

# THE VICAR OF WAKEFIELD

by Oliver Goldsmith



## THE AUTHOR

Oliver Goldsmith (c.1728-1774) was born in Ireland, the son and grandson of Church of England rectors much like the central figure of his only novel. His family was poor but did manage to obtain an education for their son at Trinity College in Dublin, where he almost flunked out because he gave far too much attention to drinking and gambling, and at the University of Edinburgh, where he studied medicine. In early adulthood he wandered aimlessly from one job to another, including tutoring and practicing medicine, both of which he found largely unprofitable. Finally he found his true love, writing, beginning as an editor of the *Monthly Review*. Most of his editing and numerous translations of the works of others left little mark on his own time, let alone on future generations. He wrote on whatever subject would bring in money, whether he knew anything about it or not, and some of his largest works, including an eight-volume *History of the Earth and Animated Nature* and histories of England and Rome were largely plagiarized and frequently inaccurate. Amidst all the dross, however, were nuggets of gold – two poems, *The Traveller* (1764) and *The Deserted Village* (1770), two plays, *The Good Natured Man* (1768) and *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), and one novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), containing some of the finest writing the English language has ever known.

Despite his undeniable talent and versatility as a writer, Goldsmith's personal life was a disaster. He never forgot the poverty in which he had grown up, thus lusted for riches, which he tended to drink and gamble away whenever they came his way. He was remarkably ugly, so socially awkward that even his friends made fun of him, and was jealous of any praise given to others. Yet he attained to the highest literary circles in England, moving among the likes of Samuel Johnson, painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, actor David Garrick, and politicians Edmund Burke and Horace Walpole, who called him an “inspired idiot.” Ever insecure, he died prematurely because he rejected the advice of doctors and instead insisted on diagnosing himself.

*The Vicar of Wakefield* is his only novel. Many have criticized the book because of its many contrivances, especially in the ending that surpasses all credibility, and characters that are either pure good or pure evil. The quality of the writing, however, cannot be questioned, nor can the hopeful message concerning the possibility of redemption for even the worst of scoundrels and the certainty of future bliss, even if not in this world, for those who seek to do what is good and right. The overt espousal of biblical morality was not necessarily popular during the Enlightenment, but made the book a favorite of the Victorians. The novel also contains passages

of social criticism dealing with the criminal justice system and the injustices of the English class system.

## **PLOT SUMMARY**

The story is narrated by the title character, a country parson. He begins by describing his family, telling the reader that his wife is good-natured, a fine homemaker, and hospitable to strangers. They often have wayfarers and distant relatives drop in and none in need of a meal or bed is denied. He does note, however, that he deals with troublesome guests by lending them something of slight value before they leave, thus assuring that they will never come back to return the item. The Vicar and his wife have six children – George, Olivia, Sophia, Moses and two younger boys, Dick and Bill. When the story begins, Olivia is eighteen and Sophia a year younger; the former is outgoing and vivacious, the latter quiet and serious. As for the boys, George is at Oxford studying for one of the professions, while Moses is at home preparing for a career in business.

Vicar Primrose, who has his own fortune, refuses to take a salary from his parish, donating all the money to support widows and orphans. Rather than hiring a curate to do the work of the parish, he insists on doing it himself, getting to know all of his parishioners intimately in the process, encouraging the married men to temperance and the unmarried to matrimony, though he did oppose second marriages for ministers. Son George takes his father's advice, and upon graduation from Oxford courts Arabella Wilmot, the pretty daughter of a wealthy and highly-placed clergyman in the area. At this point disaster strikes from two directions; Wilmot and Primrose find they disagree on the subject of second marriages (Wilmot is at the time courting his fourth wife), and the Vicar's banker has lost his money and filed for bankruptcy, and consequently the marriage is called off.

Primrose is now faced with the problem of how to support his family. He is offered the management of a small farm, which he gratefully accepts, and sends George off to London to make his fortune and contribute to the family's livelihood, reminding him of the words of Solomon, "I have been young, and now am old; yet never saw I the righteous man forsaken, or his seed begging their bread." The next day the rest of the family leaves for the farm, stopping halfway through the journey at a roadside inn. There they are warned that their new landlord, Squire Thornhill, is a notorious ladies' man, as most of the farmers' daughters in the neighborhood can confess. Soon a commotion breaks out in the inn when another guest professes himself unable to pay for his lodgings. Primrose pays the man's bill, then discovers that he is going in the same direction in which his family is traveling. He invites the young man, whose name is Mr. Burchell, to accompany them. He tells them that Squire Thornhill's uncle is a man generous to a fault, unable to deny the request of any who sought his assistance. While the conversation proceeds, Sophia falls from her horse into the nearby river, now swollen with the floods. Burchell dives in and rescues her, for which she and her family are very grateful. They part with wishes that the acquaintance might be renewed sometime in the near future.

The family is welcomed warmly by their neighbors in their new home, which is a simple farming community populated by humble folk. In preparing for their first Sunday service, Mrs. Primrose and the girls dress in their finest attire but are rebuked by the Vicar for showiness inappropriate to their new surroundings. One day that autumn as the members of the family are sitting outside enjoying the pleasant weather, horsemen pass nearby in pursuit of a stag. One of

their number, a young man, stops and introduces himself as Squire Thornhill, their landlord. He flirts with the girls and asks if he might visit again soon. They agree, though both Primrose and Sophia have questions about the man's character because of his forwardness, while Mrs. Primrose and Olivia are impressed. In fact, Mrs. Primrose begins to dream of husbands for both of her daughters in the persons of the Squire and Mr. Burchell.

As the girls prepare venison for dinner, a gift sent by Squire Thornhill, Mr. Burchell drops in to pay a visit. He is poor man who visits the area about once a year and is known for his love of children. They enjoy a nice evening together, then invite Burchell to sleep over, for which Dick and Bill willingly give up their bed. When the farm labors are completed the next day, Primrose can't help but noticing the special attention Burchell pays to Sophia, though he thinks his younger daughter too ambitious to take up with a penniless rake. When the Vicar criticizes Burchell in front of the family at dinner that night, Sophia springs to his defense. Later, with Squire Thornhill being expected the next day, the girls prepare a facial wash to enhance their beauty, but their father "accidentally" tips the pot over into the fire.

When the Squire arrives, the girls are dressed in their best finery and Mrs. Primrose invites all, including the servants, to stay for dinner. Olivia and Sophia are perhaps less enthusiastic than might be expected because Burchell had told them that Squire Thornhill had been making overtures of marriage to George's former fiancée, Arabella Wilmot, but when her name is mentioned, Thornhill scoffs at such an idea, cheering up the girls considerably. After the Squire speaks disparagingly of the church, leading to a nonsensical debate between the Squire and Moses, the young man leaves with his retinue. Primrose is now sure that Thornhill is interested in Olivia, and that he is a covert freethinker whom he would not readily invite into his family.

Burchell returns each day thereafter, helps in the fields, and continues to flirt with Sophia. While eating lunch under a tree beside the field one day, Burchell recites a ballad that harms Sophia. Suddenly a shot rings out – the Squire's chaplain has shot a blackbird. Sophia, startled by the noise, falls into Burchell's arms. When the chaplain sees what he has inadvertently caused, he offers Sophia the bird he has shot, which she reluctantly accepts, then invites the family to a dance planned by the Squire that evening, at the same time begging that Sophia would grant him the first dance. She prefers to honor Burchell in that manner, but he insists that he has already agreed to spend the evening elsewhere.

The boys then come running out to announce that the Squire has arrived and that the dance is ready to begin. A good time is had by all, with Thornhill and Olivia making the grandest couple. The Squire had brought two young women with him, Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, who, despite their elegant clothing, display unfortunate manners and occasionally use bad language. They invite Olivia and Sophia to spend the winter with them in London, to which Mrs. Primrose quickly assents over the objections of her husband. When the two ask the girls to accompany them home that night, their father puts his foot down, for which he is treated to the silent treatment throughout the next day.

As time passes, the girls begin to be affected by their interactions with the noble families of the district. They pay undue attention to their appearance and neglect their work so as not to spoil their hands. They look down on and neglect their former friends while speaking of nothing but the Squire and his companions. One day a gypsy fortune-teller arrives and the girls beg for a shilling apiece to have their fortunes told. Both return excitedly to their father; Olivia has been told that she will marry a squire within a year, while Sophia is to marry a lord shortly thereafter. Sadly, this leads the girls to take an increasingly exalted view of their destinies, far above their

actual station in life. One Sunday they hear that the two ladies they had met were planning to attend church, and the girls determine to wear their best finery and ride horses to church rather than walking. Everything goes awry, however, and by the time they arrive, the service has already ended and the guests have left.

The next night, Michaelmas Eve, the family is invited to the home of their neighbors the Flamboroughs. They share a hearty meal and play lively games after dinner. In the midst of one, called "Hide the Slipper," Lady Blarney and Miss Skeggs suddenly walk in, catching the girls in somewhat embarrassing positions. They have come to make sure the girls are in good health after having missed church the day before, and are glad to find them well. In the course of their exalted conversation, they happen to mention that they are in need of honest and educated female companions, who would of course be compensated handsomely. Mrs. Primrose is quick to put her daughters forward as ideal for the positions in question. Burchell sits sulking by the fire during this entire performance, mumbling "Fudge!" under his breath after everything said by the two socialites.

Mrs. Primrose, however, is confident in the success of her scheme, and next convinces her husband to sell their colt and purchase a horse that can carry them to church in style. Primrose finally relents, and Moses is sent to the fair to conduct the transaction. When he returns, however, he has neither colt nor horse. Instead, he carries a gross of green spectacles with copper rims coated in silver – worthless trinkets. He has been tricked out of the family's money with nothing to show for it.

The Vicar attempts to dissuade his family from their attempts to mingle with the rich, but is unsuccessful in doing so. When Burchell adds his voice in an attempt to persuade Mrs. Primrose that the girls should not be allowed to go to London, she becomes angry because she is convinced that his obvious affection for Sophia provides an ulterior motive. She asks him to leave the house, which he does, stating only that he will return to say farewell before he leaves the county. Primrose, who fears Burchell's past history of financial mismanagement, tries to comfort Sophia by telling her that she will meet many fine young men who are far more suitable matches in London.

As the London visit approaches, money is needed to outfit the girls suitably for the society in which they will be mixing, so Primrose decides to sell their remaining horse, which in any case is useless without its partner. He thus goes to the fair for that purpose. When he gets there he meets an elderly scholar who impresses him with his erudition. Soon he agrees to sell his horse to the man, receiving in return a check drawn on his neighbor Solomon Flamborough. When he gets home, however, he learns that the man is a notorious swindler – the same man who sold Moses the spectacles. Furthermore, Squire Thornhill has brought the sad tidings that the trip to London by the girls has been canceled because of gossip concerning their characters spread by some unknown person. They are left with no horse, no money, no new clothes, and no trip to the big city.

The next day they discover the source of the damning gossip; much to their surprise, it came from Mr. Burchell. A copy of the letter he sent to the ladies of Thornhill Castle is found by one of the boys. The letter warns against corrupting innocence through exposure to vice. His intention was to warn the ladies against corrupting the Primrose daughters with their loose ways, but the family takes the letter as a slander against the characters of the girls and a warning against introducing them into London society. The result is an outbreak of fury against the family's former friend. Shortly thereafter Burchell himself appears. The family intends to cast his perfidy

in his face, but he seems oblivious to any hints of wrongdoing on his part. When they produce his pocketbook and the letter it contains, he shows no sense of guilt or shame, but instead becomes angry with them for opening his purse and reading his private correspondence. They part with anger on both sides, leaving little likelihood of any future reconciliation.

With Burchell's departure, Squire Thornhill's visits become more frequent. Mrs. Primrose does everything her power to encourage a relationship between the Squire and Olivia, an effort that in no way offends Thornhill. One day a painter passes through the neighborhood and the Primroses decide to commission a family portrait, with each family member pictured as a classical figure. When Squire Thornhill hears of the plan, he insists on being included in the portrait in the character of Alexander the Great kneeling at the feet of an Amazon (Olivia, of course). As far as Mrs. Primrose is concerned, this is tantamount to a proposal of marriage. Unfortunately, lack of foresight results in the picture being too large to hang anywhere in the house, or even to fit through the kitchen door. This produces a combination of mockery and envy in the local populace, and soon Mrs. Primrose decides to maneuver Thornhill into a declaration of his intentions by asking his advice about a husband for Olivia. If this doesn't work, she will then present him with a rival for her affections; she even goes so far as to convince Olivia to marry the as-yet-unnamed rival should the Squire fail to meet expectations. Thornhill manages to avoid Mrs. Primrose's machinations, refusing to name a suitable husband for Olivia while praising her highly, but flatly rejecting the suggestion that she should marry Farmer Williams, one of the Squire's tenants. The Vicar is now convinced that, while the Squire may love Olivia, he has no intention of marrying her, so the plan to involve Farmer Williams is to proceed.

Soon Williams and Thornhill are invited to dinner on the same night, and stare daggers at one another while Olivia gushes all over the farmer. Thornhill leaves in frustration and Olivia retires from the room to collapse in tears. Finally the Vicar tells her that the game must have an end – a day for the marriage to Williams must be announced to all as a month distant, giving the Squire plenty of opportunity to declare himself if he so desires. Time passes and nothing happens. Four days before the wedding the family is gathered around the fire in the evening. Suddenly Dick comes running in to announce that Olivia has run off with Squire Thornhill. The Vicar's first thought is to take up his pistols and pursue them, but the others calm him down and remind him of the proper Christian attitude toward those who sin. He relents, but the next morning takes his Bible and his staff, intending to find the fallen one and bring her to repentance, swearing that he will forgive her if she will only turn away from her sin. Mrs. Primrose is not quite so anxious to forgive her daughter, however, and swears she will never see her again.

The Vicar goes in search of his prodigal daughter assuming that she has been swept away by Squire Thornhill. As he travels, however, he meets passersby who describe the man traveling with Olivia in a way that sounds much like Mr. Burchell, and when Primrose arrives at Thornhill Castle, the Squire denies any knowledge of the girl's whereabouts. Further encounters drive him seventy miles from home, where he becomes ill and is confined to an inn for three weeks. On his way back home, still without knowledge of Olivia, he meets a band of traveling players. After being mistaken in a tavern for one of them, he accepts an offer of a meal from a gentleman who talks of nothing but politics. The man considers himself a champion of liberty and condemns the king as a tyrant. Primrose, however, argues that the least dangerous tyrant is one at a distance, while local tyrants like noblemen and the rich do far more to undermine the freedom of the people, both by insisting on their privileges and manipulating the poor, on both cases causing the middle class to suffer. He thus champions Divine Right monarchy. His host becomes angry and orders

him out of the house, but at that moment the master and mistress of the house return. Primrose soon discovers that his host is in reality the butler, who was putting on airs. The true owners of the house are Mr. and Mrs. Arnold, the uncle and aunt of Arabella Wilmot, who recognize the Vicar and welcome him gladly to their home. Arabella inquires about her former fiancé, from whom Primrose has not heard for almost three years. She apparently still cares for him and rejected several suitors in the interim. That evening they attend a performance of *The Fair Penitent* by the traveling players, who boast of a fine new actor so skilled he seems to have been born to the stage. The actor turns out to be none other than George himself, who is unable to perform his part when he sees his father and Arabella in the audience. The Arnolds quickly invite him to their home, and a joyful reunion ensues.

George, at the insistence of his hosts, tells his story. He had gone to London to seek his fortune, bearing a letter of introduction to his cousin. His original intention had been to serve as an usher in a school, but the cousin convinces him that such an occupation will never do, and advises him to become a writer instead, since any fool can make a handsome living at the trade. He decides to write a book of paradoxes, knowing them to be false, in order to gain the attention of those who would oppose him. Sadly, he attracts no opposition, but is completely ignored. He continues to pursue a living as a writer, but finds no success. One day while sitting disconsolately on a park bench he meets Ned Thornhill – the very same man who is now his family's landlord. He soon becomes part friend, part servant to his new acquaintance. Before long his place is challenged by a young marine captain skilled in flattery. He, unwilling to flatter Thornhill because he has begun to see his character flaws, is on the verge of giving up when the Squire asks him to take his place in a duel over a young lady. He emerges victorious, thus earning the gratitude of his patron. Thornhill gives George two letters of recommendation, one to his father and the other to another nobleman, but the former castigates him for abetting his son's dissipation while the latter refuses to see him. Now desperate, he resolves to sell himself as an indentured servant in America. After making the appropriate arrangements, he meets the ship captain, who convinces him that the merchant with whom he had agreed is a liar and thief; he then suggests that George accompany his ship to Amsterdam in order to teach English to the Dutch. As soon as he lands he realizes the impossibility of doing this if he does not himself understand Dutch, but then meets a young man who tells him that the University of Louvain is in need of teachers of Greek. He finds that no such need exists, so determines to make his living as a traveling musician, which serves to earn him his daily bread, though no more. He winds up in Paris, where he again meets the cousin to whom he had originally been recommended. He is in Paris collecting works of art for a newly-enriched Englishman, despite the fact that he knows nothing about art, and assures George that he can make a handsome living in the same way. He then becomes a tutor to a young nobleman, who soon tires of him. Upon returning to England, he falls in with a troupe of traveling players, and thus is reunited with his father.

The next day Squire Thornhill arrives at the inn. His interest in Miss Wilmot is evident, though she seems to favor George more each day. The Squire also asks about Olivia, but is told that no news concerning her is forthcoming. He shows great favor to George by purchasing for him a commission with a regiment soon to sail for the West Indies, agreeing that the Vicar should pay back the sum as he is able, for which all are very grateful. George leaves the next day and the Vicar heads for home. On the way he stops overnight at another inn, where the innkeeper speaks at some length about how much Squire Thornhill is hated in the district because of his habit of seducing and then deserting young ladies. In fact, one such young lady has been staying at the

inn, though she has nothing with which to pay, for the last two weeks, and is about to be thrown out by the mistress of the house. The girl in question is none other than Olivia, who is joyfully gathered into her father's arms. She admits her guilt, but claims that she eloped based on honorable promises that were never fulfilled. The Vicar swears that he never should have trusted Burchell, but Olivia corrects him, stating that her seducer was Squire Thornhill, and that the two noble ladies were actually women of loose morals from London. Burchell, in fact, had attempted to warn her against the Squire, but she had refused to listen. Furthermore, Olivia informs her father that she and Thornhill were married by a Catholic priest, which comforts him immeasurably, at least until he discovers that the same unnamed priest had married Thornhill to six or eight other unsuspecting young women, most of whom are now trapped in prostitution. Olivia then fled to the inn at which she met her father.

On the way home, the Vicar seeks to comfort Olivia and assure her of his constant love for her. That night he leaves her at a nearby inn so he can have the opportunity of preparing the rest of the family for her return. When he arrives, however, he finds the house on fire and is barely able to rescue the members of his family, but his arm is badly burned in the process. All their possessions are destroyed, though the neighbors hurry forward with such assistance as they are able to offer and plan soon to help rebuild the house. The next day Olivia is reunited with her family, though the Vicar must speak sternly to his wife to convince her to receive the penitent. She continues to be depressed over her fall, however, and sinks even deeper into sadness when she hears that Squire Thornhill is to marry Arabella Wilmot.

The next morning the Squire himself appears, acting as if nothing ill has occurred, and proposes to the Vicar that he find a suitable husband for Olivia while continuing to be her lover. Primrose responds in anger, but Thornhill threatens him with eviction, then invites him and his family to the coming wedding, which the Vicar firmly declines. The next day Thornhill's steward demands the year's rent, which he clearly is in no position to pay. The result is that the farm's cattle are confiscated and sold, and Primrose is faced with the probability of debtors' prison. Indeed, officers arrive the next day and take the family off to the county jail. Two miles down the road, they are met by a mob of enraged parishioners determined to free their pastor. Primrose, however, stops them and rebukes them for such lawless behavior.

When Primrose arrives at the jail he finds himself in the company of Ephraim Jenkinson, the swindler who had stolen his horse in the marketplace. Jenkinson treats him kindly and offers him part of his bedding, and Primrose in return promises to do all he can to speak up for him when his trial takes place. In the days that follow, Moses secures a room for his mother and sisters, while he and his brothers sleep with their father in the jail. Upon Moses also falls the responsibility of supporting the family, so he seeks day labor. Primrose, though appalled by the language and behavior of the prisoners, determines to preach to them and seek their redemption. They respond with gratitude, and when Jenkinson has the opportunity to meet his family, he immediately begs forgiveness of Moses while taking an interest in Sophia. He asks the Vicar to tell his story, and when he has finished, the repentant swindler believes he has a plan to deliver his new friend.

Primrose continues his ministry among the prisoners in the days that follow. His family considers his work an exercise in futility, and indeed the men mock and ridicule him at first, but within a week they become attentive to his sermons. He also organizes them for simple labor, allowing them to make a pittance that contributes to their ability to care for themselves. He then launches into a discussion of what a just penal system would look like, advocating rehabilitation and eschewing extreme punishments.

Olivia, meanwhile, continues to decline into deep depression; she is convinced that all the family's suffering is her fault and wants nothing more than to die. Her father's efforts to encourage her and assure her that better days are yet to come seem to have no effect whatsoever. She urges him to give in to Thornhill and allow her marriage to his friend, but he will not hear of it. Then Jenkinson shares his plan, which is to have the Vicar write to the Squire's uncle, by all accounts a good and upright man, narrating the tale of the nephew's misdeeds. He quickly writes the letter, but gets no response, and in a few days Olivia dies. Jenkinson argues that Primrose now has no reason not to seek reconciliation with the Squire, and the Vicar agrees that he can now accept his landlord and persecutor's marriage to Arabella Wilmot. He sends a letter stating his position, which is rudely rejected by the Squire. Primrose now sees no hope before him but an early death and entrance into Heaven. Matters quickly get worse, however, when his wife appears and tells him that Sophia has been kidnaped by some unknown man in a carriage. Soon a letter arrives from George, indicating that he is doing very well in the army but is upset that he has received no letters from his beloved parents and sisters in some time; this at least is some comfort to the grieving family. The comfort is short-lived, however, when George himself is dragged into the prison in chains, bruised and bleeding. He had received a letter from his mother after writing the one described above. This letter exhorted him to wreak vengeance on the persecutor of his father and the destroyer of his sister. He promptly sent Thornhill a challenge to a duel, which the Squire responded to by sending four servants to beat George and apprehend him. He is now under sentence of death for seeking a duel, and begs his father to prepare him for Heaven. The Vicar then gives a discourse to all the prisoners concerning the blessings of suffering and the promise that lies beyond the grave.

After the sermon ends, the jailer informs Primrose that Sophia has been found. Moses runs in to confirm the news. Sophia herself soon follows, accompanied by Burchell, and tells her tale. She knows nothing of the identity of the ruffian who kidnaped her, but as she was being spirited away, she looked out of the carriage, saw Burchell passing by, and called out to him for assistance. He stopped the carriage and confronted the villain with his walking stick, by which he smashed the sword of Sophia's captor. Having rescued her, he then forced the driver to take them back to town. Primrose then begs Burchell's forgiveness for his earlier treatment of her and offers him Sophia's hand in marriage, to the delight of both. Burchell admits that he lacks the means to support a family, but the Vicar will hear no excuses. Burchell then orders dinner for the family, and during the meal hears about George's terrible plight. When George is brought in, he appears to recognize Burchell but says nothing. Burchell then changes character before their eyes, growing in dignity and offering forgiveness to George. To the amazement of all, he introduces himself as Sir William Thornhill, and tells them that he often visits the people of the county in disguise. Upon hearing a description of Sophia's abductor, Jenkinson identifies him as Timothy Baxter, and the baronet sends him, along with two others, to apprehend the rogue.

Sir William then thanks the Primrose family for the gracious treatment he received at their hands and tells a servant to admit his nephew, whom he has summoned to give account of his behavior. He then accuses the Squire of "falsehood, cowardice, and oppression" for seducing Olivia, falsely imprisoning the Vicar, and refusing to face George like a man. Squire Thornhill protests that his actions were perfectly innocent and just, putting a different face on his behavior in an attempt to convince his uncle. The baronet appears to be convinced, but at that point Jenkinson enters with Baxter, who admits that he was hired by the Squire to abduct Sophia and thus abet her seduction by Thornhill. Sir William then orders the jailer to seize the Squire, who

loudly protests that he should not be convicted on the testimony of scoundrels. But his servants are called in and confirm every particular of the accusations against him, adding a few more in the process. Sir William promptly insists that George be released and his nephew detained. Then Arabella Wilmot enters and is quickly disabused concerning the character of her intended. She is further astonished to find George there, having been told by Thornhill that he had married and emigrated to America. The two quickly make up and are restored to their former loving relationship. The Squire, however, steps forward and insists that he has a marriage contract with Miss Wilmot, and he is therefore entitled to her hand and her fortune, though the latter is his true desire. George immediately insists that he wants her love and cares nothing for her fortune, and she responds in kind, and the Vicar agrees to marry them. Jenkinson then steps forward again and swears that the Squire has no right to Arabella's fortune because he is already married. He then leaves briefly and produces none other than Olivia, who was not dead but in hiding, and also produces the license under which she and the Squire were married. Much to Thornhill's surprise, Jenkinson had obtained for him a real priest when he had asked for a false one, intending to use the situation for blackmail. So Olivia, very much alive, is not a fallen woman after all, despite the fact that she is married to a scoundrel. Sir William mitigates this by insisting that his nephew shall be left with a mere pittance, while Olivia will receive a third of the fortune that would have been his, making him utterly dependent on his wife for support. Turning to Sophia, he then proposes that she marry the loyal Jenkinson, along with a gift of five hundred pounds. She collapses in tears – enough to convince Sir William of the genuineness of her love for him. Of course, he then says that he will marry her, though Jenkinson gets to keep the five hundred pounds. All then go off to the inn to feast together, and that night the Vicar pours out his thanks to God for His infinite mercies. The next day, the Vicar gets the news that the money stolen from him by the dishonest merchant had been recovered. Nothing remained but to unite the happy couples in matrimony and celebrate their union.

## **MAJOR CHARACTERS**

- Vicar Charles Primrose – The title character is also the narrator of the story. He is a simple country parson who takes his ministry seriously and seeks to do good to all. He suffers much at the hands of the scoundrel Squire Thornhill, but comes out on top in the end.
- Deborah Primrose – His wife, she has presented him with six children, keeps his house well, and shows hospitality to all in need. She is very eager to see her daughters marry well and is inconsolable when Olivia falls.
- George Primrose – The Vicar's eldest son and an Oxford graduate, he courts Arabella Wilmot, the daughter of a neighboring clergyman, but is forced to break off the engagement when the fathers have a violent disagreement and the Primroses lose their fortune. He enters the army and gets in trouble over a duel, but eventually is reunited with the lovely Arabella.
- Olivia Primrose - The Vicar's elder daughter, she falls in love with Squire Thornhill, is badly abused and mistreated by him, but eventually becomes his wife.

- Sophia Primrose - The Vicar's younger daughter, she falls in love with a wanderer named Burchell, who turns out to be the richest man in the county. They marry at the end of the novel.
- Moses Primrose - The second son of the Vicar, he is steadfast and loyal, seeking to help his family in any way possible during his father's time of difficulty.
- Dick and Bill Primrose - The Vicar's youngest sons, they love their father dearly and draw strength from him during all the family's troubles.
- Arabella Wilmot - George's fiancée, she is the attractive daughter of a wealthy neighboring clergyman of high position. The two part over family disagreements and she is on the verge of marrying Squire Thornhill before his true character is revealed. She marries George, her true love, in the end.
- Squire Thornhill - The owner of the farm where the Primroses take up residence, he is a notorious ladies' man. He seduces Olivia with a promise of marriage he has no intention of fulfilling, but much to his surprise he finds himself married to her at the end.
- Mr. Burchell - He meets the Primrose family at an inn during their journey to the farm and soon rescues Sophia from a flooded river. He and Sophia fall in love. At the end of the story he reveals his true identity - Sir William Thornhill, the Squire's uncle. After undoing all the mischief his nephew has brought about, he and Sophia marry.
- Lady Blarney - A supposed peeress who is a friend of Squire Thornhill, she takes a liking to Olivia and invites her to accompany her to London. She is in reality a woman of loose morals who helps Thornhill in his seduction of Olivia.
- Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs - Another friend of Thornhill, she invites Sophia to be her companion, but the younger sister is not permitted to go to London.
- Ephraim Jenkinson - A swindler who robs both the Vicar and his son, he encounters Primrose again in prison, where the two become friends. He plays a major role in resolving the novel's conflicts at the end of the story.

### **NOTABLE QUOTATIONS**

“I was ever of opinion, that the honest man who married and brought up a large family, did more service than he who continued single and only talked of a population.” (Primrose, ch.1, p.11)

“In a few years it was a common saying, that there were three strange wants at Wakefield, a parson wanting pride, young men wanting wives, and alehouses wanting customers.” (Primrose, ch.2, p.14)

“[Burchell] has neither the ambition to be independent, nor the skill to be useful.” (Primrose, ch.6, p.29)

“The hours we pass with happy prospects in view, are more pleasing than those crowned with fruition. In the first case, we cook the dish to our own appetite; in the latter, nature cooks it for us.” (Primrose, ch.10, p.43)

“Such as are poor, and will associate with none but the rich, are hated by those they avoid, and despised by those they follow.” (Primrose, ch.13, p.53)

“The pain which conscience gives the man who has already done wrong, is soon got over. Conscience is a coward, and those faults it has not strength enough to prevent, it seldom has justice enough to accuse.” (Primrose, ch.13, p.55)

“Heaven, we are assured, is much more pleased to view a repentant sinner, than ninety-nine persons who have supported a course of undeviating rectitude.” (Primrose, ch.22, p.104)

“And it were highly to be wished, that legislative power would thus direct the law rather to reformation than severity.” (Primrose, ch.27, p.120)

“I had nothing now on this side of the grave to wish for; all my cares were over; my pleasure was unspeakable. It now only remained, that my gratitude in good fortune should exceed my former submission in adversity.” (Primrose, ch.32, p.153)

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Evaluate the political discourse given by Vicar Primrose in chapter nineteen of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Do you agree with his defense of the Divine Right of Kings against democracy, aristocracy, and plutocracy? Use both your knowledge of eighteenth-century British politics and the Bible to assess the validity of his arguments.
2. In chapter 27 of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the narrator discusses the relationship between the criminal justice system, natural law, and social contract. To what extent does the author here reflect the basic principles of Enlightenment thought? What leading Enlightenment thinkers expressed the ideas contained in this chapter?
3. In chapter 27 of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the narrator discusses the relationship between the criminal justice system, natural law, and the social contract. Evaluate this discourse on the basis of what the Bible says about criminal justice. Is Dr. Primrose's opinion in accord with Scripture? Why or why not?

4. In chapter 29 of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the title character gives a sermon on the problem of evil, the benefits of suffering, and the hope of felicity beyond the grave. Evaluate his sermon on the basis of Scripture, being sure to include specific references to support your assessment.
5. Compare and contrast Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* with the book of Job in the Bible. Be sure to discuss, not only the suffering and restoration of the central figures, but also the principles conveyed in the two works of literature. Was Goldsmith trying to make the same points as the author of Job in the Bible?
6. Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* is mentioned with approval by Jane Austen in her novel *Emma*, but the influences of Goldsmith's work can be seen much more clearly in *Pride and Prejudice*. Compare and contrast the two works, giving special attention to characters and plot devices. Do the two authors use these characters and devices in the same ways? Why or why not? Use specifics from both books to support your argument.
7. Compare and contrast the mothers, Mrs. Primrose and Mrs. Bennet, in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In pointing out similarities and differences, also address the social conventions being satirized by the two authors in their novels.
8. Compare and contrast the parenting skills of Dr. Primrose in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. What are their respective strengths and weaknesses? Which do you consider the better father, and why?
9. In Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, sisters become attached to men whose characters they misunderstand – a supposed gentleman who turns out to be a scoundrel and a perceived villain who turns out to be a gentleman. Compare and contrast the roles played by Squire Thornhill and Burchell in the former and Wickham and Darcy in the latter. How do these characters advance the plots and themes of the two novels? Do the two authors use these relationships in the same ways? Be sure to support your analysis with details from both books.
10. Compare the views of marriage and its relationship to love, morality, and economic concerns in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Though Austen wrote a generation later, to what extent do the view of marriage in the two books reflect the same cultural milieu and contain the same criticism of that environment? Use specifics from both novels to support your arguments.
11. Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Moliere's *Tartuffe* both suffer from highly improbable endings. How are these endings similar and how are they different? Do the improbabilities detract from the effectiveness of the works, or do they help to underscore the basic messages the authors seek to convey? Support your answer with details from both works of literature.

12. Compare and contrast the characters of Sir William Thornhill in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Duke Vincentio in William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, paying attention to the traits of the two men as well as the use of concealed identity as a plot device and a means of bringing about a satisfactory denouement.
13. Would you consider Dr. Primrose, the narrator of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a reliable narrator? Why or why not? How does his trustworthiness or lack thereof affect the experience of the reader and the way he responds to the events that occur?
14. Would you consider Dr. Primrose, the narrator of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a good husband and father? Why or why not? Use both incidents and quotations from the novel and passages from Scripture in your assessment.
15. How does the character of Dr. Primrose change from the beginning to the end of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*? Deal with specific issues including his view of himself, his view of his ministry, and his interactions with others.
16. Both Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* tell the story of a family with two daughters that is forced to relocate because of financial reverses and the ensuing problems associated with finding suitable marriage partners for the daughters. Compare and contrast the two novels with regard to their characters, plots, and themes. Be sure to use specifics from both books to support your analysis.
17. Ever since the initial appearance of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, critics have debated the author's intention in writing the book. Is it a novel of moral improvement or a satire of such novels? Does the author intend his work to be taken seriously, or was he writing with tongue planted firmly in cheek? Support your conclusion with quotations from the novel.
18. Discuss the autobiographical elements of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Consider the family background of the author as well as his nomadic existence of traveling from place to place and job to job. How do his life experiences give a sense of reality to the life of Dr. Primrose, the country parson, and to the travels and travails of his son George? Use specifics from the novel and from the life of the author to support your analysis.
19. Oliver Goldsmith once argued that, because the preachers of the established church in eighteenth-century England were too timid to address moral questions for fear of alienating their congregations, that task should be assumed by the writer. To what extent is *The Vicar of Wakefield* an embodiment of that idea? What moral instruction did the author feel was missing from the pulpit that he included in his novel? Use specifics from the book to support your analysis.

20. In Oliver Goldsmith's "Advertisement" accompanying the publication of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, he describes the central character thusly: "The hero of this piece unites in himself the three greatest characters upon earth; he is a priest, an husbandman, and the father of a family." How does this statement of what the author chiefly values cohere with the main themes of the novel? Be sure to consider all three roles played by the protagonist in your assessment.
21. In Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, the author, through the narrator, often emphasizes the importance of family values. How would you describe the sort of family life that the author so highly prizes? Be sure to consider the roles of different family members, the order of the household, and the moral and emotional strength of family relationships.
22. Analyze the letter written by Burchell to Thornhill Castle in chapter fifteen of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. Discuss it as a plot device as well as considering the ambiguous nature of the wording and the irony of the contrary ways in which it was intended and actually interpreted.
23. Compare and contrast the characters of Mr. Burchell and Sir William Thornhill in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. The two, of course, are one and the same person. Are they sufficiently alike to convince the reader that Burchell was really the baronet in disguise? Is disguise a sufficient explanation for their differences? Should the reader simply recognize the character(s) as a *deus ex machina* and give up any expectations of realism? How do your answers to these questions affect your ability to enjoy and appreciate the novel?