7.1: Henry Fielding, Joseph Andrews

It may seem odd, but this chapter is the first in which we will look at a novel. The reason is quite simple: the novel as we know it, a prose story about people who seem real in situations and settings that seem real, did not come into being in Europe until the eighteenth century. Certainly there were earlier fictional prose narratives. In England during the sixteenth century, for instance, there was a good deal of prose fiction, works that we have already mentioned like Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* or Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, but—and scholars surely differ on this matter—such works are not novels. They belong to another kind of literature, the romance, which had been popular for centuries. For example, there is a group of works from Greece, written in the second through the fourth centuries, that are often referred to as "Greek novels," works like Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* or *The Aethiopica* of Heliodorus. These works, like those I mentioned earlier, are certainly fun to read, but they, too, are more like romances than novels. Their characters are not people who ever could have existed, and they are set in far-away places that are more imaginative than real. Their action is extravagant and often relies on supernatural interventions.

Of course, some of these judgments are necessarily subjective. What seems realistic to me might not seem so to someone else. But instead of calling all prose narratives novels, we should try to make these distinctions. Just as we are not content to refer simply to trees but we distinguish among oak trees, maples, beeches, willows, and others, so we ought to distinguish among different types of prose fiction, for the different types try to accomplish different things. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, was very careful to say that he was writing romances and not novels. The difference mattered to him, and we will read his works incorrectly if we see them as novels.

A further complication is that it may be difficult to decide whether a work is a novel or some other form of literature. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is certainly novelistic, but there are differences of opinion over whether it is a novel. Similarly, the works of Daniel Defoe, written in the early eighteenth century, seem very close to being novels, though again there is no agreement on whether they are or not.
But there is no doubt that a group of works written toward the middle of the eighteenth century are novels or that these novels began a vogue for such writing that continues even now. It is interesting that while the study of novels is now a staple of literary study, in earlier times the novel was not deemed worthy of the exalted title of “literature.” Literature consisted of poetry, and prose fiction was considered a much lower form, just entertainment. In part, this judgment resulted from tradition, but it also represented intellectual and economic elitism. The novel was the literature of the newly developing middle class, a middle class that was making gains in both material wealth and literacy, as we can see in one of the works that started the English tradition of the novel, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*.

_Pamela_, which was published in 1740, has as its subtitle _Virtue Rewarded_. It is the story of a young servant girl, Pamela Andrews, who works for the B____ family. (The name is never given, a technique that was used frequently in the eighteenth century in order to provide a sense that the events recorded really happened and the characters’ identities had to be protected.) After the death of his mother, Mr. B_____ keeps Pamela employed in the household, but, according to Pamela, he does so because he desires her sexually. Pamela, however, perseveres against his advances, and by the novel’s end, she and Mr. B_____ are married. Her virtue has indeed been rewarded.

_Pamela_ is an epistolary novel—that is, most of the novel is in the form of a series of letters exchanged among the main characters, which means that all of them, including Pamela and her poor parents, are literate. Pamela herself is a prolific letter writer, and she writes at the darnest times. (One of Richardson’s later works, Clarissa, is also epistolary—and is one of the longest novels in English. The eighteenth-century English did like to write letters, but Richardson perhaps got carried away. One wonders when the characters actually did anything, since they seem to spend all their time writing letters.) _Pamela_ is still an interesting work to read, though it may strike modern readers as one-dimensional, as well as unlikely. Nonetheless, it took eighteenth-century England by storm. Not only was it popular, but it was even used by preachers as an illustration of its subtitle, virtue rewarded. Pamela Andrews, after all, resisted great temptations in order to preserve that virtue, and she was rewarded with marriage and a fortune. Richardson’s contemporaries were delighted with the lesson that this new work taught.

At least, most of his contemporaries were. Others were less enchanted, and among the latter group was Henry Fielding. Fielding had been a popular playwright whose highly satiric plays and farces often focused on governmental incompetence and hypocrisy. So effective had those plays been, that eventually the government passed the Licensing Act, a bit of censorship that ended Fielding’s playwriting career. Fielding then took up other careers, including the study of the law, but he lived for some time in financial difficulties. When _Pamela_ appeared and became so popular, he was outraged, for his view of the novel was both more subtle and more sinister than the common view. Furthermore, he saw a chance to earn some much-needed money by playing on the work’s popularity. Consequently, he wrote a hysterically funny parody of _Pamela_ that he called _Shamela_. This brief work purports to tell the real story behind the novel, and in a series of letters, Shamela tells Pamela’s story in a whole new way.

Fielding had two major objections to _Pamela_. One was that the novel, while claiming to teach moral lessons, contained a number of titillating scenes. After all, if Mr. B_____ constantly strives to seduce Pamela, there are bound to be seduction scenes. Fielding saw these scenes as being hypocritical. He thought they were salaciousness masquerading as morality. Even more important, Fielding saw that another way to look at the moral lesson of _Pamela_ was to say that young women should hold on to their chastity until they can get the right price for it, as Pamela did. Richardson may have subtitled his book _Virtue Rewarded_, but to Fielding it presented a case of virtue treated as a commodity that could be exchanged for financial and social gain. Shamela skillfully reveals these aspects of the novel and in so doing makes a mockery of Richardson’s work. We need only consider Fielding’s transformation of Mr. B_____ into Mr. Booby to catch the spirit of
Richardson, whose novels I enjoy, was not known for his sense of humor (read his books and you’ll see) and was not amused at Fielding’s parody. Even many years later, when Fielding complimented another of his works, Richardson refused to be mollified. Had Fielding stopped with the publication of Shamela, that work would probably have become an interesting footnote in the history of English literature, but Fielding did not stop there. Instead, he was inspired to write another work on the basis of Pamela, a work that helped determine the course the English novel would take. The title of this work, as it appears on the title page of the first edition, is The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, And of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams. Written in Imitation of the Manner of Cervantes, Author of Don Quixote. Fortunately, we call it just Joseph Andrews.

Shamela was a brilliant parody, but Joseph Andrews is a real novel, a satiric novel, that goes far beyond parody. While I will try not to divulge any of the novel’s convoluted ending, I can safely point out that Joseph Andrews is the brother of Pamela Andrews, that (in what seems to be a family tradition) he writes letters to, and that toward the end of the novel both Pamela and Mr. Booby, newly married, appear in Fielding’s work. The focus of the plot, too, was inspired by Pamela, for handsome young Joseph Andrews, like his fictional sister and like his biblical namesake Joseph, also has his chastity put to the test. Several of the novel’s female characters, most notably Mrs. Slipslop and Mr. Booby's aunt, Lady Booby, have designs on the young man, and poor Joseph is often hard-pressed, as his sister was in her novel, to preserve his virtue.

Of course, in one respect Fielding was having fun by reversing the genders in Richardson’s story. The idea of having a young man’s virginity sought by two older women, the idea of his resisting all of their advances, the idea of his rejecting all the benefits they might bestow on him—all of these have their humorous side. But again, if this humor were all Fielding was after, Joseph Andrews would be just another parody, a one-joke book. It is far richer than that, however, and that long title from the original title page helps to explain why. Fielding may have originally been moved to write the book by Pamela, but the work that truly inspired Joseph Andrews, as it inspired so much writing in eighteenth-century England, was Cervantes’ Don Quixote, which had been written over two hundred years earlier.

Cervantes was in many respects the patron saint of eighteenth century prose satirists. Not only are there works like The Spiritual Quixote and The Female Quixote, but numerous writers, like Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne, modeled parts of their novels on the Spanish Don. What was it about Don Quixote that made it so popular, and how did Fielding use it? First, in writing Don Quixote, Cervantes drew on the traditions of picaresque literature. In picaresque works like Lazarillo da Tormes, the reader follows the adventures of a person who has no fixed place in society but who moves relatively freely from class to class. Every time the hero, the picaro, enters a new social setting, that setting becomes the subject of the picaro’s satiric vision, and the result is a satiric work that criticizes virtually the entire society.

Cervantes used this model but went far beyond it. His Don Quixote is an old man who has read so many knightly romances that he begins to think of himself as a knight. Dressing himself in makeshift armor and riding a broken-down nag, accompanied by his friend Sancho Panza, he sets out to perform knightly deeds, to rescue maidens, to right wrongs. Of course, the Don is demented and presents a ridiculous appearance; and as he travels the roads, he encounters people from various levels of society who find increasingly inventive ways to mock and torment him.

What the reader soon realizes, though, is that Don Quixote may be a fool, but he is an idealistic fool. After all, he wants to do good deeds; and however foolish he is, he never does anything that seems to him less than noble. The people
he meets, however, with few exceptions, never have a noble thought. Their enjoyment lies not in good deeds, however misguided, not even in the contemplation of good deeds, but in tormenting an obviously demented old man. Like the picaro, Don Quixote becomes a touchstone against which can be measured the values of the people he meets, and, unhappily, they come off very badly. The idealistic fool is far more admirable than the heartless knaves who are incapable of understanding his idealistic outlook.

Not only does Don Quixote explore romance idealism and satirize society, but it does so with good humor and with an astounding sense of compassion for its hero. Yes, he tilts at windmills, and yes, he is on the receiving end of a chamber pot or two, but he retains a peculiar kind of nobility. We can laugh at him and love him at the same time. These, I think, are the qualities that endeared Cervantes to his eighteenth-century successors, and especially to Fielding. Fielding used Cervantes’ work as a model, but he made it his own. He transformed the Don and his squire into Parson Abraham Adams and his protégé Joseph Andrews. Parson Adams has many quixotic characteristics, but he is far from demented; and Joseph is a strong character, not at all like the ever-nervous Sancho Panza. Nevertheless, their journey from London back to their country home, with the cross-section of English society that it presents, with its good-humored treatment of knaves, fools, and idealists, is certainly Cervantean.

But Cervantes was not the only writer who influenced Fielding. There is, for example, a strong biblical influence on the novel. For instance, Abraham Adams is named for the biblical patriarch whose story consists of a series of tests, most of which he passes, like the command to sacrifice his son that is withdrawn at the last second, and some of which he fails, like falsifying his wife’s relationship to himself in order to save his life, an act that demonstrated a momentary lack of faith. Similarly, Joseph Andrews is named for the biblical Joseph, who, after having been sold into slavery, resisted the blandishments of his master’s wife and was rewarded by being accused of attempted rape and who consequently found himself in prison, only to be raised eventually to a position of prominence in Egypt. And, in one of the novel’s most memorable scenes, Fielding adapted the parable of the Good Samaritan, as we will soon see.

Yet another influence, though in a strange way, was the work of Homer. Of course Fielding, growing up in the eighteenth century, would have had a classical education, that is, an education based on Greek and Latin; he would have expected many of his readers to be as familiar with classical literature as he was. Not only does he make numerous references to classical literature (Parson Adams, after all, is a special devotee of Aeschylus), but he makes particular use of Homeric style when he describes some of the brawls and battles in his novel. The best example, perhaps, is found when Adams is attacked by a pack of hunting dogs and Joseph comes to his rescue, brandishing his cudgel: “it was a Cudgel of mighty Strength and wonderful Art, made by one of Mr. Deard’s best Workmen, whom no other Artificer can equal; and who hath made all those Sticks which the Beaus have lately walked with about the Park in a Morning…” (III.6). In this description, the educated reader would have recognized the description of Achilles’ shield from The Iliad, and in the ensuing battle, such a reader would have caught reflections from any number of Homeric battle scenes. Like Pope in “The Rape of the Lock,” Fielding used these epic references to provide and enhance his satiric perspective. In this case, we can see that while Achilles’ magnificent shield has become a simple walking stick and the great battle for Troy has been replaced by a canine attack, Joseph nevertheless behaves heroically, though his heroism is fully in keeping with his station in life.

I have referred to Joseph Andrews as a novel, but Fielding called it something different. In his Preface to Joseph Andrews (and I recommend that readers read the novel before they read the Preface), he calls the work “a comic Romance,” which he defines as “a comic Epic-Poem in Prose”. What he meant by these terms has been debated by scholars, but the reason he did not call his work a novel was that the term had not yet come into popular usage. He knew, however, that this work was not like the serious romances that had preceded it. For one thing, “it differs in its Character, by introducing Persons
of inferior Rank, and consequently of inferior Manners, whereas the grave Romance, sets the highest before us…” We must remember that Fielding’s England, even more than modern England, relied very heavily on a class structure. People knew their places—or at least they were supposed to know their places—and earlier romances tended to focus on the upper classes, using the lower classes as the butt of humor. But as the middle class began to develop, people wanted to read books about people like themselves in situations that they could recognize. Joseph Andrews has its share of upper-class characters, but now they tend to be the butt of humor.

Even so, Fielding’s humor differs from the humor in many other romances, as he himself points out. In Sidney’s Arcadia, for instance, the shepherds and other lower-class characters are caricatures, hopelessly stupid. Their presentation is, as Fielding puts it, “the Exhibition of what is monstrous and unnatural.” Even if we find them funny, Fielding would classify them as burlesque rather than comic, and he insists that he is not interested in the burlesque. His concern is with the comic, by which he would exclude the monstrous. As he says, in pursuing the comic, “we should ever confine ourselves strictly to Nature from the just Imitation of which, will flow all the Pleasure we can this way convey to a sensible Reader.” The comic writer needs only to copy nature, he says in the Preface, for “life every where furnishes an accurate Observer with the Ridiculous.”

Now Fielding gets to the heart of the matter, for his focus in this book is on the ridiculous, which he describes as growing out of affectation, while affectation is the result of either vanity or hypocrisy. To be sure, as we read Joseph Andrews, we see many examples of both vanity and hypocrisy, and though Fielding condemns both vices, he does so with such good humor that this work is anything but a tract against sin. What is most interesting about this preface, however, is the way Fielding wrestles with this new kind of literature, the novel. Richardson had numerous followers, but Fielding set the course that some of England and America’s greatest novelists would follow.

Of course, when Fielding says that he is “imitating nature,” we must be wary, for “imitating nature” has had a variety of meanings. When Wordsworth and Coleridge published their “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads” at the very end of the eighteenth century, they claimed that they were making poetic diction more natural than it had been in eighteenth-century poetry, and in a sense they may have been right, but even at the high point of the Romantic movement, people did not naturally speak in rhyming stanzas or iambic pentameter. My point is that we cannot expect Fielding, who claims to confine himself “strictly to Nature,” to read like a twenty-first-century writer, whose conception of that phrase would be entirely different. Fielding may have helped to revolutionize the writing of prose fiction, but he was still a man of the eighteenth century.

In fact Fielding was quite self-conscious about what he was doing, as we can see not only from his preface but from his practice in the novel. Throughout the novel, his narrator calls the reader’s attention to the fact that it is a work of fiction (a technique known as “metafiction,” which has been rediscovered by numerous modern novelists). For instance, the heading of chapter eight reads, “In which, after some very fine Writing, the History goes on…” And what does Fielding mean by “very fine Writing”? He means this paragraph:

Now the Rake Hesperus had called for his Breeches, and

having well rubbed His drowsy Eyes, prepared to dress

himself for all Night; by whose Example his Brother Rakes on

Earth likewise leave those Beds, in which they had slept away
the Day. Now Thetis that good housewife began to put the
Pot in order to regale the good Man Phoebus, after his daily
Labours were over. In vulgar Language, it was in the
Evening when Joseph attended his Lady’s Orders.

(I.8)

This is “very fine Writing” in the sense that it echoes Homeric mythological descriptions of dawn, but of course it does so in a typically Fieldingesque, humorous way. Hesperus, the evening star, is called a rake, a man about town, and the thought of such a mythological figure calling for his “breeches” is thoroughly incongruous. But then Fielding refers to “his Brother Rakes on Earth” who, like Hesperus, sleep through the days so that they may be wide awake for their nighttime revelries. Referring to the goddess Thetis, mother of Achilles, as “the good Housewife,” merely adds to the incongruity. Finally, the closing sentence, “In vulgar Language, it was the Evening…” concludes the parody. Fielding is capable of manipulating traditional mythological imagery, and he knows the epic tradition, but this work is a “Comic-Epic Poem in Prose.” Here, as elsewhere, we have epic imagery adapted to comic prose. After all the fancy language, the narrator tells us in plain words, “it was in the Evening.”

Fielding plays such games everywhere in the novel. Several times, for instance, he implies that he has learned the story he is telling from the main characters, as though they were real: One chapter begins, “When he came back to the Inn, he found Joseph and Fanny sitting together … Indeed, I have been often assured by both, that they spent these Hours in a most delightful Conversation…” (II.15). Fielding knows that he is writing fiction, and he knows that we know it, but he also knows that we have agreed to be taken in by his fictional game, and so he continues to play it. He and we are in on the whole game together. Is the story true? No. Does it contain truth? Certainly.

(I must briefly digress here. Although elsewhere in this volume I am critical of movies that are based on famous books, I feel compelled to recommend the film of Fielding’s Tom Jones, directed by Tony Richardson. In this outstanding film, Richardson captures the tone of Fielding’s narrator, who guides us through the novel. The success of Tom Jones led to the filming of other eighteenth-century novels. Those films should be avoided.)

Between the narrator’s metafictional games and Fielding’s references to other works ranging from The Iliad to Pamela, Joseph Andrews is already a comical work, and we have not even considered the novel’s plot or characters yet. Of course, it never works to explain humor, but fortunately most of the things that Fielding found humorous are still humorous. Even when he is describing truly deplorable behavior, he manages to make it seem somehow funny, not because he approves of it but because he recognizes its origin in ordinary human failings. He knows that it comes from vanity or hypocrisy and that ultimately it is another example of the ridiculous. In writing Joseph Andrews, he condemns such behavior by laughing at it, not with scorn but with what we might call charity. He knows that all of us have a share of ridiculousness.

One of the most famous scenes in Joseph Andrews is an adaptation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Joseph has been set upon by robbers, who take everything he has, including his clothes, and leave him lying badly injured by the side of the road. As Joseph regains consciousness, a passing stage-coach stops, and each person on the coach reacts to Joseph’s predicament. The coachman says they are late and have no time to spare for Joseph. A lady wants to help, but hearing that Joseph is naked, she cries, “’O J-sus’” and urges the coachman to drive on. An old gentleman, hearing that
Joseph has been robbed, fears that the thieves may still be there and urges the coachman to leave. A lawyer explains that they have to try to help Joseph, because if he dies and anyone finds out that they were last in his company, they will be held responsible. Prompted by this appear to their common self-interest, they agree to help, but then the coachman refuses to take him unless someone pays his fare (until the lawyer again threatens him) and the lady refuses to ride with a naked man. Of course, no one will lend the wounded and freezing Joseph a coat, until

the Postillion, (a Lad who hath been since transported for

robbing a Hen-roost) had voluntarily stript off a great Coat,

his only Garment, at the same time swearing a great Oath,

(for which he was rebuked by the Passengers) ‘that he would

rather ride in his Shirt all his Life, than suffer a Fellow-

Creature to be in so miserable a Condition.’

(I.12)

Like the “righteous” men in the parable, the passengers are moved entirely by self-interest, and their first inclination on seeing a fellow human being in trouble is to get away from him as quickly as possible. Only the Postillion, who, like the Samaritan, is someone to be looked down on, shows true charity. The others can behave selfishly, perhaps even murderously, and maintain their respectability because of their social positions, while the postillion, who will later suffer a major punishment for a minor transgression, is alone in demonstrating true charity. Even his censure by the passengers for his great oath is odd, for the lady received no such rebuke for her “O J-sus.” In fact, he is not being rebuked for his oath but for his implied criticism of the uncharitable passengers and for his revelation of the real shabbiness that lies under the surface of their respectability. Here we find the hypocrisy and vanity (in the sense of emptiness) that Fielding spoke of in the Preface. These people are tested, and they fail miserably, as do several other characters in this chapter. There is, for example, the surgeon who is called to help Joseph and who has almost finished dressing, thinking that he is going to help a gentleman or a lady, but who, on hearing that his patient is a poor pedestrian, goes back to bed.

The chapter’s examination of charity culminates during a conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Tow-wouse, who run the inn where Joseph has been deposited. Mr. Tow-wouse is inclined to help him, but Mrs. Tow-wouse wants the wounded man thrown out. When Mr. Tow-wouse says that “ ‘common Charity won’t suffer you to do that,’ ” she replies, “ ‘Common Charity a F—t! … Common Charity teaches us to provide for ourselves and our Families…” ’ (I.12). This definition of charity may strike us as idiosyncratic (at least), but it is indeed the definition that people seem to use throughout the novel. In fact, a good deal of Joseph Andrews is taken up with an examination of what charity really means (as exemplified by the postilion) and how society regards it (as shown by almost everyone else in this chapter). Mrs. Tow-wouse’s “Common Charity, a F—t!” may be more explicit than most of the characters choose to be, but the phrase clearly represents their views.

Fielding may be focusing his humor on such views, and his presentation does make us laugh, but there is a very serious point to what he is saying, for Fielding was concerned with a contemporary religious debate. I do not need to go into detail here except to say that the debate focused on the relative importance in Christian thought of faith and works: some
theologians argued that a Christian needed only faith for salvation, while other argued that works alone might suffice. As Parson Adams says,

“...Can any Doctrine have a more pernicious Influence on Society than a Persuasion, that it will be a good Plea for the villain at the last day: ‘Lord, it is true I never obeyed one of thy Commandments, yet punish me not, for I believe them all?’ ”

“Ay, Sir,” said Adams, “the contrary, I thank Heaven, is inculcated in almost every Page [of the Bible], or I should belye my own Opinion, which hath always been, that a virtuous and good Turk, or Heathen, are more acceptable in the sight of their Creator, than a vicious and wicked Christian, tho’ his Faith was as perfectly Orthodox as St. Paul’s himself.”

(I.17)

The kind of empty faith that Adams and his creator Fielding are attacking is a perfect target for satire. Satire, as Fielding makes clear in the Preface, focuses on hypocrisy, and the claim that all one needs is faith and that if one has faith, one need not help one’s fellow, is a fine example of hypocrisy. This attitude can be found in a number of episodes in *Joseph Andrews*, including Adams’ discussions with Barnabas and his encounter with Parson Trulliber. These clergymen, especially in contrast with the highly devout and charitable Adams, who combines faith and works, are shown to be frauds of the highest caliber.

Adams, of course, is the most interesting character in *Joseph Andrews*. He may be highly devout, but he is hardly perfect and he provides some of the novel’s greatest humor, most of which has its source in his almost complete innocence. As Fielding’s narrator tells us, Adams was “as entirely ignorant of the Ways of this World, as an Infant just entered into it could possibly be” (I.3). This innocence does not necessarily imply foolishness, though the good parson is occasionally foolish. What it does imply is that Adams tries to live up to the biblical ideal of perfection and that he therefore believes that everyone else tries to live up to that ideal as well. That Adams is alone in this belief is a condemnation not of his foolishness but of the corruption of a society that claims to rely on biblical ideals but in truth is based on selfishness. Here lies the resemblance to Don Quixote, another innocent whose innocence illustrates the corruption surrounding him. Like Don Quixote, Adams is never discouraged by the failures he sees in others. His view of the world never becomes jaded, no matter how many rascals he encounters.

One of the best episodes for illustrating Adams’ character is his meeting with Parson Trulliber. Adams, finding himself, Joseph, and Joseph’s beloved Fanny stranded at an inn without funds, assumes that he need only ask the local clergyman for a loan and the local clergyman, heeding the biblical injunctions on charity, will give it to him. If Adams were
asked for such a loan, he would not hesitate to give it, but Adams and Parson Trulliber, though sharing the same religion, do not share the same principles. Short, fat, and crude, Trulliber is a parson only on Sundays. The rest of the week he is a hog farmer, and he welcomes Adams only because he thinks Adams has come to purchase some of his hogs. After a series of misadventures, none of which cast great credit on Trulliber, Adams tells the parson why he has come, adding, “I am convinced you will joyfully embrace such an Opportunity of laying up a Treasure in a better Place than any this World affords” (II.14). There is Adams’ innocence. He assumes that Trulliber will happily lend him, or even give him, the money, since such a good deed would receive heavenly approval.

Trulliber’s response is highly equivocal: "Lay up my Treasure! What matters where a Man’s Treasure is whose Heart is in the Scriptures? There is the Treasure of a Christian” (II.14). Adams understands him to mean that he is happy to lend him the money without any thought of reward, heavenly or otherwise, simply because he has been instructed by Scripture to do so. Our quixotic innocent expects the money to be immediately forthcoming and grabs the hog farmer’s hand, while the latter immediately thinks he is about to be robbed, for what he really meant was that as long as he believed in Scripture, as long as he had what he called faith, he had no need to provide charity, to engage in good works.

Adams may be naïve, but he knows his theology, and he knows when his devoutly held beliefs are being flouted: he concludes his angry response to Trulliber by saying, “Whoever therefore is void of Charity, I make no scruple of promising that he is not Christian” (II.14). Trulliber, naturally, is furious and even appears ready to strike Adams, until his wife “interposed, and begged him not to fight, but shew himself a true Christian, and take the Law of him.” In other words, fighting is not Christian, but having Adams arrested would be.

This scene illustrates a number of points about Joseph Andrews. First, it shows us that though Adams is innocent and trusting, he is also firm about maintaining his principles. His religion is not just something he talks about; it is something he practices to the best of his ability. But we also see, in this scene and throughout the novel, that Adams is nearly alone in doing so. Certainly his pupils Joseph and Fanny share his convictions, but virtually no one else does. This is another point that the novel is making by means of Adams, that England may call itself a Christian country, but it is so in name only. Fielding offers here a strong condemnation, but what saves the novel from overmoralization and from bitterness is Fielding’s unceasing humor. He condemns Trulliber and his like by making us laugh at them. The idea that Trulliber calls himself a parson is laughable in itself. The idea that this short, fat, nasty man would attack Adams, whom we already know as a good fighter, is ridiculous. And the idea that being a true Christian means not to strike someone but to take him to law is ludicrous. By providing so much humor in these episodes, Fielding allows us to express condemnation through our laughter. By making these characters so lifelike and by revealing their failings so clearly, Fielding focuses our condemnation on the sins rather than on the sinners. He makes us wish the characters behaved better rather than wishing that we might see them punished. Considering the serious nature of Fielding’s criticism, what he accomplishes is quite extraordinary.

Adam, of course, for all his nobility, also has his failings. Occasionally, for instance, he takes his principles too far. When Fanny is kidnapped and in danger of sexual assault, while Adams and Joseph are tied to the bed posts at an inn, Joseph weeps and groans and bemoans the situation. Adams “consoles” Joseph first by reviewing their situation in such detail that Joseph feels even greater agony and then by telling him that his duty is to submit. Adams’ advice may be true. It may be perfectly in keeping with the philosophical views of Seneca, Boethius, and Cicero, whom he cites as authorities, but it is hardly consoling. When Joseph tells him, “O you have not spoken one Word of Comfort to me yet,” Adams is truly taken aback, and he asks in all sincerity, “What am I then doing? What can I say to comfort you?” (III.11). Senecan and Ciceronian consolations may be fine philosophical positions, but they are of little help when one is tied to a bedpost.
and one’s beloved is about to be ravished. Similarly, near the novel’s end, it appears that Joseph cannot marry Fanny (for reasons that I will not reveal) and Joseph is again reduced to bemoaning his situation. Again Adams tries to console him by telling him of his duty to accept what God has allowed to happen. This time, however, Adams’ very unconsoling consolation is interrupted by the news that his son has drowned, at which he completely falls to pieces. In his weeping and grieving, he totally ignores Joseph, who has been reminding him of his own forms of consolation. Fortunately it turns out that the boy has not drowned and Adams is able to resume his advice to Joseph, but even Joseph cannot overlook his teacher’s hypocrisy, which Adams tries to explain away by pointing to the difference between losing one’s son and losing one’s beloved.

So Adams, as good as he is, is not perfect. That news is hardly a revelation. Adams is a human being, and like all the human beings in this novel—or in the world—he has his failings. He is more principled that most people, but if we cannot expect perfection in him, how can we expect it in anyone? We can laugh at him and admire him—even simultaneously—for he is both funny and admirable, but he shares the human situation with the Trullibers of the world. Like Don Quixote, he reveals the failings of the people he meets, but he is not immune to those failings himself. By creating Adams, Fielding has shown the depth of his human understanding: this character, whose portrayal includes humor, anger, principle, hypocrisy, perceptiveness, and blindness, is an image of how far even the best of us can succeed as we make our way in the world.

If Adams has such flaws, it is no wonder that other characters have them, too. Lady Booby is particularly interesting, as she struggles interminably with her sexual feelings for Joseph and her knowledge both that such feelings are improper and that a lady of her stature should not be obsessed by a servant. At first her rapid changes of mind are amusing, especially as her servant Mrs. Slipslop tries to use them to her own advantage, but then she becomes more seriously interesting, in strong contrast to Pamela’s Mr. B______, who was both predictable and manipulatable. Mrs. Slipslop, too, is an amusing character who operates entirely out of self-interest. What she does to language is hysterical, but it is also amusing to watch her as she takes a superior attitude toward the other servants in the Booby household and an apparently inferior one toward the Boobys, though clearly she feels herself superior to everyone. She is a case of satire arising from a thoroughly misplaced vanity.

It is worth noting that much of Joseph Andrews consists of a journey away from London and toward a rural setting. Near the novel’s beginning, when the Booby household goes to London, even Joseph, that paragon of virtue, adopts the styles of the city. He gets a fashionable haircut and devotes his attention to looking good. He would not take to gambling, swearing, or drinking, but “when he attended his Lady at Church (which was but seldom) he behaved with less seeming Devotion than formerly” (1.4). Although his morals remain uncorrupted, Joseph is easily swept up by the more worldly atmosphere of London, an atmosphere with which fielding himself had had much contact and for which he had little tolerance, as we can see in Joseph Andrews, Tom Jones, and in his more somber last novel, Amelia. In fact, it seems in much of Fielding’s work, the higher a person’s social class and the closer that person’s attachment to the city may be, the more corrupt that person is apt to be.

Certainly there is a long history in literature of contrasting the city and the country, often by people from the city who suppose the country to be closer to nature and therefore more innocent. The accuracy of that supposition may be debatable, but the contrast is a convenient one and works very well for a satirical work like Joseph Andrews, where innocence and corruption are so clearly contrasted. Not all country people are innocent, but in the country the corruption of a Parson Trulliber stands out even more strikingly than it would in London, where it might be more expected.
The most detailed picture of city life, however, comes in one of the novel’s three major digressions. Each of these digressions plays a role in the novel, illustrating another aspect of eighteenth-century English life that Fielding is satirizing. The first is the story of Leonora in chapters four through six of Book II, and the third is the story of Leonard and Paul in chapter ten and eleven of Book IV, but the longest of the digressions is the story of Mr. Wilson in the third and fourth chapters of Book III. The third chapter is by itself the longest chapter in the novel. Wilson’s unhappy story, complete with sexually transmitted diseases as well as gambling, swearing, and drinking, can be seen as nearly the opposite of Joseph’s story. More pointedly, it is the story of what might have happened to Joseph, or to someone like Joseph, if he had remained in London. The story has a happy ending, but in the middle of this great comic novel, it presents a more serious vision of English society’s seamier side.

Even so, we cannot forget that *Joseph Andrews* is a comic novel. I have tried in this chapter not to give away too much of the story and not to focus on too many of the humorous scenes. Readers of the novel should be able to enjoy both the plot and the humor for themselves. There are some wonderful scenes in the book that are worth savoring many times, but what is really striking is Fielding’s understanding of people. Parson Adams, that most innocent and naïve of men, claims that he has learned about human nature from books: “Knowledge of Men is only to be learnt from Books, *Plato* and *Seneca* for that,” he says (II.16). We know that Adams has indeed read his Plato and Seneca, but we also know how little he knows about people. Had he read works like *Joseph Andrews*—which, incidentally, someone like Adams would never have done because such people would have considered fiction a waste of time—he would have known much more about the human heart and about humanity.

So read *Joseph Andrews* and enjoy it. The language is two hundred years old and rather more formal than what we are accustomed to, but the reader will quickly feel comfortable with it. It is worth making the adjustment in order to meet Joseph, Fanny, Adams, Slipslop, and the whole Booby clan. And if you like these characters, tackle *Tom Jones*. And if you find that you like eighteenth-century fiction, take a look at *Pamela* or at Tobias Smollett’s *Humphrey Clinker*. And then go to the masterpiece, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. 