

CHAPTER VI
FIELDING'S MORAL ATTITUDE



Most of the critics in the eighteenth and nineteenth century thought that Fielding's novels were rather immoral. English society in the eighteenth century was Christian, philosophical, moral and interested in political theory; there was also a strong belief in tradition and authority. One reason for Johnson's objection to Fielding's works is moral-aesthetic; at the same time he admires those of Richardson. Johnson, the common-sense moralist and Christian humanist, thinks and feels in the terms of the Puritan imagination. He comments on Tom Jones as "so vicious a book," "I scarce know a more corrupt work." The moral horror for Johnson in Tom Jones was the attitude shown towards Tom's sexual adventures. Sex was a serious matter for him. The aspect of Tom Jones that bothers Johnson and perhaps some readers today is that the sexual activity is always pleasant and amusing; it is not ultimately important or threatening final moral consequences. Johnson feels that the immorality in Tom Jones is both in Fielding's excuse for Tom's careless sexual adventures and in his general representation of sex as something pleasant and cheerful.

Richardson illustrates sex from the Puritan imagination. In Clarissa, sex has a great influence upon life; for the hero and heroine, it becomes equal to all of life and death. Though Fielding was impressed by Clarissa, he was so annoyed by Pamela that he wrote in his parody Shamela: "The comprehensiveness of his imagination must be truly prodigious! It has stretched out this

were grain of mustard-seed (a poor girl's little &c) into a resemblance of that Heaven, which the best of good books has compared it."

Most of the modern novelists agree with Fielding's attitude towards sex as no longer threatening. But the Puritans see sex as something that involves man's final moral responsibilities, leading him to damnation or to his greatest fulfillment. D.H. Lawrence does not regard Fielding's treatment of sex disturbing as Johnson does but rather as trivial and superficial. Arnold Kettle fairly judges Fielding's moral treatment. Fielding, he says, "is not complacent but he is fundamentally confident that the problems of human society, that is to say, his society, can and will be solved by humane feeling and right reason. It is this broad and tolerant confidence which gives Tom Jones its particular tone and which also alienates those critics who feel less confidence in social man than Fielding, whose optimism they mistake for insensitiveness."¹

Fielding intends to achieve both moral and comic treatment. He adds the threat of incest to Tom Jones's miseries in order to present the difference between tragedy and comedy. He brings his story close to tragic situations in order to remind us that his comic novel may parody tragedy but cannot be involved in it. Tom's reaction to the revelation by Partridge about his parentage is an artful parody of the tragic hero's response to his tragic discovery: "Oh, good Heavens! incest," Tom cries, and then deflates the pretended solemnity of the moment by his comic addition, "with a mother!" When he follows these words with the typical miserable hero's

formula, "To what am I reserved?" (Book XVIII, chap. II)

Fielding gives this chapter the heading, "Containing a Very Tragical Incident." He is aware that comedy itself contains experience that might also be tragic.

Kermode, a modern critic, is against Fielding's moral treatment. He believes that a novel should reveal moral character through action. Fielding's moral plot in the incident of Blifil's freeing Sophia's bird is used by Kermode to illustrate Fielding's conception of character and morality: the split between character and conduct. Tom has given Sophia a little bird as present. Sophia loves that bird so much that Blifil becomes jealous and pretends to perform a kind action by freeing the bird. Kermode feels that Blifil is a villain, so he should not perform such a humanitarian act. But Fielding makes it quite clear that this act is not really humanitarian at all. Kermode's judgement is superficial. He cannot see Blifil's hypocrisy, the difference between seeming and reality. Coleridge makes a nice comment on this incident:

"If I want a servant or mechanic, I wish to know what he does; but of a friend, I must know what he is. And in no writer is this momentous distinction so finely brought forward as by Fielding. We do not care what Blifil does; the deed, as separate from the agent, may be good or ill; but Blifil is a villain, and we feel him to be so from the very moment he, the boy Blifil, restores Sophia's poor captive bird to its native and rightful liberty."²

Coleridge's comment also implies that by distinguishing deed and doer, Fielding presents the complication of the motives for

particular actions and the moral issues involved. By this, the reader has to judge the characters and their deeds while the novelist merely presents evidence. Differing from later novelists, Fielding neither analyzes the characters himself nor presents their own self-analysis. He approaches the motive and moral judgement by allowing his reader to use his intellectual judgement on the data he gives. In the above situation, Thwackum and Square employ religion and philosophy in arguing on the rightness of Blifil's act. Allworthy is naïvely blinded by Blifil's humanitarian act and pleased with it. Squire Western, who acts on impulse, and whose actions are always exaggerated, is the only one who does not agree with Blifil's behaviour. On the contrary, he admires Tom for trying to seize the bird back. Therefore, in order to see the moral action of Fielding's novels, we must have a perspective knowledge of his characters. In Richardson's fiction, he portrays the Puritans' imagination about man: man is a battleground where God and Satan fight for domination.

In Joseph Andrews, Fielding has a moral aim to present vanity and hypocrisy:

"...to hold the glass to thousands
in their closets, that they may contemplate
their deformity, and endeavour to reduce it,
and thus by suffering private mortification
may avoid public shame."

(Book III, chap. I)

The history of Joseph gives one important moral point: the sincere and uncomplicated relationship between Joseph and Fanny establishes an idea towards love in contrast to that in Pamela. His journey from London back home produces various moral points. Self-interest

is portrayed when Joseph is robbed, stripped and the passengers in a passing stagecoach debate whether to help him. An old gentleman quickly takes leave because he fears a second robbery. A lawyer is afraid of the potential consequences of help-accusation of robbery; and mercilessly decides to let Joseph die. The only woman in the coach refuses to take in a nakedman. The coachman refuses the extra passenger and even to lend Joseph his clothes. It is the postillion (a man who will be transported for robbing a hen roost) who gives him his great-coat.

In Joseph Andrews, Fielding seems to represent his statement in The Covent Garden Journal; "that all the wit and humour of this kingdom was to be found in the ale houses." But after reading Joseph Andrews, we find that it is not only wit and humour but also charity, generosity and honest emotion. Fielding believes that the good nature, the natural sympathy and benevolence, exists in low society as in high. The postillion who gives Tom his great coat is later transported for robbing a hen roost; Betty, the chambermaid, who gives him mercy, is no better than she should be; and the pedlar lends Parson Adams his all, adding to six shillings and six pence. Fielding presents this in reaction against the exaggerated and insincere picture of the upper classes in Richardson's Pamela. Through Joseph's misfortune, charity and hypocrisy are illustrated through the reactions of Mr. Tow-wouse, an innkeeper, Mrs. Tow-wouse, Betty the chambermaid, a clergyman, a doctor and Parson Adams.

To Fielding, the most important moral aspect is good-nature. In his essay On the Knowledge of the Characters of Men, he explains the meaning of good nature:

"Good-nature is that benevolent and amiable temper of mind which disposes us to feel the misfortunes and enjoy the happiness of others, and consequently pushes us on to promote the latter and prevent the former; and that without any abstract contemplation of the beauty of virtue, and without the allurements or terrors of religion."

So, good-nature is a natural goodness. It is different from the goodness which is influenced by religious fears or by the idea of virtue. These supposed kinds of goodness are ridiculously presented in the characters of Thwackum and Square as hypocrisy and intolerance. Both of them pretend to be virtuous philosophers. But their actions prove them the opposite. Square is found later with Molly in her bedroom. Thwackum is found helping Blifil fight against Tom. Their reactions to Allworthy's legacy reveal their real nature. Thwackum says,

"The duty I have done in his family, and the care I have taken in the education of his two boys, are services for which some men might have expected a greater return. Though the Scriptures obliges me to remain contented, it does not restrain me from seeing when I am injured by an unjust comparison." "Since you provoke me," returned Square, "that injury is done to me; nor did I ever imagine Mr. Allworthy had held my friendship so light as to put me in balance with one who received his wages...."

(Book V, chap. VIII)

Parson Adams and Tom are Fielding's ideal of good-nature. They are good from the bottom of their minds, not only on the outside. Although Parson Adams is sometimes limited by his theory and religious doctrines, he is by nature generous, kind and ready to help those who are in trouble. In a hurry, he throws into the

fire his religious book which is extremely precious to him in order to rescue Fanny when he hears her cry for help. The positive side of Fielding's moral views is chiefly found in the characterization of Parson Adams and the negative side is found in various people he meets, such as Trulliber, his fellow clergyman who refuses to lend him money and treats him rudely. Adams condemns him:

"Now there is no command more express,
no duty more frequently enjoyed, than charity.
Whoever therefore, is void of charity, I make
no scruple of pronouncing that he is no
Christian."

(Book II, chap. XIV)

The miserly Peter Pounce, Lady Booby's steward suggests to Adams as they are travelling that the distresses of mankind are mostly imaginary.

"Sure, sir," replied Adams, "hunger
and thirst, cold and nakedness, and other
distresses which attend the poor, can
never be said to be imaginary evils."

(Book III, chap. XIII)

Tom is fundamentally good. In Tom Jones, we can see several examples to support his imaginative sympathy with the sorrows of other people. He prefers punishment to the betrayal of Black George, the gamekeeper, as his companion in hunting rabbits in Squire Western's estate. The reason is that if he reveals the secret, Black George will be dismissed from Mr. Allworthy's house and his family will be in trouble. He sells the pony Allworthy has given him in order to get the money to support Black George's family. He refuses to bring Allworthy's sentence of banishment to Blifil and says that, "What might perhaps be justice from another tongue would from mine be insult." Allworthy is a good man, but he has not that

imaginative sympathy that he admires in Tom: "Oh my child, to what goodness have I been so long blind!" One of the most striking demonstrations of Tom's good-nature is that he helps even the man who has tried to steal from him. While he is riding towards Highgate with Partridge and a guide, a genteel-looking man asks to join them. When he knows that Tom has a one-hundred pound note, he pulls out his pistol and demands it. Tom is able to disarm him. The man asks for mercy by saying that he has five hungry children and a wife waiting for him. After testing the truth, Tom sets him free and also gives him a couple of guineas. In this situation, Fielding does not only intend to present Tom's good-naturedness but also to present social justice and social attitudes towards this poorman. By his action, people in society would judge him as a robber and consider he should be punished. Social justice is based on the seeming or outside appearance without looking at the reality or the reason which causes him to perform such an action. Here, Tom is the representative of Fielding's broadminded tolerance. He sets the man free because this man is not by nature evil or a thief. This is his first attempt at crime. Necessity pushes him into wrongdoing; he wants the money for his wife and five children who are hungry. Tom is tolerant enough not to punish him but also gives him a sum of money to buy food for his family. Another example to indicate justice based on seeming rather than reality is Blifil's freeing Sophia's bird. Thwackum, Square and even Allworthy agree with Blifil that his act is right. He gives mercy to the bird because the bird prefers to be free rather than kept in the cage. But he does not think

that the bird cannot help itself when it is left alone. The fact is that he is jealous because the bird is so dear to Sophia.

Fielding's broadmindedness is also seen in his sexual treatment. Fielding himself was impressed by Richardson's narrative skill but he was absolutely against Richardson's moral teaching. Richardson is intolerant and, like his contemporaries, regards sex as the primary moral aspect which embodies others in human behaviour. To him, chastity is the greatest virtue, as he indicates in Pamela or Virtue Rewarded. Fielding suggests that it should be better entitled "Virginity sets its price." Pamela adores her chastity above all else and this is Fielding's objection to her. Richardson believed in the general Puritan concept of sexual ethics: that sex is Satanic. The example of Adam and Eve suggests that it is the female who leads astray the male. Eve turns Adams out of the favour of God and she causes mankind's eviction from paradise. Therefore, to the Puritans, sex is threatening, like Satan, and is able to lead the good Christian astray to damnation. Fielding thinks that there are other virtues which are more important and interesting, such as good-nature, charity and honesty.

In Tom Jones, before Tom marries Sophia, he has had love affairs with three women: his amour with Molly Seagrim, his love affair with Mrs. Waters at the Upton inn and his secret love affair with Lady Bellaston. With Molly Seagrim and Mrs. Waters, Tom falls for their physical attraction. But with Lady Bellaston, it is different:

"Jones had never less inclination to an amour than at present; but gallantry to the ladies was among his principles of honour; and he held it as much incumbent upon him

to accept a challenge to love, as if it had been a challenge to fight."

(Book XIII, chap. VII)

To him, gallantry to the ladies is a principle of honour. Besides, Lady Bellaston is generous to him, gives him money and he is grateful to her generosity:

"Though Jones saw all these discouragements on the one side, he felt his obligations full as strongly on the other; nor did he less plainly discern the ardent passion from whence these obligations proceeded, the extreme violence of which if he failed to equal, he well knew the lady would think him ungrateful, and what is worse, he would have thought himself so. He knew the tacit consideration upon which all her favours were conferred; and as his necessity obliged him to accept them, so his honour, he concluded, forced him to pay the price. This therefore he resolved to do, whatever misery it cost him, from that great principle of justice, by which the laws of some countries oblige a debtor, who is not otherwise capable of discharging his debt, to become the slave of his creditor."

(Book XIII, chap. IX)

Fielding leaves this matter to our imagination. He believes that Tom as a truly good-natured man, supports love with gratitude. Tom does not have the same positive physical desire for Lady Bellaston as he has had for Molly and Mrs. Waters.

Fielding makes it clear that it is not Tom who starts the attack, but the women who offer themselves to Tom. He thinks that if he does not respond, he is ungenerous. Although this does not fit at all with conventional notions of the virtue of chastity, both male and female, it agrees with a delicate and sensitive humanity. Tom frequently wins the reader's favour because he is real and directly opposite to the conventional. He is really innocent

whereas Joseph Andrews is abstractly innocent. He cannot see that Molly is playing a trick to seduce him. His reaction to her is generosity. Fielding says that Tom is one of those who "can never receive any kind of satisfaction from another, without loving the creature to whom that satisfaction is owing, and without making its well-being in some sort necessary to their own ease."

With Mrs. Waters, he becomes more experienced. But he is aware that she is offering herself to him. However Fielding suggests that she is more good-natured and more generous than many nominally more virtuous. She is really not mercenary, unlike Richardson's Pamela:

The beauty of Jones highly charmed her eye, but as she could not see his heart, she gave herself no concern about it. She could feast heartily at the table of love, without reflecting that some other already had been, or hereafter might be, feasted with the same repast. A sentiment which, if it deals but little in refinement, deals, however, much in substance; and is less capricious, and perhaps less ill-natured and selfish, than the desires of those females who can be contented enough to abstain from the possession of their lovers, provided they are sufficiently satisfied that no one else possesses them."

(Book IX, chap. VI)

Fielding believes that only people of good-nature are capable of love. In the prefatory chapter to Book VI of Tom Jones, he defines love in exactly the same way as he defines good-nature:

"I desire of the philosophers to grant there is in some human breasts a kind and benevolent disposition which is gratified by contributing to the happiness of others. That in this gratification alone, as in friendship, in parental and filial affection, there is a great and exquisite delight.

That if we will not call such a disposition love, we have no name for it."

He thinks that the fulfillment of physical passion between a man and a woman of good nature who love one another is the supreme felicity attainable on earth. When Tom and Sophia are married, Fielding comments to the reader:

"Thus, reader, we have at length brought our history to a conclusion, in which, to our great pleasure, though contrary perhaps to thy expectation, Mr. Jones appears to be the happiest of all humankind: for what happiness this world affords equal to the possession of such a woman as Sophia, I sincerely own I have never yet discovered."

(Book XVIII, chap. XIII)

Fielding reminds us that Tom is not controlled by sexual appetite alone; he is good-natured and always grateful to Molly and Mrs. Water for their physical kindness and to Lady Bellaston for her generosity. These women are also grateful to him; for example, Mrs. Waters thinks of him, "to whom I owed such perfect happiness." As soon as Tom knows that his marriage with Sophia is possible, he does not think of other women anymore. This kind of sexual ethic may be difficult to explain clearly and exactly but Fielding's concept of good nature, which included sex with other human relations, and his broadmindedness makes it clear.

In The Rise of the Novel, Ian Watt comments that there are many moral offences in Tom Jones which receive a much more tolerant treatment than any Puritan moralist would have accorded them. For example, Defoe and Richardson are against drunkenness but Fielding does not blame Tom when he gets drunk in his joy at Allworthy's recovery from sickness. His drunkenness is not essentially wrong;

it is seen merely as the high spirited reaction of a warm-hearted though fallible hero. Murphy, Fielding's first biographer, says that Fielding was in fact as much of a moralist as Richardson, although of a different kind. He believed that virtue, far from being the result of the suppression of instinct at the behest of public opinion, was itself a natural tendency to goodness or benevolence. In Tom Jones, he tried to show a hero possessed of a virtuous heart, but also of the lustiness and lack of deliberation which easily led to error and even to vice. Fielding showed how the good heart was threatened by many dangers to achieve maturity and knowledge of the world. The happy conclusion of the story is the highest point of Fielding's moral and literary logic. It is also the best indication of that civilized maturity and tolerance which, even more than his great narrative and technical skill, can be said to be the main contribution of Fielding to literature.