

The value of irony in joseph andrews



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In his novel *Joseph Andrews*, Henry Fielding uses irony to express satire and offer social commentary. Irony “ results when there is a disjunction between what an audience would expect and what really happens.” The dominant form of irony in *Joseph Andrews* is dramatic irony: Fielding sets up the reader to believe that one thing is going to happen, when another actually does. Dramatic irony allows Fielding to “ teach” his readers “ lessons” by giving examples of vain characters’ ill-fated plans while maintaining a light mood. Fielding uses verbal irony to show the hypocrisy in his vain characters. The entire novel is structured around the ironic statement that Fielding makes in the beginning: “ But as it often happens that the best Men are but little known” (61). In this vein, Fielding introduces Parson Adams as the main character in the novel. Parson Adams’s character is full of irony. A clergyman’s duty is to provide guidance to his parishioners. Although “ he was a perfect Master of the Greek and Latin languages”, he was also “ entirely ignorant of the ways of this World” (65). Parson Adams’s naivete makes him an endearing, kind character. Readers become acquainted with Fielding’s stance on morality through Parson Adams’s “ adventures” rather than through his speech. Specific incidences of dramatic irony show readers the foolishness of specific characters. Henry Fielding offers social commentary by giving foolish people who indulge their vanity unexpected outcomes. Leonora, the object of aspiring lawyer Horatio’s love, unexpectedly abandons him for Bellarmine and his “ coach and six” (135). It is soon revealed, however, that Bellarmine’s does not love Leonora, but is only entranced by her money. When her father refuses to give Bellarmine money, “ he proceeded directly to his own Seat” (152) with an ironic message: “ I hope we shall see you at Paris, till when the Wind that flows

from thence will be the warmest dans la Monde” (153). Bellarmine has no desire to see Leonora, because her money cannot help him. This is ironic, because Leonora gives up true love for a man who only wants to use her. Ultimately, her vanity fails her. Fielding shows that morality is not dependent on wealth when he describes a poor peddler who saves Parson Adams when a wealthy clergyman, Tulliver, refuses to bail out a fellow parson. Fielding also uses irony to comedic effect: the accusation that Parson Adams attempted to kidnap Fanny, Joseph Andrews’s beloved, when he actually saved her is initially alarming. However, the reader must recognize the absurdity of Adams’s bad luck, as well as his accuser’s stupidity. Even in this situation, Fielding offers a social satire when Adams’s trial is stalled by the very people who hope to benefit from his arrest. They squabble over the amount of money awarded to each person, one claiming that “ he ought to have the greatest Share, for he had first laid his Hands on Adams”, another for “ having first held the Lantern to the Man’s Face” (164). The selfishness of Parson Adams’s accusers causes his trial to be postponed while they argue over who deserves the Parson’s money. Verbal irony is used to reveal the hypocrisy of several other characters. Lady Booby and Mrs. Slipslop demean Joseph Andrews after he rejects both of them. In Lady Booby’s heart, however, “ she had not so entirely conquered her Passion” (83). Lady Booby’s pride prevents her from admitting her affections. The Man of Courage, whom Parson Adams encounters on the road, flees upon hearing Fanny Goodwill’s screams after he lectures Adams about disinheriting “ a Nephew who is in the Army because he would not exchange his commission, and go to the West-Indies” (158). Henry Fielding makes ironic statements about his own writing, and about the art of writing in general. His sarcasm in

comparing the art of “authoring” to the art of “prime ministering” (119) shows his willingness to make fun of himself, giving a light overtone to the novel. The irony used to conclude Joseph Andrews further confirms Henry Fielding’s moral message, while simultaneously providing additional comic effect. The reader is amused and held in suspense by the possibility that Fanny is Joseph’s sister. Later, in an ironic twist, the reader learns that Andrews, the moral hero of the novel, is actually the son of a formerly decadent man, Mr. Wilson. One’s social class, it seems, does not affect one’s ability to be moral. On the surface, irony in Joseph Andrews is used primarily for comic effect. The realism of the comic events allows the reader to take many of the absurd events seriously. The repetitious behavior patterns of the vain characters are contrasted with the behavior patterns found in the more noble individuals. Whereas Lady Booby and the Man of Courage say one thing and do another, Parson Adams and the poor peddler help others on their own volition. Although the number of Parson Adams’s adventures exceeds those experienced by the average person, most people do encounter hypocritical individuals throughout the course of a day. Luckily, Joseph Andrews’ fairytale ending offers both fictional characters and real-life readers “a perpetual Fountain of Pleasure” (334).