

## A Study of the Language of *The Vicar of Wakefield*

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### I

In the eighteenth century, “there were many indications that urbane, classical attitudes towards literature, with its insistence on form and manner and restraint already ceased to appeal to the majority of the reading public before”<sup>1</sup> the triumph of romanticism.

“Fiction, because it appealed to a wide, less cultured, and less intellectual public, had escaped the narrower restraints and more formal attitudes of poetry.”<sup>2</sup> Several great novel writers like Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson had a warm response to the deepest human experiences. They had an eye for the colour and movement of life, of its pathos, ribaldry, and fun. Those new creators were vigorous and exuberant, if formally sensitive and commonly moral for the sake of their female readers. They were forerunners, so to speak, and did not really believe in the novel as an art capable of expressing the deepest experience of man. Actually, they wrote to make money, to entertain, or to preach a simple morality.<sup>3</sup>

Oliver Goldsmith (1730-74) was among the great Samuel Johnson’s circle in London in the eighteenth century. He is famous for the two comedies *The Good-Natured Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773). The playwright was strongly objecting to the excesses of a kind of comedy without any laughing at all. He appeared to represent a bias against sensibility popular in the mid-eighteenth century literary world.<sup>4</sup>

Goldsmith was always profligate in his private life and was in financial difficulties with many usurers running after him. Under pressure to pay off his debt, he was forced to undertake numerous compilations such as *Roman History* (1764) as well as several great pieces of poetry like “The Deserted Village” (1770) and admiring essays for journals such as *The Critical Review* in 1760s.<sup>5</sup> The dissipated writer was also forced to produce his solitary novel *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). It became a successful masterpiece and is responsible for his popularity, even today. Interestingly enough, however, it was treated as a poor work at first. It lay for two years in the hands of his

bookseller and was only brought out after his successful poem *The Traveller* (1764). Even Dr. Johnson did not think very much of its prospects and observed that sixty guineas was no mean price for Goldsmith to receive for it.<sup>6</sup>

In this novel, Goldsmith tells his story of the sufferings of Dr. Charles Primrose and his family as if the ending, with its restoration of the vicar to good fortune and happiness, were justification enough for all the pains suffered by him and his family.<sup>7</sup> The hero and narrator “is a priest, an husband-man, and the father of a family. He is drawn as ready to teach, and ready to obey, as simple in affluence, and majestic in adversity.”<sup>8</sup> “He may be a marginal man drawn to retirement and innocent of the world’s corruption.”<sup>9</sup> Goldsmith had the readers fond of sensibility know “The simple life may be desirable, but it can be no more than an ideal”<sup>10</sup> in the eighteenth century.

In this paper, we will see the language of *The Vicar of Wakefield* lexically and stylistically in order to discover Goldsmith’s art of producing a novel.

## II

In this novel, abstract words such as “vanity” and “good-natured” are often found. “Vocabulary is a means easily available to reflect ideas and feelings. The nouns and adjectives constitute the significant elements, on which the sentence stress is obviously placed by the author.”<sup>11</sup>

In the first chapter, Dr. Primrose describes his wife as “a good-natured notable woman.” Susie I. Tucker explains the term “good-nature” as one of the important philosophical words of the eighteenth century and notes the case of Goldsmith’s works:

Discussion about the term *Good Nature* is a window into many aspects of the eighteenth-century mind—patriotic, dogmatic, kindly or cynical. Some, like Shaftesbury, thought it a mark of the English character, ‘a Quality so peculiar to the English Nation that no other Language hath a word to express it.... It was all very well to define it as the healing Balm for all our Sores, and the powerful Charm for all our cares, or the cement of love, the bond of society, the rich man’s pleasure, the poor man’s refuge, or as that disposition which partakes of felicity of all mankind, or even to equate it with Charity in St Paul’s sense.... Goldsmith’s *Good-natur’d Man*, according to the *London Magazine* of May 1768, demonstrates the madness of good-nature, and is calculated to show the dangerous consequences of that benevolence, which is indiscriminately showered upon the worthy and undeserving.<sup>12</sup>

Among the eighteenth century notable philosophers, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) was as great as any and believed “man was born with a ‘moral sense’ which was closely associated with his sense of aesthetic form. The order and beauty of the universe might easily be perceived by the man of taste, and that same

understanding of order informed his moral sense.”<sup>13</sup> The philosopher preached an ideal of tolerance, virtue, and taste.<sup>14</sup> To fall under his influence was to aim at a moral and civilized life above the cares of politics and free from most annoyances of ordinary life. His idea was well suited to Enlightenment ideas which formed the intellectual and moral climate in England.

At that time, there also appeared the sentimental trend<sup>15</sup> in the literary world. W.F.Gallaway, Jr. mentions “sentimentalism”:

Sentimentalism rests on the belief that human nature is fundamentally good. The sentimentalist sees the world as his heart bids, not as his mind, where observation and experience of the actual are stored, presents it to him. The sentimentalist praises the spontaneous generosity and the sensitive humanity of naturally good man, and attacks form—social, liturgical, literary—as a fetter on the free outpouring of the heart.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Primrose’s idea of man and society is close to sentimentalism. To describe the farmers in his neighbourhood, he points out the word “temperance,” as virtue, in the light of sentimentalism:

Remote from the polite, they [farmers] still retained the primaevial simplicity of manners, and frugal by habit, they scarce knew that temperance was a virtue. They wrought with cheerfulness on days of labour; but observed festivals as intervals idleness and pleasure. (31-32)<sup>17</sup>

The vicar respects his neighbours’ lifestyle far from “opulence and poverty” unlike people in town. For the sentimentalist, “simple life is preferred, and the ‘noble savage’ admired.”<sup>18</sup>

Erik Erametsa notes that the vocabulary of sentimentalism is classified into two groups: the catchwords of didacticism and morality of the Enlightenment and the words connected with the manifestation of feeling.<sup>19</sup> He displays the vocabulary mentioned above: (1) goodness, good, good nature, good natured, benevolence, benevolent, cheerful, cheerfulness, esteem, to please, merit, weakness, pride, pity; (2) sensibility, delicacy, delicate, to feel, feeling, distress, obligation, tenderness, tender, generosity, generous, kind, gratitude, grateful, sweet.

The novel opens with a rural idyll, and with a family of but one character: “all equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive.”<sup>20</sup> The character is of great sentimentalism. His family enjoys a moral and rural life in the country:

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

was spent in moral and rural amusements; in visiting our rich neighbours, and relieving such as were poor. (18)

Here, the good-natured family seems to have the right to enjoy their local lives with good neighbours in the sentimental world.

In contrast, the successive chapters of the novel show various misfortunes falling on the good-natured family to illustrate the need of caution or prudence. Goldsmith made the readers fond of sensibility awake to the realities of life so that they might need “caution or prudence.” .

Goldsmith has those two positions: “intellectual and moral leanings” and “sentimental ones” in his literary productions. They seem to be irreconcilable and it is hard to resolve the antinomy.

Mr. Burchell criticizes Sir William Thornhill’s excessive sympathy without hesitation and discusses the negative phase of sentimentalism:

He was surrounded with crowds, who shewed him only one side of their character; so that he began to lose a regard for private interest in universal sympathy. He loved all mankind; for fortune prevented him from knowing that there were rascals. Physicians tell us of a disorder in which the whole body is so exquisitely sensible, that the slightest touch gives pain: what some have thus suffered in their persons, this gentleman felt I his mind. The slightest distress, whether real or fictitious, touched him to the quick, and his soul laboured under a sickly sensibility of the miseries of others....his profusions began to impair his fortune...he grew improvident as he grew poor; and though he talked like a man of sense, his actions were those of a fool. (29)

Here Goldsmith has little sympathy for the extreme sentimental behaviour of the old noble character with the word “disorder” caused by mental illness. He seems to have dissuaded people from being too sensible or sensitive in the eighteenth century.

The main climate of eighteenth century England was intellect and morality through good learning. It can be associated with “a strong tendency towards order and regulation peculiar to the age of reason.”<sup>21</sup> Dr. Primrose often presents people around him the art of living with metaphors. He preaches the word “hospitality” before his children:

“Well done, my good children,” cried I, “hospitality is one of the first christian duties. The beast retires to its shelter, and the bird flies to its nest; but helpless man can only find refuge from his fellow creature. The greatest stranger in this world, was he that came to save it. He never had an house, as if willing to see what hospitality was left remaining amongst us.” (39)

His family loves the controversy and they enjoy quoting wise sayings and proverbs as

they debate. The son Moses is an expert at representing his idea by quoting a certain saying. Sophy complains of her father's condemnation regarding Mr. Burchell's conduct, and her brother supports her words.

"You are right, Sophy," cried my son Moses, "and one of the ancients finely represents so malicious a conduct, by the attempts of a rustic to flay Marsyas, whose skin, the fable tells us, had been wholly strip off by another." (40)

Olivia claims to be an expert of controversy when her father asks her the career of her reading in the field:

"I have read the disputes between Thwackum and Square; the controversy between Robinson Crusoe and Friday the savage, and I am now employed in reading the controversy in Religious courtship." (45)

### III

The story of *The Vicar of Wakefield* is modeled after Dr. Primrose's family's life. In this section, we see several linguistic characteristics of the characters' conversation in the novel. The priest introduces his family to the readers in the first chapter. He begins by describing his wife's character:

To do her justice, she was a good-natured notable woman; and as for breeding, there were few countries ladies who could shew more. She could read any English book without much spelling, but for pickling, preserving, and cookery, none could excel her. She prided herself also upon being an excellent contriver in house-keeping; tho' I could never find that we grew richer with all her contrivances. (18)

Thus he praises his wife, but we are more or less surprised to find several instances of argument on various topics. The couple often argue about their difference in life-style. The wife persuades her husband to permit her and her daughters dressing up on going to church one day. They "began their operations in a very regular manner" and she "undertook to conduct the siege."

After tea, when I seemed in spirits, she began thus.—"I fancy, Charles, my dear, we shall have a great deal of good company at our church to-morrow."—"Perhaps we may, my dear," returned I; "though you need be under no uneasiness about that, you shall have a sermon whether there be or not."—"That's what I expect," returned she; "but I think, my dear, we ought to appear there as decently as possible, for who knows what may happen?" "Your precautions," replied I, "are highly commendable. A decent behaviour and appearance in church is what charms me. We should be devout and humble, chearful and serene."—"Yes," cried she, "I know that; but I mean we should go there in as proper a manner as possible; not altogether like the scrubs about us."

“You are quite right, my dear,” returned I, “and I was going to make the very same proposal. The proper manner of going is, to go there as early as possible, to have time for meditation before the service begins.”—“Phoo, Charles,” interrupted she, “all that is very true; but not what I would be at. I mean, we should go there genteelly. You know the church is two miles off, and I protest I don’t like to see my daughters trudging up to their pew all blowzed and red with walking, and looking for all the world as if they had been winners at a smock race. Now, my dear, my proposal is this: there are our two plow horses, the Colt that has been in our family these nine years, and his companion Blackberry, that have scarce done an earthly thing for this month past. They are both grown fat and lazy. Why should not they do something as well as we? And let me tell you, when Moses has trimmed them a little, they will cut a very tolerable figure.” (58-59)

Their conversation is like a battle. At the latter part of their conversation, the priest’s wife’s monologue proceeds without a break as she defeats him finally, with logic in a variety of strategic phrases. In response to every reply of Dr. Primrose, his wife tries to meet him halfway and protests to him: “That’s what I expect...but I think, my dear...”; “Yes...I know that; but I mean...”; and “Phoo, Charles...all that is very true; but now what I would be at. I mean...” In the end, she does not hesitate to declare her ideas: “Now, my dear, my proposal is this...” and “And let me tell you...” She seems to be good at challenging him. The priest is tired of answering her questions one by one and ends with the speech “heaven grant they may be both the better for it this day three months.” (65) He confesses “This was one of those observations I usually made to impress my wife with an opinion of my sagacity.” (65) He sometimes protests her actions and words: “How, woman... is it thus we treat strangers? Is it thus we return their kindness? Be assured, my dear, that these were the harshest words, and to me the most displeasing that ever escaped your lips!” (70)

Dr. Primrose loves his daughters and they love him. Their conversation is filled with one another’s affection. Olivia is a person whose wish is for many lovers, and Sophy, one. Olivia is a strong woman, and Sophy is a gentle and obedient woman. The difference between these characters is exemplified in the following conversation after the daughters’ meeting a fortune-teller:

“Well, my girls, how have you sped? Tell me, Livy, has the fortune-teller given thee a pennyworth?”—“I protest, pappa,” says the girl, “I believe she deals with some body that’s not right; for she positively declared, that I am to be married to a ‘Squire in less than a twelvemonth!’—“Well now, Sophy, my child,” said I, “and what sort of a husband are you to have?” “Sir,” replied she, “I am to have a Lord soon after my sister has married the ‘Squire.’—“How,” cried I, “is that all you are to have your two shillings! Only a Lord and a ‘Squire for two shillings! You fools, I could have promised you a Prince and a Nabob for half the money.” (57)

The father refers to them with “my girls,” “Livy,” “Sophy,” “my child” and “you fools” lovingly. Olivia calls him “pappa” too friendly, and Sophy, “Sir” too respectfully. While he gives the name “Sophy” and the second person pronoun “you” to the sensible daughter Sophy, he gives the nickname “Livy” and the archaic second person pronoun “thee” to the vivacious daughter Olivia.<sup>22</sup> Archaic words were scarcely used except in intimate relationships, like ones between lovers or among close friends in the eighteenth century.

Last, the conversation between Miss Skeggs and Lady Blarney can be easily associated with the funny upper class conversations between Miss Richland and Mrs. Croaker in *The Good Natur'd Man* and between Hastings and Mrs. Hardcastle in *She Stoops to Conquer*. The high-class ladies are talking with Dr. Primrose's family and Mr. Burchell:

“All that I know of the matter,” cried Miss Skeggs, “is this, that it may be true, or it may not be true: but this I can assure your Ladyship, that the whole rout was in amaze; his Lordship turned all manner of colours, my Lady fell into a sound; but Sir Tomkyn, drawing his sword, swore he was her's to the last drop of his blood.” “Well,” replied our Peeress, “this I can say, that the Dutchess never told me a syllable of the matter, and I believe her Grace would keep nothing a secret from me. This you may depend upon as fact, that the next morning my Lord Duke cried out three times to his valet de chambre Jernigan, Jernigan, Jernigan, bring me my garters.”... “Besides, my dear Skeggs,” continued our Peeress, “there is nothing of this in the copy of verses that Dr. Burdock made upon the occasion.” *Fudge!* “I am surprised at that,” cried Miss Skeggs; “for he seldom leaves any thing out, as he writes only for his own amusement. But can your Ladyship favour me with a sight of them?” *Fudge!* (62)

The two ladies exchange polite words and phrases regardless of whether their topic is simply gossip of the fashion world. They are very lively and make the readers laugh like an audience at a theatre. Their modes of address are “your Ladyship,” “his Lordship,” “my Lady,” “her Grace,” and “my Lord Duke.” Those names can be associated with upper-class society of the eighteenth century. Carey McIntosh notes “They are the names of variables in terms of which status is conferred and manipulated; they are verbal counters for the politics of dependency.”<sup>23</sup> Those dignified names are expressed in “more splendid attributes of the sovereign in question.”<sup>24</sup> The verb “favours” meaning the action of granting is a piece of honorific language. Goldsmith is good at appropriating “courtly-genteel phrases to give his characters a varnish of politeness.”<sup>25</sup> There is another interesting word “fudge” spoken by Mr. Burchell. The word is an interjection of condemnation against the women's contemptible talk.<sup>26</sup> The interjection is not polite because Dr. primrose complains “*fudge*, an expression which

displeased us all, and in some measure damped the rising spirit of the conversation.”  
(62) The linguistic contrast between the ladies’ absurd and insignificant talk and the mischievous man’s derogative solitary word sounds funny.

Goldsmith has carefully provided a narrative margin, a space within which the attentive reader can enjoy both the sentimental comedy and the satire of the vicar’s folly, and in ways which are invisible to narrator. “It is a sophisticated intellectual comedy, but it is balanced uneasily between the sentiment felt in Richardson’s novels and the satire, in Fielding’.”<sup>27</sup> *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Goldsmith’s first attempt to prove himself as a novelist in the eighteenth century literary world, proved to be great success.

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1950) 163.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Plumb 163.

<sup>3</sup> J.H. Plumb 163.

<sup>4</sup> Goldsmith attacked plays like Richard Cumberland’s *The West Indian* (1771) in his “Essay on the Theatre; or, A Comparison between Laughing and Sentimental Comedy” in 1773.

<sup>5</sup> Maximillian E. Novak, *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (London: The Macmillan Prs. Ltd, 1983) 168.

<sup>6</sup> Boris Ford, “Oliver Goldsmith,” *From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. Boris Ford, *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 4 (London: Penguin Books, 1957) 366.

<sup>7</sup> Novak 169.

<sup>8</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, advertisement, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, ed. Arthur Friedman, vol. 5 (Oxford: The Clarendon Prs., 1966) 14.

<sup>9</sup> Clive T. Probyn, *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1789* (London: Longman, 1987) 150.

<sup>10</sup> W.F.Gallaway, Jr., “The Sentimentalism of Goldsmith,” *PMLA* 48 (1933): 1180.

<sup>11</sup> Erik Erametsa, *A Study of the word ‘Sentimental’ and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of Eighteenth Century Sentimentalism in England* (Helsinki: Annale Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 1951) 9.

<sup>12</sup> Susie I. Tucker, *Protean Shape* (London: U. of London the Athlone Prs.) 145.

<sup>13</sup> Novak 27.

<sup>14</sup> H.A.Needham notes the word “Taste”: “The use of this word in England, towards 1700, to denote cultivated artistic sensibility was doubtless influenced by the parallel use of the Italian *gusto* and French *goût*. It was first applied to the elegant amateur. In the early years of the century the term was frequently opposed to judgment—the man of taste who judged works of art by their appeal to his sensibility being regarded as superior to the mere critic who judged according to the Rules. But gradually the notion of taste came to include power of judgment as well as sensibility. H.A.Needham, *Taste and Criticism in the Eighteenth Century* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1952) 224.

<sup>15</sup> Needham notes the word “Sentimental”: “Although the noun ‘sentiment’ had been used in English from medieval times, first in the sense of ‘opinion’ and later of ‘feeling,’ the adjective dates from about 1730. In the eighteenth century the word, as applied to persons, meant ‘characterized by refined and elevated feeling’; and when used of



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works of art or literary compositions meant 'conveying refined aesthetic emotion' or 'appealing to emotions' (especially of love). The present-day meaning of the word, implying superficiality, or excess or morbidity of feeling, grew up in the nineteenth century." Needham 226.

<sup>16</sup> Gallaway, Jr. 1167.

<sup>17</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, ed. Arthur Friedman, vol. 5 (Oxford: The Clarendon Prs., 1966). All quotations are from this edition. The number in parentheses is the page of the edition.

<sup>18</sup> Gallaway, Jr. 1171-72.

<sup>19</sup> Erametsa 74.

<sup>20</sup> Probyn 157-58.

<sup>21</sup> Hiroyuki Ito, preface, *The Language of The Spectator: A Lexical and Stylistic Approach* (Tokyo: Shinozaki Shorin, 1980) i.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Barber notes "There are two cases in particular where we find this emotional use of *thou*. The first is to indicate intimacy, affection, tenderness: members of polite classes who are social equals may slip into the *thou* forms to express such affectionate feelings, and return to you to indicate greater formality and distance...." Charles Barber, *Early Modern English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1976) 209.

<sup>23</sup> Carey McIntosh, *Common and Courtly Language: The stylistics of Social Class in 18<sup>th</sup>-Century English Literature* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Prs., 1986) 69.

<sup>24</sup> McIntosh 69.

<sup>25</sup> McIntosh 77.

<sup>26</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary* cites the passage and notes "The interjection as used by Goldsmith (quotation in 1766) seems from the context merely to represent an inarticulate expression of indignant disguise, though later writers who adopted it from him use it with a more definite meaning." (s.v. *fudge*. int. & sb.)

<sup>27</sup> Probyn 157.