalized by the character of their occupations.[32]

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[29] Sentimentalism has been defined as "the belief that human nature is fundamentally good" (Gallaway, p. 1167).

[30] Legouis and Cazamian, p. 877.

[31] Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 168, 171.

[32] Macmillan, p. xix.

Having a horse, one of the officers sent to arrest the Vicar "kindly" takes the "enfeebled" Olivia behind him. After the Vicar finishes the second of his jail sermons, he comments that the jailer was "one of the most humane of his profession" and that he pleaded duty when he removed George to a stronger cell.[33]

In a letter to David Garrick, Madame Riccoboni suggested that Goldsmith's attitudes were naive:

> Pleading in favour of robbers, thieves, and people of bad morals was very far from pleasing me.--Your vicar preaches to scoundrels and converts them; I should not like to meet his congregation in a wood, if I had a thousand guineas in my pocket.[34]

But Madame Riccoboni may have been misled, for some critics believe that Goldsmith was really ridiculing current sentimentality:

> It is clear . . . that Goldsmith is free from two obsessions of the sentimentalist--the natural goodness of human kind, and the superior happiness and virtue of savages on South Sea isles. . . . It is even possible that The Vicar of Wakefield should be regarded not as an idyll . . . but as a satire . . . broken in the end by an indulgence of the novelist to his own heart and to the hearts of a sentimental reading public.[35]

Baker, too, states that The Vicar "was to be a fable at the expense of sentimental optimism, . . . confidence that

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[33]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 159, 193.

[34]B. Sprague Allen, "William Godwin and the Stage," PMLA, XXXV (September, 1920), 372.

[35]Gallaway, pp. 1177, 1181.

honesty will have its reward without a cautious sense of the wickedness of the world and the guile and unscruplousness of others."[36] Certainly Goldsmith's commendation of Lord Thornhill's prudence teaches that man must use reason as a complement to the sentimentalism of the heart. To this extent, at least, the views of Baker and Gallaway are defensible.

The ideal nature of rural life is another major theme in The Vicar. Describing the family's existence at Wakefield, Dr. Primrose says, "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." In his new home the Vicar comments that his parishioners worked cheerfully on "days of labour" but welcomed holidays as occasions for idleness.

> They kept up the Christman carol, sent true love-knots on Valentine morning, ate pancakes on Shrovetide, showed their wit on the first of April, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas eve.[37]

A day in the Primrose home began with grateful words "to that Being who gave us another day" and ended with family devotions. Laboring from sunrise to sunset, the family found joyful relief at the dinner hour, which was passed, according to the Vicar, "in innocent mirth between my wife and daughters, and in philosophical arguments

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[36]Baker, p. 81. [37]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 2, 19.

between my son and me." Burchell's ballad of the "gentle Hermit" presents another ideal picture of rural life:

> Around in sympathetic mirth,
> Its tricks the kitten tries,
> The cricket chirrups on the hearth,
> The crackling faggot flies.[38]

Goldsmith's mild expression of opposition to urban life reveals itself in the theme of wealth and poverty. George Primrose finds Paris a "retreat of venal hospitality" and its people "fonder of strangers that have money, then of those that have wit." The Vicar finds the rural breeding of his daughters "already superior to their fortune" and asserts that "greater refinement would only serve to make their poverty ridiculous." By associating city values with wealth, Goldsmith demonstrated to the reader his distrust of urban influence.[39]

Through Primrose and his wife, their son George, and Burchell, the author communicated his condemnation of wealth. The Vicar observes that "the poorer the guest, the better pleased he ever is with being treated." He also notes that the fortune and fine clothing of Squire Thornhill persuade the women of the family to accept him and his impertinent humor. In a preamble to Dick's story of the Giant and the Dwarf, Primrose declares his resentment of the wealthy: "Unequal combinations are always disadvantageous to the weaker side, the rich having the pleasure, and the poor the

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[38] Ibid., pp. 20, 40. [39] Ibid., pp. 47, 127.

inconveniences that result from them." Later in his political oration to the servants of the Arnold household, he states that ambition for wealth leads men to undermine "sacred monarchy" and gather about themselves "a circle of the poorest people" from whom they may purchase liberty for a promise of bread.[40]

Mildly condemning the world's emphasis on wealth, Mrs. Primrose remarks to Squire Thornhill that "they who had warm fortunes were always sure of getting good husbands . . . . It is not, What is she? but, What has she? is all the cry." George Primrose notes from his travels that "riches in general were in every country another name for freedom."[41] Even the ballad of Edwin and Angelina calls attention to the advantages of money:

> Alas! the joys that fortune brings
> Are trifling, and decay;
> And those who prize the paltry things,
> More trifling still than they.[42]

In commenting on this theme, Gallaway maintains that Goldsmith condemned luxury, not because of a romantic belief in man's primitive felicity, but because of luxury's effects on national morale and economics. He further observes that the author did not describe "the bliss of the primitive, but the bourgeois happiness of the moderately

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[40] Ibid., pp. 2, 24, 32, 66, 106-110.

[41] Ibid., pp. 87, 130. [42] Ibid., p. 40.

well-to-do."[43] The reader may find justification for Gallaway's view in the comment of Primrose:

> . . . there must still be a large number of the people without the sphere of the opulent man's influence; namely, that order of man which subsists between the very rich and the very rabble. . . . In this middle order of mankind are generally to be found all the arts, wisdom, and virtues of society.[44]

Charity, another prominent thematic element, appears as a quality of most sympathetic male characters in the novel. The Vicar demonstrates benevolence by giving the profits of his living to widows and orphans. He commends the generosity of the disguised Jenkinson, who gives £5 to a distressed youth. After the fire the neighbors of Primrose bring clothing to the family and provide one of their outhouses with kitchen utensils so that by morning the Primroses have "another, though a wretched dwelling to retire to." Jenkinson, undisguised, offers part of his bed clothing to the chilled Vicar. "With humanity" the jailer prepares a bed for the Vicar's two small sons that they may lie in the prison with their father. Sir William Thornhill generously orders that £40 "be distributed among the prisoners," and induced by Thornhill's example, Wilmot gives half that sum.[45]

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[43]Gallaway, pp. 1174-1175.

[44]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 108-109.

[45]Ibid., pp. 72, 145, 161, 165, 217-218.

Although generally praising charity, Goldsmith qualified his commendation at least twice. The Vicar's purpose in lending an object of some value to a relation "of very bad character," "a troublesome guest," or one he "desired to get rid of," knowing that the receiver would not return, demonstrates that the motives of benevolence are not all worthy. Burchell's comment on his excessive generosity in youth, when he lost "a regard for private interest in universal sympathy," reveals that wholesale charity is foolish, since the friends that benefit gathers about a person are "little estimable."[46]

Several social and political reforms are advocated in The Vicar. Between the reigns of Queen Anne and George III, political influence in England and government by oligarchy were at a peak. Parliament, ruled by the rich, had reduced the King "to a cipher."[47] In reaction to this situation, Goldsmith spoke through the Vicar to condemn the opulent, whose efforts were directed always toward the undermining of the single tyrant and the restoration of his power to themselves. The Vicar praises monarchy because it is the only defender of the middle class and because it creates one king, "whose election at once diminishes

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[46]Ibid., pp. 2, 16-17.

[47]Howard Bell, Jr., "The Deserted Village and Goldsmith's Social Doctrines," PMLA, LIX (September, 1944), 751.

the number of tyrants, and puts tyranny at the greatest distance from the greatest number of people."[48]

A specific reform recommended by Goldsmith was correction of the penal code. Primrose is conscious of its inconsistency:

> When, by indiscriminate penal laws, a nation beholds the same punishment affixed to dissimilar degrees of guilt . . . the people are led to lose all sense of distinction in the crime . . . ; thus the multitude of laws produce new vices, and new vices call for fresh restraints.[49]

To correct this abuse, the Vicar recommends that law be made "the protector, but not the tyrant of the people" and surmises that criminals if properly treated might "serve to sinew the state in times of danger," since "few minds are so base as that perseverance cannot amend."[50] Seitz believes that Goldsmith owed his views on the penal code to the Irish peasantry. The Vicar's argument against capital punishment resembles that of a group of Irish peasants who, when questioned by a nineteenth-century traveller concerning their failure to enforce the criminal laws against a thief, replied, "Plaze your honour, would you have us hang a man for stealing a bit of mutton?"[51] With sufficient justification, Macmillan comments that Goldsmith's views on the injustice and inefficiency of the

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[48]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 107-108.

[49]Ibid., pp. 174-175. [50]Ibid., p. 175.

[51]Seitz, p. 410.

criminal code and on the proper treatment of prisoners show that he was "capable of making valuable contributions to social and political science."[52]

A thematic element which seems to have aroused little, if any, comment from critics of The Vicar is anti-feminism. Although not wholly derogatory, Goldsmith's attitude in the novel toward the female sex often assumed this quality. The Vicar states that his wife prided herself "upon being an excellent contriver in housekeeping" but that he never found they "grew richer with all her contrivances." She demonstrates her occasional extravagance on the Squire's second visit, and the Vicar's observation is that "our family was pinched for three weeks after." His wife's conduct at the dinner hour causes the Vicar to state with disgust that "as she always insisted upon carving everything herself, it being her mother's way, she gave us upon these occasions the history of every dish." When he sees his wife and daughters in their "former finery," he comments that "all this is not neatness, but frippery." Later upon discovering that the women are making a wash for the face, he says, "Washes of all kinds I had a natural antipathy to; for I knew that instead of mending the complexion, they spoiled it." The reader may find other indications of the Vicar's anti-feminism in his description of Lady Blarney and Miss

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[52]Macmillan, p. xxv.

Skeggs, in his implication that Mrs. Primrose lacks humor and wit, and in his statement that "Old England is the only place . . . for wives to manage their husbands."[53]

Moses Primrose and Burchell also reveal anti-feminist tendencies. The Vicar's son observes that the Spanish market for wives "is open once a year; but our English wives are saleable every night." Burchell's "gentle Hermit" advises "his love-lorn guest" to "spurn the sex" before he discovers this disguised stranger to be the sweetheart who had "triumphed in his pain." Burchell's comment on "ladies set up for wit that had none," directed at Mrs. Primrose, exemplifies this attitude again.[54]

Anti-feminism, however, is not a consistent theme. The Vicar concedes that "as men are capable of distinguishing merit in women, so the ladies often form the truest judgments of us." He speaks sympathetically of his wife to the abandoned Olivia: "Poor woman! this has gone to her heart; but she loves you still, Olivia, and will forget it." Preparing to go to the prison, Primrose describes his wife as "pale and trembling," clasping the "affrighted" children in her arms. Moses displays a "real liking" for one of the two Miss Flamboroughs, and Sir William Thornhill

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[53]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 1, 8, 22, 31, 32, 95.

[54]Ibid., pp. 40, 79, 95. (Other examples of anti-feminism are found on pp. 7, 53, 145, 183, 221.)

chooses Sophia as his wife because she, a stranger to his fortune, "loved him for himself alone."[55]

Comments on literature are the subject matter of another popular theme in The Vicar. Johnstone concludes from a study of Goldsmith's literary views that he has little reverence for the rules:

> Although he believed in the Aristotelian doctrine of imitation, he thought that the author should copy nature directly and produce original work instead of imitating the ancients. He had little reverence for such ancients as Homer, Pindar, and Horace; and he held up for his ideal the writers of the reign of Queen Anne, notably Pope.
>
> As for the literary work, he believed that it should represent ideal nature. Its function is to present a blend of the delightful and useful. It should elicit from the audience the emotional effects of the beautiful, the sublime, or the novel.[56]

In view of Goldsmith's emphasis on the direct imitation of nature in literature, Johnson's comment to Mrs. Thrale appears ironic: " . . . it [The Vicar] is very faulty; there is nothing of real life in it, and very little of nature."[57]

Conversing with Primrose, a strolling player observes that "Dryden and Rowe's manners . . . are quite out of fashion: our taste has gone back a whole century; Fletcher, Ben Jonson, and all the plays of Shakespeare are the only

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[55] Ibid., pp. 44, 141, 158, 217, 221.

[56] Coragreene Johnstone, "The Literary Views of Oliver Goldsmith," Dissertation Abstracts, XII (1952), 187.

[57] Davidson, p. 7.

things that go down." The player later adds that "the public think nothing about dialect, or humour, or character, for that is none of their business; they only go to be amused." When the Vicar critically surmises that the "modern dramatists are rather imitators of Shakespeare than of nature," his companion observes that they are in reality imitators of no one and that "it is not the composition of the piece, but the number of starts and attitudes that may be introduced into it, that elicits applause."[58] Speaking through Burchell, Goldsmith also censured the artificiality of contemporary poetry:

> 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.[59]

Contemporary prose receives the reproach of George Primrose, who finds that "forty very dull fellows about town" live in opulence by writing "history and politics." Searching for an untreated subject on which to write, he decides to write nonsense, because "the best things remained to be said on the wrong side." His book of paradoxes having failed, George becomes an essayist, but his essays are "thrown off to oblivion," being

> buried among the essays upon liberty, Eastern tales, and cures for the bite of a mad dog; while

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[58] Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 102-103. [59] Ibid., p. 38.

> Philautos, Philalethes, Philelutheros, and Philanthropos all wrote better, because they wrote faster than I.[60]

The reader may assume that of poetic forms Goldsmith favored the ballad. Burchell, for example, uses a ballad to illustrate his theory of literary perfection, and the Vicar comments that "the most vulgar ballad of them all generally pleases me better than the fine modern odes, and things that petrify us in a single stanza." Censuring the contemporary elegiasts, Primrose is contemptuous of the triviality of their subject matter:

> The great fault of these elegiasts is, that they are in despair for griefs that give the sensible part of mankind very little pain. A lady loses her muff, her fan, or her lap-dog, and so the silly poet runs home to verify the disaster.[61]

Goldsmith stated an axiom by which he judged literature in his comment that "a book may be amusing with numerous errors, or it may be dull without a single absurdity,"[62] Burchell's theory that "the reputation of books is raised, not by their freedom from defect, but the greatness of their beauties" is an echo of Goldsmith's own statement.[63]

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[60] Ibid., pp. 117, 119-120. [61] Ibid., pp. 38, 94.

[62] "Advertisement to First Edition," The Vicar of Wakefield (Boston, 1845), p. 14.

[63] Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 80.

Closely allied to Goldsmith's view of literature is his commentary on the patronage system. Johnstone observes that "Goldsmith thought the 'author by profession' was to be preferred to the dilettante."[64] Through George Primrose, Goldsmith expressed contempt for the writer who besieges the prospective subscriber's heart "with flattery" then pours in his proposals "at the breach." A hack writer describes for George the method of his attack on a patron:

> If they subscribe readily the first time, I renew my request to beg a dedication fee. If they let me have that, I smite them once more for engraving their coat-of-arms at the top. Thus . . . I live by vanity, and laugh at it.[65]

When the Vicar, shocked by George's report, asks if poets can so disgrace their profession as "to make a vile traffic of praise for bread," George answers that genuine poets are above sycophancy:

> The creatures I now describe are only beggars in rhyme. The real poet, as he braves every hardship for fame, so he is equally a coward to contempt; and none but those who are unworthy protection, condescend to solicit it.[66]

George again expresses contempt for the patronage system when he relates his experiences in the household of Squire Thornhill. His duties there were to arouse the Squire's spirits when he sat for a picture and to "assist at tattering a kip" when the Squire was in the mood for

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[64] Johnstone, p. 187.

[65] Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 118-119. [66] Ibid., p. 119.

frolic, to sing when he was bid, to be humble always, and, if he could, "to be very happy." With contempt George speaks of a "captain of marines" who, having a taste "for pimping and pedigree," opposed him in their patron's affections. Unlike the captain, George found that the Squire's increased desire for flattery only made him more unwilling to give it.[67]

The contrasting comforts offered by religion and philosophy form the central theme of the Vicar's second sermon to his fellow prisoners. Having stated that philosophy consoles with promises that "life is filled with comforts" and that "life is short," he observes that "these consolations destroy each other; for, if life is a place of comfort, its griefs are protracted." Religion, however, encourages man "in a higher strain," for it asserts that earthly life is only a preparation "for another abode." The person who finds happiness in this life has the satisfaction of knowing his happiness will continue; the one who is "miserable" receives the promise of "a place of rest." Near the conclusion of his sermon the Vicar states that

> religion does what philosophy could never do; it shows the equal dealings of Heaven to the happy and the unhappy, . . . if the rich have the advantage of enjoying pleasure here, the poor have the endless satisfaction of knowing what it was once to be miserable . . . .[68]

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[67] Ibid., pp. 120-121.

[68] Ibid., pp. 188-190.

Unlike the preceding theme, Goldsmith's concern with man's "duty" receives extensive rather than intensive treatment. At Wakefield Primrose finds pleasure in performing without reward the charitable deeds which are his "duty." Later, in describing the activities of a typical day, he speaks of the family's morning prayer as a "duty" of gratitude. When his parishioners try to restrain the law officers who have come to arrest him for debt, the Vicar speaks again of man's obligation to God: "Alas! my poor deluded flock, return back to the duty you owe to God, to your country, and to me." In the jail he feels a "duty" to attempt the reclamation of his fellow prisoners. While still in prison he denounces the penal code but makes the qualification that capital punishment is justifiable in cases of murder, for "it is the duty of us all, from the law of self-defence, to cut off that man who has shown a disregard for the life of another."[69] Other characters also speak of duty. Jenkinson, as the old man whose "locks of gray venerably shaded his temples," tells a distressed youth that "to do good is a duty we owe to all our fellow-creatures." Squire Thornhill assumes that man owes a duty to his employer when he states that "it is certain he [the Squire's steward] knows his duty." The "duty" of the

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[69]Ibid., pp. 6, 20, 166, 173.

jailer who removed George to another cell also exemplifies the obligation imposed on man by his profession.[70]

Wherever Goldsmith spoke of duty, he implied that it was a natural obligation. Never did he speak of neglected duty without suggesting serious consequences. Whether the obligation were to God, to others, to country, or to profession, Goldsmith seemed to advocate compliance.

Another minor theme which receives somewhat widespread treatment is friendship. Goldsmith's view, in general, would seem to be that expressed by the hermit of Burchell's ballad:

> And what is friendship but a name,
> A charm that lulls to sleep;
> A shade that follows wealth or fame
> But leaves the wretch to weep?[71]

The sceptical attitude of Burchell arises from his experience with friends whose flattery "began to dwindle" as he grew poorer. After Squire Thornhill's first visit, Charles Primrose questions the value of an association with the young landlord and comments that "disproportioned friendships ever terminate in disgust." Ned Thornhill's many displays of false attachment to George Primrose substantiate Goldsmith's suspicion of friendship. For example, in the Squire's household, George is admitted to the table as

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[70] Ibid., pp. 71-72, 155, 193. (Duty is also mentioned on pp. 106, 146, 157.)

[71] Ibid., p. 40.

"half friend, half underling." As a "friend" Thornhill secures an army commission for George and tells Arabella that George has "gone off to America" with his new wife.[72] But Goldsmith's attitude was not wholly sceptical; he did commend through the Vicar the friendliness of Burchell, Jenkinson, and Farmer Williams.[73]

Resembling Goldsmith's distrust of friendship is his expression of contempt for romantic love. The Vicar finds that the "sentiments" of the Squire have "more of love than matrimony in them." Jenkinson, also speaking slightingly of the young landlord, confirms the Vicar's doubts by observing that "Mr. Thornhill had often declared to him that he was in love with both sisters at the same time." Burchell's hermit expresses the theme most emphatically:

> And love is still an emptier sound,
> The modern fair one's jest;
> On earth unseen, or only found
> To warm the turtle's nest.[74]

Although various scholars have undertaken the task of selecting The Vicar's major theme, wide disagreement prevails. The divergence of opinion suggests that the novel has no central thesis. Of the fifteen subjects treated in this chapter, the most important are the deceitfulness of appearance, the necessity of a proper balance between

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[72] Ibid., pp. 17, 26, 120, 133, 208.

[73] Ibid., pp. 147, 193, 213.

[74] Ibid., pp. 40, 89, 205.

reason and passion, the limiting of pride by reality, and necessity of prudence as a guide to man's actions. Themes in The Vicar analyzed most extensively by scholars include disguise, sentimentality, literature, corruption in government, and the ideal nature of rural life, especially among the middle class. Goldsmith is consistent in treating the obligation of man to his duties, the necessity of realism for the achievement of happiness, the perfect environment offered by country life, the condemnation of wealth for its effect on government and economics, the superiority of religion over philosophy, the artificial quality of contemporary literature, the decayed nature of the patronage system, and the capricious character of romantic love. Subjects not treated quite so consistently are friendship, anti-feminism, the innate goodness of man, reason and passion, and humility and pride. The subtlety with which Goldsmith handled this complex of themes reveals a reason for his novel's perennial popularity.

CHAPTER IV

STYLE

Goldsmith's style differs very little from that of most of his contemporaries. One critic has observed that

> his [Goldsmith's] inspiration remains classical in its sly finesse, its sense of measure, its self-possession, its balance, and its humour; his language, of a true and charming spontaneousness, is, however, in the bondage of the verbal habits of the century.[1]

Johnson, also noting the spontaneity of Goldsmith, says that he "had no settled notions upon any subject. . . . It seemed to be his intention to blurt out whatever was in his mind, and see what would become of it."[2] Goldsmith's employment of the first person point of view, wide generalizations, and occasional passages of description does not distinguish him from other writers of the Age of Reason. His use of both humor and pathos cause him to resemble not only other novelists but also other essayists of the period. Since reformation of manners was a popular topic among essayists, it is not surprising that Goldsmith, whose principal products were essays, should utilize irony, gentle humor, and pathos in satirizing the sentimental

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[1] Legouis and Cazamian, p. 852.

[2] Quoted from Boswell, p. 378.

manners of his day and in presenting his own sentimental attitudes toward home, family, and rural life.

Goldsmith presents his novel through first person narration. By concentrating on the Vicar's responses to the action of the novel, the author is able to give the reader a complex and vivid portrait of the Vicar. Grabo, however, finds The Vicar's point of view somewhat faulty. He notes that Primrose, in relating the story, must be careful to transmit to the reader the exact actions of the other characters but must be blind at times to the real nature of the incidents. For example, he must record Burchell's slip: "I now found that--that--I forget what I was going to observe: in short, sir, he resolved to respect himself. . . ."[3] But Primrose must not note the slip. The Vicar must picture Burchell as "honest, simple, just," but for purposes of the plot Goldsmith must for a while make the latter antipathetic to Primrose. A similar problem arises in the Vicar's portrayal of Squire Thornhill, whose villainy he must relate but must partially disregard until Olivia's disclosures following her abandonment. In addition, Grabo asserts that Goldsmith did not maintain consistently the Vicar's point of view, for "it merges inevitably now and then into the larger point of view of the author." The description of Flamborough's Michaelmas Eve party illustrates the "observant author" point of view,

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[3]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 17.

and Mrs. Primrose's challenge of Squire Thornhill exemplifies the omniscient point of view. Grabo's specific observations are justifiable, but his conclusion that "the original point of view proved inadequate to its [The Vicar's] control" is, perhaps, an exaggeration.[4]

One scholar has noted that the "inspiration" of Goldsmith "tends to express itself in generalities."[5] The first chapter of The Vicar provides many examples of this stylistic characteristic. Speaking of his wife and himself, Primrose states that "we loved each other tenderly" and that "there was, in fact, nothing that could make us angry with the world or each other." Describing the qualities of his children, the Vicar comments that his sons are "hardy and active" and that his daughters are "dutiful and blooming." Summarizing the attributes of his family, he theorizes that "they had but one character--that of being all equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive." Later the Vicar generalizes similarly again in stating that

> what perplexed us [his family] most, was to think who could be so base as to asperse the character of a family so harmless as ours; too humble to excite envy and inoffensive to create disgust.[6]

Goldsmith, however, did not confine his style to generalities. He made frequent use of vivid detail,

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[4]Grabo, pp. 34-39. [5]Legouis and Cazamian, p. 852.

[6]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 1, 3, 5, 76.

especially in his descriptions of rural life. The Vicar pictures his new home:

> Our little habitation was situated at the foot of a sloping hill, sheltered with a beautiful underwood behind, and a prattling river before; on the one side a meadow, on the other a green. . . . My house consisted of but one story, and was covered with thatch, which gave it an air of snugness; the walls on the inside were nicely whitewashed, and my daughters undertook to adorn them with pictures of their own designing. . . . Besides, as it was kept with the utmost neatness--the dishes, plates, and coppers being well scoured, and all disposed in bright rows on the shelves--the eye was agreeably relieved, and did not want richer furniture.[7]

Relating the typical activities of an evening "when the weather was fine," the Vicar begins by stating that the family sometimes drank tea, "the preparations for it being made with no small share of bustle and ceremony." He continues by commenting that "on these occasions our two little ones always read for us" and that "to give a variety" to the amusements, Olivia and Sophia sang to the guitar. While their children "thus formed a little concert," Primrose and his wife "would stroll the sloping field, that was embellished with blue-bells and centaury," ecstatically talk of their children, "and enjoy the breeze that wafted both health and harmony."[8] Describing a particular dinner in the field, Primrose observes that

> we sat, or rather reclined, round a temperate repast, our cloth spread upon the hay. . . . To heighten our

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[7]Ibid., pp. 19-20. [8]Ibid., p. 23.

> satisfaction, two blackbirds answered each other from opposite hedges, the familiar redbreast came and picked the crumbs from our hands, and every sound seemed but the echo of tranquillity.[9]

Goldsmith likewise utilized picturesque detail in his paragraphs on the family portrait. Mrs. Primrose, representing Venus, desires that the painter not "be too frugal of his diamonds in her stomacher and hair." The Vicar is depicted in "gown and band," presenting to his wife his books on the Whistonian controversy. Olivia, an Amazon, sits "upon a bank of flowers, dressed in a green joseph, richly laced in gold, and a whip in her hand." Sophia, a shepherdess, has "as many sheep as the painter could put in for nothing," and Moses appears "with a hat and feather." Not all the description in the novel, however, is given in long passages. Goldsmith's selection of precise descriptive details is often admirable. For example, Primrose notes the "red-pimpled face" of the "philanthropic" bookseller in St. Paul's Churchyard, and as he observes his burning home, he sees "every aperture red with conflagration."[10]

One general comment on Goldsmith's employment of description seems to be valid: "Goldsmith is not an exact realist; for although faithful to detail in description, the scene or event is always softened by the medium of

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[9] Ibid., p. 37. [10] Ibid., pp. 85, 101, 143.

memory."[11] Witham's criticism applies especially well to the author's descriptions of nature and rural life.

In choosing words to convey his ideas, Goldsmith was usually discriminating and concise. By the use of epigram, antitheses, and balance, he condensed his thoughts so that some of the shortest paragraphs express incidents which linger longest in the reader's mind.[12] The author's clever use of contrast in the portrayal of characters illustrates this point. Picturing his daughters for the reader, Primrose states:

> Olivia, now about eighteen, had that luxuriancy of beauty with which painters generally drew Hebe; open, sprightly, and commanding. Sophia's features were not so striking at first, but often did more certain execution; for they were soft, modest, and alluring. The one vanquished by a single blow, the other by efforts successfully repeated.[13]

Goldsmith also employed antitheses in placing the emotional Vicar opposite the calm Burchell, the imprudent Primrose opposite the prudent Wilmot, the simple Mrs. Primrose opposite the wise Lord Thornhill, and George, Arabella's true lover, opposite Squire Thornhill, her false sweetheart.

Macmillan commends the vocabulary found in The Vicar by noting that the "little fishes" talk like "little fishes" and the "whales" like "whales." He finds that the Vicar normally uses Biblical phrases, that his two daughters talk

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[11] Witham, p. 12. [12] Ibid., p. 16.

[13] Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 4.

like well-bred young ladies of the country who have little knowledge of the fashionable world, that their mother retains in her speech old-fashioned words and the verbal characteristics of rurality, and that the young landlord speaks like a gentleman, but now and then his "innate vulgarity reveals itself."[14] Although this observation is too general to be of much value, it does provide insight into Goldsmith's workmanship.

In presenting the themes of the novel, Goldsmith often chose to repeat key words. He used reason, prudence, temperance, and passion in stating the reason-passion theme. He employed vanity, pride, humility, proud, and humble in developing the pride-humility theme. He repeated duty numerous times in advocating obedience. He utilized friend and friendship frequently to emphasize the advantages and disadvantages of a cordial relationship between men. In presenting the sentimentality theme he repeatedly used simple, harmless, innocent, and in stating his political views he twice spoke of monarchy as "sacred" and repeated liberty frequently in various contexts.

In defining the tone of The Vicar, critics conclude that its first half is generally characterized by humor.[15] A few amusing incidents are the Vicar's overturning of the

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[14]Macmillan, p. xvii.

[15]Wardle, p. 171; Grabo, p. 39.

washes his wife and daughters have prepared, the family's futile attempts to ride the horses on a Sunday morning, Burchell's crying of "Fudge" at the speech of Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs, Jenkinson's tricking of both Moses and the Vicar at the fair, and Burchell's outwitting of Deborah Primrose. Witham justifiably observes that "his ridicule is ever good-natured, wholesome, and tender; never malicious like Swift's, misanthropic like Pope's, or harshly boisterous like that of Johnson."[16]

After Olivia's elopement, the tone of the novel changes from humor to pathos. Misfortune descending on the Vicar and his family causes them to betwail their state bitterly. Following Olivia's departure, her mother cries:

> She's an ungrateful creature . . . to use us thus. . . . The vile strumpet has basely deserted her parents without any provocation, thus to bring your [the Vicar's] grey hairs to the grave; and I must shortly follow.[17]

Finding himself rejected by Lord Thornhill and "another nobleman of distinction," George Primrose laments that his patience "was now quite exhausted. Stung with the thousand indignities I had met with, I was willing to cast myself away, and only wanted the gulf to receive me." Later Olivia arouses the reader's pity:

> The hours of pleasure that I have passed with my mamma and sister now grow painful to me. Their

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[16]Witham, p. 13. [17]Goldsmith, Vicar, p. 97.

> sorrows are much; but mine are greater than theirs, for mine are mixed with guilt and infamy.[18]

Primrose inveighs against the Squire's base proposal to marry Olivia to another man by stating that "to gratify a momentary passion, thou [the Squire] hast made one creature wretched for life, and polluted a family that had nothing but honour for their portion."[19] Commending the fine tragic touches of Olivia's story and of the Vicar's humble dignity in the face of overwhelming odds, Witham convincingly states that

> never sensational or manufactured, it [Goldsmith's] pathos lies in the genuine tenderness with which a man who himself has suffered portrays the sufferings of others.[20]

Closely allied to the humor and pathos of The Vicar are its ironic elements, which arouse both laughter and sympathy. Generally speaking, the irony in this novel is dramatic irony.[21] For example, when the Vicar tells his friend, "You might as well advise me to give up my fortune as my argument," the friend replies, "Your fortune . . . I am now sorry to inform you is almost nothing." Other humorous illustrations of Sophoclean irony are the Vicar's statement of sympathy for Burchell, a "poor forlorn

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[18] Ibid., pp. 123, 140. [19] Ibid., p. 154.

[20] Witham, p. 14.

[21] In dramatic irony, also called Sophoclean or tragic irony, there is "an element of contrast, . . . not between what the speaker says and what he means, but between what he says or thinks and the true state of affairs" (Barnet, p. 309).

creature," and the fiery defense of liberty delivered by servants of the Arnold household.[22]

The pathetic rather than the comic supports additional examples of irony in the novel. Dahl cleverly points out that

> thinking himself the most fortunate of men, he [the Vicar] is really the most miserable. The irony of the situation is skillfully played up by the amusing 'Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog' sung by little Bill. The dog, 'Who to gain some private ends,/ Went mad and bit the man,' is like the Vicar who in order to marry his daughter attempts to distress the Squire by announcing her engagement to Williams. In the ballad the biter (the dog) dies, not the man bitten. Similarly, it is the Vicar who is really hurt by his own stratagem.[23]

On numerous occasions Primrose reaches a peak of happiness, then discovers that his optimism is completely without foundation and that in reality his situation is wretched. Before the announcement of Olivia's elopement, he states proudly that

> we are descended from ancestors that knew no stain, and we shall leave a good and virtuous race of children behind us. While we live, they will be our support and our pleasure here: and when we die, they will transmit our honour untainted to posterity.[24]

Journeying home with the abandoned Olivia, Primrose, not knowing that he will soon find his home afire, joyfully states: "And now my heart caught new sensations of pleasure . . . . As a bird that had been frightened from its nest,

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[22]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 9, 30, 106, 110.

[23]Dahl, p. 93. [24]Goldsmith, Vicar, pp. 95-96.

my affections outwent my haste, and hovered round my fireside with all the rapture of expectation."[25] Before hearing his wife's revelation that Sophia has been snatched by "ruffians," the Vicar attempts to console Mrs. Primrose by observing that

> what though no submissions can turn our severe master, though he has doomed me to die in this place of wretchedness, and though we have lost a darling child [Olivia], yet still you will find comfort in your other children when I shall be no more.[26]

Following the announcement of Sophia's disappearance, Moses comforts his father with an optimistic letter from George. Unaware that George presently will appear in chains, the Vicar states with gratitude: "In all our miseries . . . what thanks have we not to return, that one at least of our family is exempted from what we suffer."[27]

In general, Goldsmith's style is conventional. Although it proves to be the source of minor weaknesses in the novel, his employment of the popular first person point of view does provide a means by which the reader may become thoroughly acquainted with the lovable Primrose. Believing like Samuel Johnson and others that literature should state the universal, Goldsmith often expressed himself in generalities; however, occasionally he drifted into passages

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[25] Ibid., p. 143. [26] Ibid., p. 181.

[27] Ibid., pp. 184-185. (Other examples of dramatic irony are found on pp. 177, 180, 208.)

of detailed description, these passages being confined principally to accounts of rural life. In his diction, Goldsmith was usually precise. By employing the devices of antitheses, repetition of key words, and realistic speech, Goldsmith was usually concise and vivid. The tone of The Vicar is both humorous and pathetic. If Goldsmith's aim were to satirize sentimentality by making Primrose an object of the reader's gentle laughter, the first half of the novel is a success. The events following Olivia's disappearance, however, tend to arouse the reader's sympathy rather than his chuckle. Although these stylistic devices were hardly unique, Goldsmith used them with consummate skill.

CHAPTER V

A RETROSPECT

The Vicar of Wakefield is neither a sensational novel directed toward the reform of mankind nor does it mark an advance in fictional techniques. Rather, it is conventional both in form and substance. Despite this literary orthodoxy, the novel has remained popular with critics and the reading public for two centuries.

Previous plot studies of The Vicar have concentrated principally on Goldsmith's failure to utilize adequately the cause-effect relationship. With few exceptions, all scholars who have studied this plot find coincidence and accidental meeting the novel's greatest weakness. Most character analyses of the narrative have centered on the chief character. While one critic attributes "typical human naturalness"[1] to the Vicar, another finds him "an impossible mixture of folly and wisdom" and "an inadequate cog in a poorly designed machine."[2] In thematic studies of The Vicar, critics have attempted with little success to define the major theme. Those themes which have received most extensive treatment are the contrast of appearance and

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[1]Davidson, p. 242. [2]Grabo, pp. 36, 39.

reality, the innate goodness of man, the limitations of contemporary literature, the corruption in government, and the ideal nature of rural life. A few stylistic studies of the novel have concentrated their praise on Goldsmith's spontaneity, some, contradictorily, on his careful diction, and others on his success in handling both humor and pathos.

From this summary of critical views, the reader may perceive that The Vicar is not a perfect work of art. Its most apparent consistencies are a chronological arrangement of events, the distribution of poetic justice, the portrayal of flat characters such as Sophia, Moses, Sir William Thornhill, and Squire Thornhill, the coherence of most thematic elements, and the employment of a simple, direct style. Its major inconsistencies are a frequent absence of realism, insufficient motivation in the behavior of Mrs. Primrose and Jenkinson, incoherence of such themes as friendship, anti-feminism, pride and humility, reason and passion, and sentimentality, and a shift of the novel's tone from humor to pathos.

Although censured often for its dependence upon the deus ex machina, the plot of this novel deserves praise for its unity. An uncomplicated sequence of events and the employment of dependable plot devices (the foreshadowing of future events, the inclusion of mysterious elements, the use of disguise and reversal of fortune in the rising action,

and the employment of a revelation scene and a deus ex machina in the falling action), make the narrative easily understood. Goldsmith's utilization of digressions which contribute to characterization and theme also add to the novel's unity and impact.

The artistic success of characterization in The Vicar derives primarily from the naturalness of Primrose, the central character. Goldsmith's employment of contrasting characters--Olivia and Sophia, George and Moses, Jenkinson and Flamborough, Lord Thornhill and his nephew, the Vicar and his wife--and his use of a wide range of characters also contribute to the excellence of the novel. The superficiality of Moses' attachment to reason and of Mrs. Primrose's humility, and the unexpectedness of Jenkinson's sudden reformation detract only slightly from an otherwise commendable portrayal of characters.

Goldsmith's presentation of themes is, perhaps, the most artistically successful aspect of the novel. Although inconsistency limits the effectiveness of a few central themes, most of the themes remain unmodified throughout the book. Subtle expression and wide variation in presentation of the thematic elements furnish additional evidence of the author's skill and reveal that he clearly understood many problems peculiar to his age and many general to all mankind.

Goldsmith's style deserves little censure. The first-person point of view, weak in some respects, contributes

to the vivid characterization of Primrose. Although seldom elaborate, the naturalness and precision of the author's diction merit commendation. Also worthy of praise is Goldsmith's success in arousing both laughter and sympathy.

The most valid justification for an intensive study of The Vicar is not that its artistic achievement deserves increased consideration, although it does, but that the novel has gained the rank of a classic by its popularity with the reading public. That The Vicar averaged two editions each year during the nineteenth century and that it became required reading in many schools attest to its appeal for even the common man.

The eighteenth century found pleasure in the "sensational" plot elements of The Vicar and in its touches of sentimentality. Nineteenth-century readers praised the novel for its moral tendency, believing its central theme to be an assurance that the righteous man succeeds best in the world. Twentieth-century readers probably find greatest satisfaction in Goldsmith's satiric treatment of sentimentality, his pointed warnings on corruption in government and literature, and his wise insight into the human situation.

Characterization in The Vicar should have a special appeal for the English. Not only do many of the portraits in the novel arise directly from English rural life, but also Goldsmith defined in it character traits peculiar to

his adopted nation. Qualities of the novel which probably delight the readers of all nationalities are a simple, spontaneous style, a suspenseful plot, the presentation of a somewhat idealized existence, the reality of most of the characters, and the universal appeal of a Christian home and family unity.

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