

# The downfall of greatness as depicted in henry fielding's amelia



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Amelia is certainly a change in direction from the writing style Henry Fielding employed in *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*. Gone are the frequent author-as-narrator interjections, as well as much of the comedic relief captured in the later mentioned novels. By veering away from a comedic tone in his writing, Fielding introduces us to more realistic characters through Amelia and Booth. Fielding's more realistic take on the "domestic sphere" in mid-eighteenth century London focuses on the daily struggles within these two character's marriage, using the fears and uncertainties both Amelia and Booth experience to speak to the unrest felt on a grander, sociopolitical scale by citizens regarding the state of England. In fact, the novel's underlying tone is that of fear; fear of an unjust social system, and fear of unjust "great" men in power, and fear of submitting the control of one's own life to that of a Higher Power, as in the case of Booth. The novel distinguishes between great men, who are men of ambition that will manipulate their way into power, and good men, who have kind hearts. Through corrupt and powerful individuals in the novel, Fielding ultimately concludes that men who are "great" are often far from good.

Both Amelia and Booth seem to agree that men who are considered "great" are often those whose ambition for power and greatness lead them to do manipulative and corrupt tasks to get there. Amelia suggests "great" men are inhuman, and questions, "are they born without hearts?" (405) To which Booth replies, "One would, indeed, sometimes...be inclined to think so" (405-6). They both seem to acknowledge here that men who are considered great by societal standards may have committed vile acts, or at the very least acted without compassion towards others in order to elevate

themselves. Although Booth and Amelia seem to agree in the vices of great men, by the conclusion of the passage, the narrator states, “ though he had in other points a great opinion of his wife’s capacity, yet as a divine or a philosopher he did not hold her in a very respectable light, nor did he lay any great stress on her sentiments in such matters” (406). Although moments before, he and his wife are in agreement, when the topic starts to shift towards religion, Booth is no longer interested in what his wife has to say, even implying a lack of intelligence on her end, and a fear of the topic on Booth’s end. This conversation shifts so abruptly for such an innocuous reason that Fielding seems to be using irony as a commentary on how women’s intelligence and education were viewed during the time period in London society. Booth’s opinion of his wife is that she can not contribute intellectually on matters of such importance; yet Fielding takes care to show this idea is inaccurate; Amelia has intellectual merit, and Booth fails to credit her.

In the passage, while still conversing over the goodness of man, Amelia reiterates what she calls “ a sentiment of Dr. Harrison’s, which he told me was in some Latin book; I am a man myself, and my heart is interested in whatever can befall the rest of mankind. That is the sentiment of a good man, and whoever thinks otherwise is a bad one” (406). Through absorbing the learning of Dr. Harrison, Amelia shows she is educated on the topic of true goodness, and can keep up with Booth conversationally, bringing in both her opinion and the teaching of others into the dialogue. This shows that Amelia’s wits are sharp, and she is intellectually compatible with Booth (if not, at other times in the novel, superior to his intelligence). It is important to

note that Amelia uses the word “ good” in the above passage, as opposed to the word “ great,” which she and Booth have used to describe men in power. Here, she is talking about good naturedness and kind heartedness, not the greatness that leads to ambition for power and fame. Men with goodness in their hearts ultimate want the best for all mankind, not just personal gain that would equate them individually with greatness.

In examining Booth’s response, the reader can see that Amelia and Booth ultimately make the same conclusions. Booth states, “ Where benevolence therefore is the uppermost passion, self-love directs you to gratify it by doing good, and by relieving the distresses of others; for they are then in reality your own” (406). Though he shows that acting for the benefit of mankind can be done selfishly, he and Amelia both conclude that serving the good of man is what a kind hearted person does, because one cannot truly be content while one’s fellow man suffers. In regards to men who care more about power and personal gain, Amelia and Booth both believe these men are “ great,” but they do not use the term in a positive way. Booth explains, “ where ambition, avarice, pride, or any other passion, governs the man and keeps his benevolence down, the miseries of all other men affect him no more than they would a stock or a stone” (406). While their thirst for power and fame may be “ great,” men that lack compassion for the suffering lack true goodness.

Though the pair seem to more or less agree on the evil effects of “ greatness” on man, Booth quickly discredits her intelligence and opinion when the conversation shifts in topic, from the goodness of man to the virtue of piety. He responds to his wife by giving a “ speedy turn to the <https://assignbuster.com/the-downfall-of-greatness-as-depicted-in-henry-fieldings-amelia/>

conversation, and began to talk of affairs below the dignity of this history” (406) and presumably affairs of less interest to his wife. Amelia, who throughout the novel influences Booth, takes opportunities where she can to counsel Booth on his vices and living a more virtuous life. It is not until Book XII that Booth is really receptive to his wife’s pious teachings. At this moment, he diverts the conversation, prolonging his ultimate conversion towards living a more virtuous, “ happily ever after” life. Fielding uses this shift ironically, allowing the reader to be in on the fact that the conversation turned due to Booth’s discomfort, not Amelia’s lack of intelligence on this subject. Fielding, who formerly employed literary devices such as authorial interjections or narrator asides, now uses irony to cue the reader into a misbelief on Booth’s part, and a misconception on society’s part, both of which undermine the intelligence of women. Yet it is important to remember that the two characters both ultimately conclude that men who are considered great because of their power are often immoral and corrupt, and that one should strive to have a good heart and not great authority.