

Virtue and the man of the hill in tom jones



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Although Fielding's *Tom Jones* isn't written in an entirely linear style, by far the lengthiest of his digressions, and seemingly the least relevant to the plot, is the episode in which Tom meets the Man of the Hill. A misanthropic hermit whose unlucky early life caused him to abandon all efforts to remain a part of society, his pessimistic view of man's potential for good and self-imposed isolation stand in direct opposition to the complex moral system and engagement with others that Tom represents. Just as Fielding uses figures like Thwackum to criticize the use of a religious front to mask the absence of actual goodness, the Man of the Hill's decision to stand apart from the world and look down on it disapprovingly, much like a God figure, holds him back from self-examination and improvement. By serving as a foil to Tom, the Man of the Hill and his simplified view of humanity allow Fielding to criticize past conceptions of morality, and explain his own more complex approaches.

The Man of the Hill's views on humanity and morality, as well as the reasons behind his decision to leave society and live an isolated life, are made explicit as he tells his story. When he explains his first encounters with the study of religion, it becomes clear that he views humanity as fundamentally less moral than the ideal set forth in Christian texts, telling Tom of his admiration for "that Divine wisdom which is alone to be found in the Holy Scriptures; for they impart to us the knowledge and assurance of things much more worthy our attention than all which this world can offer to our acceptance" (385). He goes on to further explain his decision to live apart from humanity, saying "I have only escaped [the madness of humanity] by living alone, and at a distance from that contagion" (392). Although Tom disagrees with the Man's assertion that humanity is, at its core, immoral, the

Man repeats his belief that, “ human nature is everywhere the same, everywhere the object of detestation and scorn” (395). Through the Man of the Hill’s story, Fielding sets up an extreme religious viewpoint on morality, which he proceeds to contradict with Tom’s more nuanced personality and opinions.

The authorial decision to counterpoise Tom and the Man of the Hill makes sense primarily because of their similarly difficult backgrounds. The former, despite benefiting from Allworthy’s kindness, had to contend with Blifil, Thwackum, and Square throughout his childhood. The latter also seems to lack a strong connection with his family; he describes his mother as an “ arrant vixen” and notes that his father refused to lend him money after he was expelled from school (367). Both men are portrayed as having been troublemakers when they were younger—Tom’s exploits are recounted at length in the book, and the Man of the Hill tells him about having gambled, stolen, and finally been sent to jail before he could graduate from school. Due to these similarities, Fielding can use Tom’s differing philosophies to contradict and point out the errors in the religious and pessimistic way of thinking that the Man of the Hill advocates. Furthermore, although this comparison is made less explicit, Fielding also reveals a stark difference between how Tom and the Man of the Hall act with regards to their own past indiscretions. While Tom eventually learns to take responsibility and make amends for his immoral actions, the Man instead tends to ascribe his actions as truly being the fault of others around him. When Tom finally returns home to Allworthy by the book’s close, he tells him, “ I have had time to reflect on my past life... I can discern follies and vices more than enough to repent and

to be ashamed of” (835). The Man of the Hill, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to admit accountability to the same degree, arguing that his misdeeds wouldn’t have occurred were it not for his college friend Sir George, who “had a great delight in destroying and ruining the youth of inferior fortune,” because “[the Man’s] reputation of diligence in [his] studies made [him] a desirable object of his mischievous intention (369). By the end of the novel, it is clear that Fielding intends this dialogue as a direct critique of moral and religious systems that views mankind as wholly good or bad, thus discouraging the urge towards self-improvement and personal responsibility that Tom’s journey exemplifies.

As mentioned earlier, Fielding’s inclusion of the Man of the Hill is a fairly lengthy digression from the overall plot of the novel—he isn’t mentioned again, and doesn’t really seem to impact the series of events in any major way. However, when readers consider the author’s treatment of religion as a larger theme in the novel, this episode’s purpose becomes more clear—it makes more explicit the consequences of a misguided religious morality that are only hinted at through Fielding’s treatment of characters like Mr.

Thwackum, the reverend. Thwackum has much in common with the Man of the Hill, both in terms of religion and his opinion of mankind’s overall level of morality—upon his introduction, Fielding describes him as “[maintaining] that the human mind, since the fall, was nothing but a sink of iniquity, till purified and redeemed by grace” (82). Unlike the Man of the Hill, however, Thwackum isn’t isolated and readers can both see and judge how his beliefs cause him to interact with others. Fielding notes, “when [religion and virtue are] poisoned and corrupted with fraud, pretense, and affectation... they

have enabled men to perpetrate the most cruel mischiefs to their own species" (85). Thwackum exemplifies this problem. Portrayed as vicious and hypocritical, he notably prefers Blifil to Tom. Following the incident in which Tom lies to protect Black George the gamekeeper, Thwackum beats him in order to get him to reveal the truth, rather than letting him go unpunished because of his benevolent motivations. Shortly after, Thwackum not only objects to Tom having sold his horse to further help Black George (because "the Almighty had marked some particular persons for destruction"), he recommends that Allworthy beat him for doing so (99). Once again, Thwackum's religion serves as a misguided and cruel replacement for a fair set of values. This system of morality, in which the truly good is sacrificed in favor of that which only appears good, is one that Fielding argues against throughout *Tom Jones*, in particular during the Man of the Hill scene.

If Fielding is opposed to the idea that human nature is wholly bad, as well as the blind use of religion to mask personal failings while judging others, what system for determining morality does he try to advance? It's clear through his portrayal of Tom's transformation from a disobedient foundling to Sophia's redeemed husband, as well as passages of narration directed specifically from Fielding to the reader, that he hopes to persuade his audience that mankind has no prescribed nature, and can exhibit both good and evil, yet must conform to a certain set of societal expectations if he wants that inner morality to be recognized externally. Fielding begins to make this clear early in the text. After a discussion of how Thwackum and Square's differing philosophies can perhaps be resolved towards a less erroneous approach to virtue, he notes, "we do not pretend to introduce any

infallible characters into this history; where we hope nothing has been found which hath never yet been seen in human nature” (91). Even Squire Allworthy, esteemed for his “goodness,” is led to make incorrect judgments precisely because of his love for others. Due to Fielding’s insistence on realism in his portrayals of his characters, his contention that every figure in the story is flawed to some degree reflects a similar view on humanity’s capacity for morality. Furthermore, he complicates his definition of virtue by acknowledging the potential for good acts to result in bad outcomes, saying, “if by virtue is meant (as I almost think it ought) a certain relative quality, which... seems as much interested in pursuing the good of others as its own; I cannot so easily agree that this is the surest way to human happiness” (668). Finally, Fielding draws a distinction between inner goodness and its outer manifestation. He acknowledges the societal impulse to reward conformity and good manners—“[t]he most formal appearance of virtue, when it is only an appearance, may... seem to be rather less commendable than virtue itself without this formality; but it will, however, be always more commended” (515). Through advice given directly from the narrator to the reader, he expands upon this point by clearly instructing that, “[i]t is not enough that your designs, nay, that your actions, are intrinsically good; you must take care that they appear so. If your inside be never so beautiful, you must preserve a fair outside also” (96). Even more strongly, he repeats, “no man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the rules of prudence; nor will Virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward ornaments of decency and decorum” (97). This brings the reader back to Fielding’s earlier point that virtue doesn’t automatically grant happiness. Rather, happiness can be achieved, as Tom Jones shows, through virtue that

is accompanied by good manners. Then, not only will your inner desire to help others and perform good deeds be satisfied, but your good manners will put you in a position to be seen as moral by the world, which will cause society to grant you happiness within it. Through the moral framework that Fielding's narrative voice reveals, we can go on to examine the virtue of characters within *Tom Jones* in a way much closer to what the author likely intended.

Tom himself follows Fielding's prescribed journey to virtue over the course of the book's plot, transforming from trouble making child of indeterminate parentage to the much more virtuous husband of Sophia. Clearly, he exhibits both good and bad traits, in keeping with Fielding's efforts towards realism. This is exemplified in the actions he takes to support Black George and his family. When he says, "I could not bear to see these poor wretches naked and starving... I could not bear it, sir; upon my soul, I could not," his motive to help them is clearly deeply held and admirable in its generosity (98). However, what would otherwise be a moral action (providing the hungry with food) is compromised by the lengths Tom goes to—stealing and lying about where the money and food have come from. In this case, the morality of his choices is portrayed as dubious; although his internal motivations are moral, his actions disrupt the decorum of his household, which functions as a parallel to society as a whole. Fielding is careful to note that, were Tom not "deficient in outward tokens of respect," he likely would meet with significantly less trouble from Thwackum (89). However, as Tom grows up, he conforms more and more closely to what society expects from him. Once he is released from jail, the first aspect of his redemption is his reunion with

Allworthy, which occurs because of a letter from Square, which reads, “When you lay upon your supposed deathbed, he was the only person in the house who testified any real concern... this young man has the noblest generosity of heart” (804). In this case, Fielding shows that Tom’s love for Allworthy is not enough—his actions, which were in keeping with what society expects from one whose loved one is ill, are what return him to Allworthy. Finally, not only is Tom legitimized as Allworthy’s heir, he is rescued from his state of unknown parentage through the revelation that Bridget Allworthy is his mother. This new, more acceptable place within society mirrors his new tendency to take responsibility for his actions, and focus on the social implications of his decisions rather than solely his moral motivations. Due to these personal changes, Tom can finally marry Sophia. In this way, Fielding confirms that his protagonist has succeeded in manifesting his inner goodness externally, which allows him to achieve happiness in a societally sanctioned way. Tom has finally overcome the problem that the Man of the Hill represents—the difficulty of being virtuous within society, instead of virtuous to its exclusion.