



NAVIGATING SATIRE AND SENTIMENT IN OLIVER GOLDSMITH'S *THE VICAR OF THE WAKEFIELD*

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Abstract

*This paper applies a close reading approach to Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, examining the interplay of satire and sentiment as defining features of the novel. The analysis shows how Dr. Primrose functions simultaneously as an unreliable narrator and a figure of moral integrity, creating structural irony that exposes vanity, misplaced trust, and self-righteousness. At the same time, sentimental elements—such as Olivia's repentance and the family's endurance—reinforce themes of forgiveness and resilience. Through this dual emphasis, Goldsmith's text critiques the duplicity of social values while affirming the appeal of steadfast virtue. The study situates the novel within 18th-century sentimental fiction and highlights how its enduring resonance lies in sustaining the tension between satire and sentiment.*

Keywords: *Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, satire, sentiment, close reading, unreliable narrator*

Introduction

Oliver Goldsmith was born in Ireland on Nov. 10, 1730, and struggled initially as writer. McKeon (1987) situates Goldsmith within the origins of the English novel. Harsh circumstances of life forced Goldsmith to write down books and articles for publishers to earn his livelihood. It took him years before he could establish himself as literary powerhouse. His prominent literary works include a critically acclaimed poem 'The Deserted Village' a play 'She Stoops to Conquer' and his novel, 'The Vicar of Wakefield'. Goldsmith published a collection of essays 'The Citizen of the World', in 1762. It won the attention and admiration of Samuel Johnson who was an established literary figure at the time. Goldsmith eventually became a member of his close circle of Johnson's friends. Although he had a fair income through the publication of his works, he remained mostly in debt and died on April 4, 1774. His fiction, nonetheless, has left its mark as Bloom (2005) situates Goldsmith's fiction within the broader canon of Victorian reception. Richetti (1999) contextualizes Goldsmith's work within the 18th-century English novel tradition.

The novel *The Vicar of the Wakefield* is Oliver Goldsmith's crowning achievement. It is a much loved and revered novel in equal measures. From early on *The Vicar of Wakefield* was generally regarded as a tale of virtue and its triumph over evil. It is a celebration of the fact that steadfastness and perseverance in the face of difficulty can help in overcoming any misfortune of trials of life. Critics lauded its sentimental passages brimming with pathos and didactic moral instructions. However, there has been raging debate if the sentiment in *The Vicar of Wakefield* was

a tad tongue in cheek and meant as satirical evaluation of moral standards of the time as Damrosch (1987) emphasizes Goldsmith's imagination as central to his literary output.

Modern readers and critics tend to regard it as a satirical world incorporating the duplicity of values and mainly enjoy it for its ironical content as much as for its other qualities. It is a pivotal text that yields invaluable insights when viewed as a satirical portrayal of embedded social values of the period because as Baldick (2015), notes satire often overlaps with irony and parody in unearthing discourse patterns. This paper, therefore, critically analyses the text for a cultural sight that navigates entrenched social values through the vehicle of satire and sentiment. Watt (1957) rightly views sentimentalism as part of the rise of the English novel.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the method of close textual analysis, often referred to as close reading, which emphasizes a detailed engagement with the language, structure, and rhetoric of a literary text. Originating in the tradition of New Criticism, close reading privileges the text itself rather than external biographical or historical contexts, allowing the critic to uncover irony, ambiguity, and patterns of meaning embedded in the narrative (Brooks, 1947). In more recent developments, close textual analysis has been adapted to examine the cultural and ideological dimensions of literature, enabling scholars to situate textual details within broader discourses of sentiment, morality, and social critique (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954; Eagleton, 2008).

For *The Vicar of Wakefield*, this framework provides a way of tracing how Oliver Goldsmith constructs the dual registers of satire and sentiment. Through structural irony, unreliable narration, and sentimental pathos, the novel produces a complex interplay of ridicule and sympathy. Close reading allows this paper to illuminate how particular passages—such as Dr. Primrose's moral pronouncements, Olivia's downfall, or the family's resilience—operate both as satirical critiques of vanity and as sentimental affirmations of virtue.

Specifically, close reading highlights how satire in the novel often emerges from ironic disjunctions between the Vicar's lofty ideals and the harsh realities he encounters. His misplaced judgments, naïve trust, and self-righteous principles become sites of structural irony that expose social hypocrisy. At the same time, sentimental passages rely on pathos to move the reader emotionally, whether through depictions of family suffering, forgiveness, or resilience. By examining these textual moments, the framework demonstrates how Goldsmith's narrative oscillates between irony and emotion, ridicule and sympathy, ultimately complicating the distinction between satire and sentiment in 18th-century fiction as Goldsmith is positioned *The Vicar of Wakefield* firmly within the sentimental tradition (Durant, 1977).

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Goldsmith (1766) portrays a family's struggles against adversity. The novel opens with an idyllic portrait of a happy family. Dr. Charles Primrose, as the vicar of the Wakefield, enjoys domestic bliss with loving wife Deborah, his sons, George, Moses, Dick and Bill and two daughters, Sophia and Olivia. The vicar has fixed views on certain topics and gets caught up in a heated argument with Mr. Wilmot, his eldest son George's future father in law. He holds the stance that a priest of the church should not marry another woman upon the death of his first wife. Mr. Wilmot is set upon marrying his fourth wife thus disagrees with the vicar. The vicar in the meanwhile learns that his fortune has been swindled by his financial adviser. Mr. Wilmot breaks off the marriage, and the vicar falls upon harsh times with his family and forced



to move to another town in order to live off humbler means more befitting to their changed financial status.

While on their way to another town, they meet a person named Mr. Burchell who has no fortune but possesses a reputable character in the town. Mr. Burchell tells them about a womanizer, squire Thornhill, notorious for his exploits with ladies. Mr. Thornhill succeeds in ingratiating himself with family of Dr. Primrose and both Deborah and her daughter Olivia see him as a viable suiter and expect squire Thornhill to make a marriage proposal for vicar's daughter. Eventually, Olivia runs off with Mr. Thornhill on the promise of marriage which turns out to be fake as he has done this to many women by duping them with fake ceremonies of marriage and then discarding them. The vicar gets into one misfortune after another after Olivia's elopement. Their house burns in a fire. Dr. Primrose is put behind bars for his inability to pay rent to Mr. Thornhill. The vicar's eldest son George gets in a fight with the squire and lands in prison along with his father. Sophia is abducted by the hooligans on the instigation squire Thornhill.

Things take a positive turn when Mr. Burchell turns out to be the celebrated Sir William Thornhill, squire Thornhill's uncle. Mr. Burchell marries Sophia. Olivia's marriage with squire Thornhill turns out to be a real one due to Jenkinson's tricking Thornhill. The man who had run off with the vicar's fortune is caught and the money is returned. George marries his old love Ms. Arabella Thornhill.

Critic Chris Baldick defines satire as 'a mode of writing that exposes the failings of individuals, institutions, or societies to ridicule and scorn. It is an incidental element in literary work that may not be wholly satirical' (Baldick, 2015). Satire is aided through structural irony which is employed in works of literature through its use of a naïve or 'deluded hero' or 'unreliable narrator' whose assessment of the affairs in the world are in sharp contrast with actual events that are evident to the reader and the author. This use of irony equips the readers with knowledge of the circumstances where the characters or narrators are in the dark (2015). Robert Hopkins argues that 'the Vicar is an "unreliable narrator" and that readers have misinterpreted the work "for over 175 years' (Haggerty 3). The novel is a satiric investigation of Dr Primrose and his family's struggles with vanity and sentimental portrait of a family battling one misfortune after another with a happy ending. Structural Irony in *The Vicar of the Wakefield* occurs as the Vicar's principles clash with experiences in real life. Haggerty (1991) argues that satire and sentiment are inseparably intertwined in Goldsmith's novel.

Dr Primrose's intellectual pursuits and magnanimity coupled with his denunciation of worldly vanities do not hold in the face of his and his family's actions to the contrary. The vicar's dedication to complex theoretical endeavors i.e. supports of monogamy repeatedly land him in trouble. The bulk of the novel's ironic humor comes from the vicar's own naïveté and blindness to circumstances around him which stare the readers in face creating a dramatic irony. Thus, Dr Primrose comes off as self-righteous and oblivious to real circumstances. The protagonist, Dr Primrose's inability to see through the guise or treachery reveals his innocence and justly accounts for the ironic point of view enabling the reader to laugh at Dr. Primrose as well as sympathize with him.

The vicar's actions stem from an ironic sense self-righteousness failing to see the true merit in people and situations. As a result, he lacks farsightedness and spends his money on charity disregarding his family's needs and making provision for rough conditions in future. Again, it due

to his lack of insight and perspicacity that he falls a prey financial fraud and takes Jenkinson's charade on its face value. His values clash with regards to Mr. Burchell and Squire Thornhill. While Mr. Burchell possesses all the qualities of a gentleman and is the polar opposite of the villainous Mr. Thornhill, the vicar nonetheless wishes the latter as match for his daughter Olivia and remains averse to Mr. Burchell's sincere feelings for his eldest daughter Sophia. His vanity precludes him from appropriate courses of action in these cases. He is, therefore, not quite as insightful as he believes himself to be although acting from noblest of notions. If it were not for his vociferous valorization of petty issue championing the cause of monogamy with Mr. Wilmot, his son's prospects might have flourished unscathed.

Dr Primrose, notwithstanding, possesses an unrivalled beauty of mind and magnanimity of soul. Despite Olivia's elopement with squire Thornhill, the vicar is quick to forgive her in her moment of shame and wholeheartedly accepts her contrition. He is gravely and genuinely distressed at the news of her death. The vicar cares for his family and finds solace in their presence. 'The novel demonstrates the impracticality of a life of principle in a fallen world. The Vicar's failures in life are as obvious as his goodness is, because his goodness causes his worldly failures' (Durant). Standards of the society collide with those of the vicar, forcing to suffer one slap of fate and cruel circumstances after the other.

The vicar is not alone in his travails of misfortunes, his family also suffers due to their vanity and, at times, innocence. The two town ladies from the city, Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, enthrall the family with their pretentiousness. As a direct influence of these two ladies, the Primrose daughter change their attitude towards the Flamboroughs and look down upon them as their social inferiors. They are reluctant to associate with Flamboroughs once they meet the city ladies in spite of Mr. Burchell's dislike for the ladies from out of town. They misinterpret Mr. Burchell's letter as a denunciation of vicar's daughter although it was meant for the city ladies. Olivia's infatuation with Mr. Thornhill despite his notorious reputation reveals her desire for material comforts and her inability to see through his vicious designs. Her blind trust in him leads to her elopement with Thornhill on his false promises of marriage, who deceives her with a fake ceremony in line with what Armstrong (1987) notes domestic fiction connects with cultural politics in the 18th century.

However sentimental elements abound in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. These are characterized by the idealized pictures of rural family life that appear throughout this novel as well as in the pathos of the disasters that befall Primrose and his family. The family's lost income, the fire, the fallen daughter, Vicar's imprisonment, all illustrate sentimentality. Olivia's sad song, "when lovely woman stoops to folly" brims with sentimentality. Given that sentimental fiction is not intended to be realistic can be seen from this novel's use of coincidences and disguise. Dr. Primrose remains steadfast in the face adversity and looks to his family for solace; this adds to the novel's appeal. The novel ends on a sentimental note when the vicar proclaims: "I had now nothing on this side of the grave to wish for. All my cares were over. It only remained that my gratitude in good fortune should exceed my submission in adversity".

Conclusion

To sum up, *The Vicar of Wakefield* just like any other outstanding work of fiction, has captivated the attention of readers for its multifaced qualities and for its malleability to different interpretations without being confined to any one of them. It amuses and delights with its light



passages of a simple family love and fidelity and shines as a sentimental and satiric work underscoring the social morality of the time and incapsulating Goldsmith's keen observations. The vicar, when challenged by circumstances fights for his values and struggles to pull his family out of misfortunes. *The Vicar of Wakefield* presents a protagonist caught between his valorization of his intellectual integrity and a clash of his values with a society without principles. It has its due share satire and sentiment built upon the trial and tribulations of Dr Primrose and his eventual triumph.

At the same time, the novel invests deeply in the sentimental mode. The family's series of misfortunes—the loss of wealth, the burning of their home, Olivia's fall, and the vicar's imprisonment—draw on the emotional power of suffering, forgiveness, and resilience. Durant (1977) emphasizes that the sentimentalism in *The Vicar of Wakefield* is not merely ornamental but central to its enduring appeal, engaging readers in moral reflection through scenes of pathos. Olivia's contrition, Sophia's constancy, and the vicar's forgiving nature offer moments of emotional intensity that reaffirm the redemptive power of virtue and familial bonds. These sentimental passages soften the satire, ensuring that the critique of social norms is never wholly cynical but tempered by compassion and hope.

The significance of *The Vicar of Wakefield* lies in this balance between satire and sentiment. As Nünning (2004) observes, Goldsmith's narrative can be understood as an example of unreliable narration that reflects the variability of cultural values across time. The novel mocks the vanity and pretensions of its characters while simultaneously appealing to the reader's emotions through idealized depictions of family unity and moral perseverance. It is this interplay that makes the work so malleable, allowing successive generations of critics to read it alternately as a sentimental novel, a satirical comedy, or a hybrid of the two.

Ultimately, the trials and triumphs of Dr. Primrose and his family capture the precarious negotiation between principle and survival in a world without stable moral foundations. The vicar's journey demonstrates both the inadequacy of rigid intellectual ideals when confronted with human weakness and the possibility of moral triumph through forgiveness, endurance, and self-reflection. In uniting satire with sentiment, irony with pathos, Goldsmith offers a narrative that is not only a mirror of 18th-century society but also a timeless meditation on human folly and resilience. *The Vicar of Wakefield* remains a text of remarkable complexity and vitality, inviting readers to laugh, to weep, and to reflect on the enduring struggles between virtue, vanity, and survival.

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