

ON THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

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Abstract

This article mainly deals with Oliver Goldsmith's novel entitled *The Vicar of Wakefield* and attempts to reconstruct a social history of the 1760s England. History books include great men's and generals' lives but not ordinary citizen's or soldier's. Novels are, in this context, complementary part of the history. Goldsmith, as a novelist and a Tory, reflect the rural part of England of his time. The article provides the reader with a view over a country vicar's daily life together with his political and religious standing, as well as the difference between the city life and modest joys of rural people. Goldsmith maintains his Tory standpoint all through the novel and makes his son Moses unsuccessful in business to reflect his anti-Whig standing. Another issues that this article deals with are child labour, education and status of women, and marriage traditions.

Key Words: Goldsmith, Marriage, Country, City, Politics

VICAR OF WAKEFIELD ÜZERİNE

Özet

Bu makale temel olarak Oliver Goldsmith'in Wakefield Papazı adlı romanından 1760'lı yılların kırsal İngiltere'sinin sosyal tarihini açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Tarih kitapları büyük devlet adamlarının ve generallerin yaptıkları yazarlar, ancak sıradan insanların ve askerlerin hayatlarından pek söz etmezler. Bu bağlamda romanlar, tarihin tamamlayıcı yazınlarıdır. Goldsmith, politik duruşuyla ve bir romancı olarak sözü geçen dönemi resmetmektedir bu romanıyla. Makale, okuyucuya bir kırsal bölgenin papazının dini ve politik duruşuyla beraber, şehir yaşantısı ve kırsal bölge insanının küçük sevinçlerini yansıtır. Böylece, bir Tory olan papaz, oğlu Moses'i ticarete başarısız kılarak Whig'lere olan karşıt duruşunu gösterir. Bu makalenin ele aldığı diğer konular ise çocuk işgücü, kadın eğitimi ve konumu ve evlilik geleneğidir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Goldsmith, Evlilik, Taşra, Şehir, Politika

Giriş

The Main Character as an Embodiment of the Author

Every work of art and piece of literature derives its ingredients from the social surrounding where it is produced. Inevitably, Oliver Goldsmith wrote about his time and his thoughts were in compliance with the Tory point of view of his time. He was a supporter of the king and squirearchy. *The Vicar of Wakefield* is a

literary product of a man living in eighteenth-century England, which consequently reflects some historical and biographical truths about him, as Paul Valéry suggests: “[A]uthors fabricate for themselves a character who little by little takes the place of their own authentic self” (Coote 1982: 9). Therefore, the vicar in Goldsmith’s novel becomes Goldsmith himself and reflects both his world view and *zeitgeist* of his time.

The novel mainly deals with the vicar’s family life and his struggle to support his family. The vicar has got six children, and after the marriage of the eldest son, the vicar’s house burns in a fire and he loses all his wealth. With his family he moves to a nearby village and works on a rented farm and preaches in the church. After long sufferings, the vicar regains his wealth and in the meantime his daughters, Olivia and Sophia, find suitors to marry. Sophia, the elder daughter, marries the baronet, Sir William Tornhill, and the younger daughter, Olivia, marries Sir William’s nephew. His son, George, makes his own choice from love. Yet the reason behind all these marriages, especially the daughters’ marriages, are not arbitrary, for Goldsmith himself was a class-conscious man who believed marriages should be on equal terms both economically and intellectually. The Vicar/Goldsmith is not satisfied with the hypocritical attitude of his landlord’s family. W. A. Speck suggests that

[t]he two Tornhills exemplify the contrast between the ideal of a country gentleman and its debasement of Sir William is in every way [that of] a deserving figure, while Mr Tornhill is a dyed-in-the-wool villain.... Goldsmith [sees] that he [Sir William] was “a man of large fortune and great interest, to whom senates listened with applause, and whom the party heard with conviction; who was the friend of his country *but loyal to his king* (1997: 112).

The vicar Charles Primrose’s attack against non-conformists runs through the novel, defending the idea that “they were in danger of being crushed between the elite above and the electorate below them” (Speck 1997: 112). Dr. Primrose is not a republican, in the sense that Holland, Genoa, and Venice are and he concludes:

I am, then, for, and would die for, monarchy, sacred monarchy; for if there be anything sacred amongst men, it must be the anointed sovereign of his people, and every diminution of his power, in war or in peace, is an infringement upon the real liberties of the subject. The sounds of liberty, patriotism and Britons, have already done much; it is to be hoped that the true sons of freedom will prevent their ever doing more (Goldsmith 1986: 132).

An Even Stronger Political Point of View

This observation of the Vicar's is the very sentiment of Goldsmith himself; for he feels bitter against the well organised Bourgeois and middle-classes that were not united under even stronger politics. As a man of his time, it would be really difficult for Goldsmith to tear himself from the era he lived through. As Stephen Coote suggests, Goldsmith construed that "moral struggles of the ordinary man were a worthy subject" (1986: 11) Hence, the political view that the novel includes is hard to ignore. Consequently, I am going to examine the novel in terms of Carolyn Steedman's essay entitled "Culture, Cultural Studies, and the Historians" (1992: 613-622). Briefly, the essay remarks on the following aspects of the authorial voice: The historian is the only authority and shapes history according to the documents he consults. While he may innocently have followed some particular documents, history is still a narrative of the true past. However, it recreates a reality in itself, which needs, like any other sort of writing, *interpretation*. Therefore, history is also one of the most unstable of written forms. As the time passes by, the history-based text also will be subject to change. For everything will be interpreted in compliance with the reader's world knowledge. Moreover, the historian's gaze may be inadequate to reflect all the realities of the era about which he may be writing. For example, we hardly see any women or children figuring in the histories of this time; or the private life of people, and of how the family worked, or of how men and women related to one another, etc. There was not then, as there may be today, the notion that perhaps a kitchen recipe may aid the cultural historian giving his descriptions and observations more intimate detail and cultural material, for such ingredients may be products of a particular importation policy or certain climate requirements. On that same score, some lesser writers and poets may have been excluded from books, whose works might well have been influential in the interpretation of that time for future – for today's -- reader.

The Novel as a Cultural Document and Documentation

Quite naturally Goldsmith's novel is not a history book that is waiting to be interpreted. Yet the reason behind it is the fact that Goldsmith is very much interested in the politics of his day. Speck sees it as a "novel [that] documents a strain of middle class conservatism which arose in response to the new issues of the 1760s" (1997: 113). Now, if we consider this part of the novel as a history-based text, the other aspects that are closely related to the way of people's living will be like a recipe that will enable us to view the time of Goldsmith.

The narratives about family life and things that happen to them reveal some cultural and social realities of the time when the novel was written. At the very beginning of the novel the vicar talks of his wife as if she were a commodity, which can be traced back to the historical conditioning of the time. Speck suggests that women are treated "as commodities with a value placed upon them" (1997: 104). He takes his argument further and, as indicated above, with the rise of middle

class and novel genre, women characters act in compliance with market demand. Speck comments on this, remarking that “Moll Flanders and Roxana exploit the market value of their bodies to rise in the world from humble origins to affluence” (1997: 104), which indicates the difference between the way of country life and that of London. However, for our country vicar the wheel has not yet come full circle and he had chosen his wife “as she did her wedding gown” and the vicar chose her because “she was a good-natured notable woman; as for breeding” (Goldsmith 1986: 37).

The movement between classes and the absorption of wealth through marriage was secured by the Marriage Act of 1753, because it is “principally concerned with upper class courtship and marriage” (Hay & Rogers 1997:44). On the other hand, “plebeian men and women were less bound by social convention and parental approval in the choice of their partners” (Hay & Rogers 1997:50). The vicar is well aware of the fact that he does not have anything to leave as inheritance to his daughters or sons, and as a class-conscious man, the vicar warns his daughter to court somebody of their own “rank”. In fact, the person she is courting is a rich man, Mr Tornhill, who is pretending to be a poor Mr. Burchell. Dr. Primrose warns his daughter, insisting that, “Disproportioned friendships ever terminate in disgust; and I thought, notwithstanding all his ease, that he seemed a perfectly sensible distance between us. Let us keep to companions of our own rank” (Goldsmith 1986:54). And at a later stage, Dr. Primrose yearns for his daughter’s infatuation for this poor man rather than the son of a squire: “[N]or could I conceive how so sensible a girl as my youngest could thus prefer a man of broken fortunes to one whose expectations were much greater” (Goldsmith 1986:69). The vicar wants to maintain his Tory point of view and rural morality under any condition. However, he is well aware of the fact that money is an important aspect to support and protect a family. He is a man who has been imprisoned for being unable to pay his rent and poverty, which was a widespread occurrence at that time for many family men. Therefore, the vicar wants to marry his daughters to financially secure partners.

Women’s education was poorer in comparison to that of men. Trevelyan depicts the eighteenth century education amongst lower and upper classes: Women’s education was a sad thing to see; “among lower classes it was perhaps not much worse than men’s, but the daughters of the well-to-do had admittedly less education than their brothers” (1943: 312). The vicar’s wife is literate, which makes him happy, and he says, “[S]he could read any English book without much *spelling*” (Goldsmith 1986: 37). This compliment of sorts might indicate the lower rate of education amongst women, which overlaps with the historical conditioning of the time.

Life in the Country and in London

Goldsmith’s novel serves as a good means to detect the difference between London life and country life. These differences emerge in pastime activities as well. Goldsmith portrays the scenery as “[w]alking out, drinking tea, country

dances, and forfeits, shortened the rest of the day without the assistance of cards, as I hated all manner of *gaming*, except backgammon, at which my old friend and I sometimes took a two-penny hit” (1986: 42). Trevelyan narrates the historical account of London pastime as follows: “Both sexes gambled freely, the fine ladies and gentlemen even more than country squires. In London, Bath and Tunbridge Wells the gaming-table was the central point of interest” (1943: 314).

At this period, tea was a drink for even lower class country people. People living in the country could now afford to drink tea, though at the beginning of the century it was expensive and only rich people could afford it. In Henry Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, for example, we see tea being consumed in the houses of the rich only. Now, by Goldsmith’s time, even a country vicar can afford it. We have Trevelyan’s narrative on the history of tea exportation for this knowledge:

Thanks to the East India Company’s great ships, not only tea but coffee was now a usual drink at least among the wealthier classes. From the reign of Charles the II to the early Georges, the London Coffee House was the centre of social life (1943: 323-4).

The vicar tells of the joy of drinking tea after a tiring day thus: “Here too we drank tea, which now was become an occasional banquet” (Goldsmith 1986: 52). To gather city culture is another thing and it is important to have visited London and attended a school. Trevelyan depicts London thus:

London indeed was industrial as well as commercial, and already displayed many characteristics of modern ‘great city’ life.... They [the guilds] were markets for farmers, and meeting places to which the gentry and their families resorted to shop, to dance and to conduct the affairs of the country. Many squires of the middling sort, especially those who lived more than a hundred miles from the capital, not being able to afford a ‘London season,’ built themselves good houses in or around the country town (1943: 373).

As indicated above, London is an important centre for people living in the country. This must be the reason why the vicar thinks that visiting London would help his daughter improve her manners; Goldsmith notes that he tells his wife “a single winter in town would make her little Sophia quite another thing” (Goldsmith 1986: 71). Elsewhere, the vicar continues narrating the positive effects of living in London thus: “Suppose the girls should come to make acquaintances of taste in town! This I am assured of, that London is the only place in the world for all manner of husbands” (Goldsmith 1986: 81). Working in the field spoils the beauty of the daughters. It is tragic perhaps from the eighteenth century point of view, for it was a time when whiteness of skin was a sign of high culture. Dr. Primrose narrates:

The sun was dreaded as an enemy to the skin without doors, and the fire as a spoiler of the complexion within. My wife observed, that rising too early would hurt her daughters' eyes, that working after dinner would redden their noses, and she convinced me that the hands never looked so white as when they did nothing (Goldsmith 1986: 72).

The indirect reflection here, of course, is on the fact that a poor country tenant's wife and children have to work in the field to support the family.

A Father's Agony

After the abduction of his daughter, Dr. Primrose wanders from one inn to another trying to find his daughter. In one case, he comes across members of one of the wandering theatrical companies. Yet we see that some country inhabitants are deprived of theatrical performances, although the historical background claims just the opposite. The reason behind this authorial point of view is that Goldsmith wants us to notice that when Dr. Primrose talks to one of the players of his playwrights' works, the conversation suggests that such works are now old fashioned and are not performed any more: "I demanded who were the present theatrical writers in vogue, who the Drydens and Otways of the day". The *poor* player answers him, saying that "few of our modern dramatists would think themselves much honoured by being compared to the writers you mention" (Goldsmith 1986: 111). And he explains that the audience's receptivity and taste have changed and thinks that "the works of Congreve and Farquhar have too much wit in them for the present taste; our modern dialect is much more natural" (Goldsmith 1986: 112), which indicates that the eighteenth century audience do not want 'blank verse' any more. Trevelyan explains the theatres of the time thus:

The theatre had a vigorous popular life in the eighteenth century England. ... Companies were established in the larger provincial towns, and strolling players were always moving round the countryside, acting in barns and town halls before rustic audiences (1943: 411).

The novel gives a lot of details about prisons. Mr Tornhill, abusing his power, has the vicar imprisoned. The prison scene teaches us that while murderers receive slight punishments, the slight crimes of petty criminals receive capital punishment. Though the vicar does not mention torture, this might be so because of his groundless imprisonment or some other concern, for Trevelyan labels prisons as a "national disgrace" (1943: 346) throughout the eighteenth century.

The Old Squirearchy

As a conformist, Goldsmith was on the side of the “old squirearchy” rather than the rising values of the time. Real wealth, to Goldsmith, comes from the family through inheritance and it is mostly in the form of inherited land. Yet the “shift from seeing money as wealth to viewing it as capital...facilitated the development of the financial market associated with the City ever since” (Trevelyan 1943: 102). This must be the reason why Goldsmith makes little Moses, the younger son of the vicar, unsuccessful in his business dealings (Goldsmith 1986: 83). For the speculative market conditions are no source of wealth for Goldsmith. During the time the vicar is imprisoned, the only one to support the family is his younger son, Moses. He urges the boy to support the family:

Thou art now sixteen years old, and hast strength, and it was given thee, my son, for very useful purposes; for it must save from famine your helpless family. Prepare than this evening to look out for work against to-morrow, and bring home every night what money you earn, for our support (Goldsmith 1986: 157).

This moment in the text is an excellent example for viewing the living conditions of the time. Women seem to be confined in their houses and do not work outside and men are expected to support the family. Another issue closely related to the above moment is that of “the child labour”.

Conclusion

We may conclude by noting that Goldsmith draws a picture of the materiality of a country life of the mid-eighteenth century. We learn of many details that earlier history books did not include and the thoughts of ordinary people living in the country. Another thing to remember is the fact that morality under the pressure of economical anxieties creates a splitting consciousness. The vicar’s thoughts, through his struggles with the time in which he lives and survives, cannot remain static. For example, though he supports marriages on equal terms, he changes his mind and has the vicar supporting his daughter’s marriage to a rich person who would provide his daughter a better and more secure life, by means of which Goldsmith has the vicar betraying his deeply rooted political and religious background. Hence, Goldsmith portrays a society in stasis and in flux, giving us hints of things to come.

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