

Major themes in Henry Fielding's novels

The Vulnerability and Power of Goodness

Goodness was a preoccupation of the *littérateurs* of the eighteenth century no less than of the moralists. In an age in which worldly authority was largely unaccountable and tended to be corrupt, Fielding seems to have judged that temporal power was not compatible with goodness. In his novels, most of the squires, magistrates, fashionable persons, and petty capitalists are either morally ambiguous or actively predatory; by contrast, his paragon of benevolence, Parson Adams, is quite poor and utterly dependent for his income on the patronage of squires. As a corollary of this antithesis, Fielding shows that Adams's extreme goodness, one ingredient of which is ingenuous expectation of goodness in others, makes him vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous worldlings. Much as the novelist seems to enjoy humiliating his clergyman, however, Adams remains a transcendently vital presence whose temporal weakness does not invalidate his moral power. If his naïve good nature is no antidote to the evils of hypocrisy and unprincipled self-interest, that is precisely because those evils are so pervasive; the impracticality of his laudable principles is a judgment not on Adams nor on goodness per se but on the world.

Charity and Religion

Fielding's novels are full of clergymen, many of whom are less than exemplary; in the contrast between the benevolent Adams and his more self-interested brethren, Fielding draws the distinction between the mere formal profession of Christian doctrines and that active charity which he considers true Christianity. Fielding advocated the expression of religious duty in everyday human interactions: universal, disinterested compassion arises from the

social affections and manifests itself in general kindness to other people, relieving the afflictions and advancing the welfare of mankind. One might say that Fielding's religion focuses on morality and ethics rather than on theology or forms of worship; as Adams says to the greedy and uncharitable Parson Trulliber, "Whoever therefore is void of Charity, I make no scruple of pronouncing that he is no Christian."

Providence

If Fielding is skeptical about the efficacy of human goodness in the corrupt world, he is nevertheless determined that it should always be recompensed; thus, when the "good" characters of Adams, Joseph, and Fanny are helpless to engineer their own happiness, Fielding takes care to engineer it for them. The role of the novelist thus becomes analogous to that of God in the real world: he is a providential planner, vigilantly rewarding virtue and punishing vice, and Fielding's overtly stylized plots and characterizations work to call attention to his designing hand. The parallel between plot and providence does not imply, however, that Fielding naïvely expects that good will always triumph over evil in real life; rather, as Judith Hawley argues, "it implies that life is a work of art, a work of conscious design created by a combination of Providential authorship and individual free will." Fielding's authorly concern for his characters, then, is not meant to encourage his readers in their everyday lives to wait on the favor of a divine author; it should rather encourage them to make an art out of the business of living by advancing and perfecting the work of providence, that is, by living according to the true Christian principles of active benevolence.

Town and Country

Fielding did not choose the direction and destination of his hero's travels at random; Joseph moves from the town to the country in order to illustrate, in the words of Martin C. Battestin, "a moral pilgrimage from the vanity and corruption of the Great City to the relative naturalness and simplicity of the country." Like Mr. Wilson (albeit without having sunk nearly so low), Joseph develops morally by leaving the city, site of vanity and superficial pleasures, for the country, site of virtuous retirement and contented domesticity. Not that Fielding had any utopian illusions about the countryside; the many vicious characters whom Joseph and Adams meet on the road home attest that Fielding believed human nature to be basically consistent across geographic distinctions. His claim for rural life derives from the pragmatic judgment that, away from the bustle, crime, and financial pressures of the city, those who are so inclined may, as Battestin puts it, "attend to the basic values of life."

Affectation, Vanity, and Hypocrisy

Fielding's Preface declares that the target of his satire is the ridiculous, that "the only Source of the true Ridiculous" is affectation, and that "Affectation proceeds from one of these two Causes, Vanity, or Hypocrisy." Hypocrisy, being the dissimulation of true motives, is the more dangerous of these causes: whereas the vain man merely considers himself better than he is, the hypocrite pretends to be other than he is. Thus, Mr. Adams is vain about his learning, his sermons, and his pedagogy, but while this vanity may occasionally make him ridiculous, it remains entirely or virtually harmless. By contrast, Lady Booby and Mrs. Slipslop counterfeit virtue in order to prey on Joseph, Parson Trulliber counterfeits

moral authority in order to keep his parish in awe, Peter Pounce counterfeits contented poverty in order to exploit the financial vulnerabilities of other servants, and so on. Fielding chose to combat these two forms of affectation, the harmless and the less harmless, by poking fun at them, on the theory that humor is more likely than invective to encourage people to remedy their flaws.

Chastity

As his broad hints about Joseph and Fanny's euphoric wedding night suggest, Fielding has a fundamentally positive attitude toward sex; he does prefer, however, that people's sexual conduct be in accordance with what they owe to God, each other, and themselves. In the mutual attraction of Joseph and Fanny there is nothing licentious or exploitative, and they demonstrate the virtuousness of their love in their eagerness to undertake a lifetime commitment and in their compliance with the Anglican forms regulating marriage, which require them to delay the event to which they have been looking forward for years. If Fielding approves of Joseph and Fanny, though, he does not take them too seriously; in particular, Joseph's "male-chastity" is somewhat incongruous given the sexual double-standard, and Fielding is not above playing it for laughs, particularly while the hero is in London. Even militant chastity is vastly preferable, however, to the loveless and predatory sexuality of Lady Booby and those like her: as Martin C. Battestin argues, "Joseph's chastity is amusing because extreme; but it functions nonetheless as a wholesome antithesis to the fashionable lusts and intrigues of high society."

Class and Birth

Joseph Andrews is full of class distinctions and concerns about high and low birth, but Fielding is probably less interested in class difference per se than in the vices it can engender, such as corruption and affectation. Naturally, he disapproves of those who pride themselves on their class status to the point of deriding or exploiting those of lower birth: Mrs. Grave-airs, who turns her nose up at Joseph, and Beau Didapper, who believes he has a social prerogative to prey on Fanny sexually, are good examples of these vices. Fielding did not consider class privileges to be evil in themselves; rather, he seems to have believed that some people deserve social ascendancy while others do not. This view of class difference is evident in his use of the romance convention whereby the plot turns on the revelation of the hero's true birth and ancestry, which is more prestigious than everyone had thought. Fielding, then, is conservative in the sense that he aligns high class status with moral worth; this move amounts not so much to an endorsement of the class system as to a taking it for granted, an acceptance of class terms for the expression of human value.