

Joseph andrews by henry fielding

Literature



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The final book of Henry Fielding's literary masterpiece, *Joseph Andrews*, draws the various scattered thematic strands of the novel together and resolves the numerous plot conflicts. Most significantly, Book IV, Chapter XVI rewards those who have proven to possess genuine virtue, as opposed to the false variety. Thus, the final chapter witnesses the reunion between children and parents, the exposition of those who claim to possess virtue, while they do not, and the revelation of the true possessors of virtue and their subsequent reward. This final chapter and most evidently in the material recognition of parson Adam's worth as a truly virtuous character, resolves the novel's central thematic conflict between genuine and false virtue, further exposing the superficiality upon which prior judgments of character and worth were founded.

Before discussing the selected incident and relating it to the novel's primary themes and overall plot action, it is necessary to identify the real hero, or protagonist, of *Joseph Andrews*. Doing so is important insofar as this essay has selected an incident involving Parson Adams, rather than one revolving around Joseph Andrews, despite the fact that the novel takes its name from the former character. Quite simply stated and despite the fact that the reader may be influenced towards the supposition that Joseph Andrews is the novel's primary character, due to the novel's more popularly used and known title, the fact is that the full title of this work is *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*. The full title of the work clearly indicates that the author considered Parson Adams a primary, not a secondary, character and, a close reading of the book further supports this contention, not only through the space given to the development of Adams' character but, more importantly, through the role he is assigned in <https://assignbuster.com/joseph-andrews-by-henry-fielding/>

the plot. Adams, despite the fact that he often emerges as an innocent, although highly educated, man, completely ignorant of the ways of the world and human duplicity, is a man of silent but certain action and responsible for the resolution of the conflicts which comprise the plot. For example, despite all the pressures that are brought to bear upon him, his determination to help Fanny and Joseph never wavers and, in the final chapter of the book, it is Parson Adams who marries the couple. In other words, Parson Adams, despite his somewhat comical external appearance and naiveté, is a significant force within the plot and his actions contribute to the novel's happy conclusion.

Beyond the stated, Parson Adams' character exposes the fact that one of the main themes of *Joseph Andrews* is the search for true virtue. The novel has numerous other parsons besides Abraham Adams, all of whom are successful, inspire the respect of the community and are generally held in high esteem because they are popularly regarded as virtuous men. In direct comparison, Abraham Adams' outer appearance, with his shoddy clothes and his comical demeanor, is the very opposite of respectable. As such, he is generally regarded as comparing unfavorably to them and hardly commands the respect of the community which, in fact, is incapable of taking him seriously enough to recognize that he is a genuine representation of virtue. Consequently, for much of the novel, Parson Adams' true worth is largely unrecognized and the operative superficial social standards for the detection and recognition of virtue prevent the community from appreciating Parson Adams.

As stated, however, the novel focuses on the exposition of genuine virtue and the revelation of false virtue. Accordingly, the community's failure to

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comprehend Parson Adams' possession of this quality is consistent with the identified theme. Nevertheless, readers are given an earlier indication of Parson Adams' true worth and are cautioned towards recognition of the fact that outer appearances of virtue are not indicative of the possession of true virtue when Henry Fielding explains that Parson Adams' shoddy outer appearance is a direct consequence of his poverty, further explaining that poverty was imposed upon him by his integrity and honesty (pp. 97-8). The implication of the stated is clear: in direct comparison to the other parsons who exploited their supposed calling for financial gain, Abraham Adams resisted material temptation, remained committed to his calling and determinedly refused to betray his conscience. In the process, he suffers both ridicule and poverty, as in Book III, Chapter VII, when he is taunted mercilessly and is made the butt of cruel practical jokes.

That Parson Adams possesses true virtue as opposed to the false variety, is further revealed in Fielding's exposition of him as a truly loyal and generous character. In reference to the first, suffice to say that despite the opposition of those around him and the pressures that they exercise upon him to separate Fanny and Joseph, he continues to support their union and, in the final chapter, oversees the formalization of that union. As regards the second, his generosity towards others and his display of true Christian charity, despite his poverty, speaks for itself. Action is the true test of virtue and generosity and Parson Adams' repeated impulsive actions to materially and morally help others constitute constant confirmations of his classification as a genuinely virtuous man.

For much of the novel, Parson Adams is an unappreciated and ridiculed character whose true worth is unrecognized by the community. However, in <https://assignbuster.com/joseph-andrews-by-henry-fielding/>

the final chapter, Parson Adams received the recognition he never asked for. The fact that Adams oversees the marriage ceremony may be immediately explained as a natural conclusion to the support he extended the couple throughout much of the novel but, the fact it is the incident carries a deeper meaning. Quite simply stated, the marriage ceremony is the only formal religious event in the story, and definitely one of the novel's more significant concluding incidents. The fact that, from amongst all those that could have performed the ceremony, Parson Adams did is both reward and recognition of his purity and virtue. He, rather than any of the other parsons was selected, not just because of his friendship with Joseph, but because an event of this stature and status demands the supervision of a truly virtuous man of calling if it is to retain its sanctity and purity. Hence, the fact that Adams oversees this ceremony is confirmation and recognition of his virtue. The fact that this novel revolves around the exposition of true versus false virtue and the reward of those who possess the latter, is further affirmed through the final material reward awarded Parson Adams. Apart from the fact that the false virtue of others is exposed in the final chapter, Parson Adams' virtue is officially recognized and materially rewarded through the generous annual income of 130 pounds that Mr. Booby establishes for him. In this, Fielding is making a commentary on the fact that falsehood and duplicity are eventually exposed for what they are and those who are truly virtuous, and constantly demonstrate their commitment to the ideals of virtue by resisting temptation and refusing to succumb to the pressures brought to bear upon them by those around them, are eventually given their just reward and are recognized for who they are. It is, thus, that the selected final episode brings the scattered strands of the novel together, provides a

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final articulation of its main theme, and expresses Fielding's commentary on society and human nature.

In the final analysis, readers may find the final episode unrealistically idealistic insofar as it follows the classical framework of good triumphing over evil. While that may be the case, one has to recall that this novel was written in the eighteenth century and for an eighteenth century audience which was definitely less cynical and more optimistic than most are today. Thus, were we to evaluate the novel from within the context of its times, we would concede to the fact that it is a proficient and interesting articulation of the struggle between genuine and false virtue.

Works Cited

Fielding, Henry. *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*. London: Penguin, 1982.