

CHAPTER III
FIELDING'S IRONY



Fielding wrote a new kind of novel: a kind of novel in which irony plays as important a role as psychological detail does in Richardson's novels. Richardson achieves the sense of reality by a lot of details which provide intimacy; Fielding achieves the same end by contrasting his views of people, kinds of people and their experiences and motives, such as the ironic similes of Slipslop and a tiger, Adams and Colley Cibber,¹ Lady Booby and Cupid, Joseph and the Biblical Joseph. We are able to learn the truth about their characteristics from his ironic comparisons.

Fielding's irony is usually simple and straightforward; it is not as subtle and involved as that of other great ironists. The ambiguities between what is said and what is intended are clear. For example, Parson Adams, after reproaching Joseph to be patient and control his violent passions towards Fanny, bursts into lamentations when his son is reported drowned; and the philosopher of high virtue, Square, is found with Molly Seagrim in her bedroom.

Most ironists force the reader to realize the real inner meaning by himself. If he is intelligent, he succeeds; if he is stupid, he is trapped or deceived. Fielding is different from them. He does not write for a very well-educated reader, but for the eighteenth century's common reader. He does not intend to trap his reader but to strengthen his native tendency towards good

sense. His irony is not so disturbing as that of Swift; it is intended to be corrective and orthodox. Fielding was optimistic in that he thought that the defects of human society, especially that of English society during his time, could be corrected or reformed. In his novels, he pointed out those defects with the intention that they should be corrected. He presents the reader with a large number of good and bad examples and defines a positive and detailed code of proper conduct. Irony in Defoe and Swift is only a device for arguing one thing by seeming to argue its opposite. Thomas Hardy's irony is pessimistic about human existence; the insignificance of man is evidenced by his very attempt to show himself great and powerful.

Fielding is an inferior ironist to Swift: his irony is less intellectual, less subtle and less profound in the inner organization of mind than Swift's. But he transcends Swift in turning irony to new uses. Swift creates an abstract world, the non-existent lands visited by Gulliver, and selects materials from the real world for ironic treatment. Swift engages the reader to see a sane moral order only as an abstract superhuman idea, practical only in the dream world of Brobdingnag or the Houyhnhnms. The King of Brobdingnag comments on humanity as "the most pernicious race of little odious vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of the earth." Men are essentially selfish and immoral. But Fielding treats people, events and ideas in their real native settings. He persuades the reader to see the admitted numerous manifestations of hypocrisy and illnature as

deviations from a healthy social conscience existing in the here and now.

Fielding's irony portrays the whole temper of his mind. The most familiar difference between Richardson and Fielding is that Richardson forces the reader to the strained and stimulated states of feeling of his characters; while Fielding, the master of the comic, keeps his own position and that of the reader detached. Fielding's comic spirit is achieved by his irony and his irony mostly derives from his authorial self-assertion. The authorial self-introduction in his novels assures the reader that the novel is a made story. Fielding's irony also achieves his aim in presenting moral judgement to his reader.

Fielding used irony in various ways. As a rhetorical device, irony influences an audience in order to convey a moral; it presents the difference between what he is and what he ought to be. As a psychological device, it presents the difference between what a character thinks he is and what he really is. As a metaphysical device, it presents the difference between the appearance and reality for the purpose of establishing reality. The contrast of appearance and reality is one of the main themes in Fielding's Joseph Andrews. When irony is employed on a character, it may produce a psychological sense of reality. In Joseph Andrews, Lady Booby's mock-heroic utterances not only reveal her lust, but also her self-delusion; she is shown as an unhappy and misguided woman who sees her lustful passion as a great love:

"Whither doth this violent passion
hurry us! What meanness do we submit to
from its impulse!"

(Book I, chap. VIII)

Mrs. Slipslop is also lustful and self-deceived like her mistress:

Mrs. Slipslop "at last gave up
Joseph and his cause, and with a triumph
over her passion highly commendable" went
off to get drunk.

(Book I, chap. IX)

The irony is that she feels that she has triumphed and should be
praised.

Fielding uses comedy as a vehicle for satire. For example,
the comic picture of Parson Adams when he tries to walk ahead of
the coach in which sits Mrs. Slipslop. He has forgotten his horse
and has to walk instead, but he refuses Mrs. Slipslop's invitation
to get into the coach:

"Mrs. Slipslop desired the coachman
to overtake him, which he attempted, but
in vain; for the faster he drove, the
faster ran the parson, often crying out,
'Ay, ay, catch me if you can.'...."

(Book II, chap. VII)

This episode is satiric in the way that it balances the forgetful
but energetic spirits of the good-natured parson and the pseudo-
gentility of an easily-offended woman, Mrs. Slipslop.

In Fielding's novels, the basic methods of irony can be divided
into verbal and substantial. The verbal irony results from the
choice or arrangement of words; words are chosen or arranged so that
they imply an opposite conclusion. The substantial irony is achieved
through action, statement or symbol. An act, train of acts, event,
or train of events produces an outcome which leads to its opposite;

or a symbol which seems to stand for one thing, stands for its opposite; or a statement by the author or a character provides the truth by being false.

In Joseph Andrews, there is verbal irony on the word "charity." Mrs. Tow-wouse, the landlady, says that:

"...common charity teaches us to provide for ourselves and our families."
(Book I, chap. XII)

Parson Trulliber refuses to lend Parson Adams the fourteen shillings and excuses himself by saying:

"I know what charity is, better than to give to vagabonds."

Adams answers:

"I am sorry, that you do know what charity is, since you practice it no better: I must tell you, if you trust to your knowledge for your justification, you will find yourself deceived, though you should add faith to it, without good works.... Whoever ... is void of charity, I make no scruple of pronouncing that he is no Christian."
(Book II, chap. XIV)



The dispute between Adams and Peter Pounce, the miser, gives the definition of charity:

"You and I," Peter tells Adams, "have different notions of charity. I own, as it is generally used, I do not like the word, nor do I think it becomes one of us gentlemen; it is a mean parson-like quality; though I would not infer many parsons have it neither."
"Sir," says Adams, "my definition of charity is, a generous disposition to relieve the distressed." "There is something in that definition," answers

Peter, "which I like well enough; it is, as you say, a disposition, and does not so much consist in the act as in the disposition to do it."

(Book III, chap. XIII)

Jonathan Wild is well-known for its irony. The irony is frequently presented in terms of the mock heroic. The details of Wild's ancestry and birth, the deeds of his forefathers are illustrated with a broad parody of pedantic scholarship. Most of Wild's conversations are heightened by a pretence at philosophy; for example, he discusses human ambitions and the relation of rulers and ruled:

"It is well said of us, the higher order of mortals, that we are born only to devour the fruits of the earth; and it may well be said of the lower class that they are born only to produce them for us. Is not the battle gained by the sweat and danger of the common soldier? Are not the honour and fruits of the victory the general's who laid the scheme? Is not the house built by the labour of the carpenter and the bricklayer? Is it not built for the profit only of the architect and for the use of the inhabitant, who could not easily have placed one brick upon another? Is not the cloth or the silk, wrought in its form, and variegated with all the beauty of colours, by those who are forced to content themselves with the coarsest and vilest part of their work, while the profit and enjoyment of their labours fall to the share of others?"

(Book I, chap. VIII)

But the irony in Jonathan Wild has no basic straightforward text to operate upon; the whole text is ironic. A novel should have a basic straightforward text which the reader is expected to accept

directly - a narrative and a set of characters on which he is supposed to rest his belief and to concentrate his sympathetic interest.

There is a progress in maturity and refinement in Fielding's ironic methods from Jonathan Wild to Tom Jones. In Tom Jones, he became a masterly ironist. Upon analysis his irony shows a variety and complexity. In his plots he makes his prominent and practical irony work both backward and forward along the causal chain: a present action is made to seem the product of certain prior actions or motives, then shown to have issued from their opposites; or present causes are so arranged as to seem sure to bring certain future results, only to produce opposite ones. There is also a great deal of irony in Amelia, but it is destroyed by the emotionalism; to achieve an effective ironic tone it is essential that the author should retain at least the appearance of detachment. In Tom Jones, Fielding uses both verbal and substantial irony so subtly and skilfully that Tom Jones should be considered as Fielding's masterpiece in using the literary device of irony.

In Tom Jones, there are a lot of ironies of plot. Tom's generosity and openheartedness cause him trouble with Allworthy at the beginning and help him out at the end. Blifil's hypocrisy seems to be successful at the beginning, but at the end causes his downfall. Mrs. Waters' role is ironic; she admits Tom as her son in the beginning and it is she who reveals the truth about his parents to Squire Allworthy in the end. Bridget Allworthy appears to be innocent whereas she is guilty. Square, who always

persuades Tom to confess the truth, himself has made a confession before he dies in his letter to Allworthy; he has suddenly discovered the truth of the Bible when he is dying.

There are other smaller ironies of plot combined with the larger ones to make a full circle in the end. The larger ironies produce happy reversals rather than unhappy, so the irony is comic rather than tragic. The smaller ironies keep the action interesting throughout the novel. Captain Blifil, who happily dreams of the land that will become his after Allworthy's death, dies himself and owns only the land in which he lies:

"But while the captain was one day busied in deep contemplations of this kind, one of the most unlucky as well as unseasonable accidents happened to him. The utmost malice of Fortune could, indeed, have contrived nothing so cruel, so malapropos, so absolutely destructive to all his schemes. In short, not to keep the reader in long suspense, just at the very instant when his heart was exulting in meditations on the happiness which would accrue to him by Mr. Allworthy's death, he himself-died of an apoplexy."

(Book II, chap. VIII)

In book IV, when Squire Western hears that Tom has tried to catch Sophia's bird, he says that he will love the boy as long as he lives; but in Book XVII, when he learns that Tom may be hanged, he says that he never heard any better news than this in his life. The Man of the Hill believes himself good and all other people bad. When he is attacked by robbers, it is Tom who rescues him. When he hears a woman's cry for help, he remains still though he has a gun in his hand (Book IX, chap. II). Mrs. Miller asks Tom to leave her house because Lady Bellaston's visit to him may influence the good

names of her daughters. But later, we are told that her daughter is seduced by Nightingale and Tom has to persuade him to marry her (Book XIV, chap. V-VI).

The unexpected reaction or attitude to a given situation may be ironic in the same way as the unexpected motive. At first, people are against Jenny's situation; but when Allworthy shows mercy to her, they all suspect that he is the father of her child:

Jenny was, however, by the care and goodness of Mr. Allworthy, soon removed out of the reach of reproach, when malice being no longer able to vent its rage on her, began to seek another object of its bitterness, and this was no less than Mr. Allworthy himself; for a whisper soon went abroad that he himself was the father of the foundling child.

(Book 1, chap. IX)

People generally dislike Black George but generally pity him as soon as Allworthy dismisses him.

Irrationality or misapprehension of characters is a mode of irony which resembles dramatic irony: when a character thinks irrationally or misinterprets a situation, readers may feel that it is ironic that he is doing without knowing or seeing what he does; he is deceived. Black George thinks that he is honest in giving Tom back the money after having stolen a much larger sum from him:

Poor Conscience had certainly been defeated in the argument, had not Fear stepped in to her assistance; for secreting the £500 was a matter of very little hazard; whereas the detaining the sixteen guineas was liable to the utmost danger of discovery. By this friendly aid of Fear, Conscience obtained a complete victory in the mind

of Black George, and, after making him a few compliments on his honesty, forced him to deliver the money to Jones.

(Book VI, chap. XIII)

A plain lie is not ironic but the plain lie may change to the ironic if the teller mistakenly believes that he is deceiving his listener. The irony is not in the lie but in the defeat of the liar's expectation. Blifil is a masterly liar. He thinks that he can deceive Allworthy and Western by claiming kindness as his motive for freeing Sophia's bird. He says to Mr. Allworthy:

"Indeed, uncle, I am very sorry for what I have done, I have been unhappily the occasion of it all. I had Miss Sophia's bird in my hand, and thinking the poor creature languished for liberty, I own I could not forbear giving it what it desired; for I always thought there was something very cruel in confining anything. It seemed to be against the law of nature, by which everything has a right to liberty; nay, it is even unchristian, for it is not doing what we would be done by"

(Book IV, chap. III)

The insincere using of false reason by a character in order to deceive other people is also ironic. Mrs. Wilkins suggests to Squire Allworthy that it would not be wrong to put the foundling at someone else's door:

"It is a good night, only a little rainy and windy; and if it was well wrapt up, and put in a warm basket, it is two to one but it lives till it is found in the morning. But if it should not, we have discharged our duty in taking proper care of it;...."

(Book I, chap. III)

Captain Blifil objects to accepting Tom as a member of the family and says that,

"Though the law did not positively allow the destroying such base-born children, yet it held them to be the children of nobody; ...the church considered them as the children of nobody; ...at the best, they ought to be brought up to the lowest and vilest offices of the common wealth."

(Book II, chap. II)

Sometimes Fielding presents hypocrisy in a distinct way, such as Honour's hesitation against suicide. Sophia asks her if she will fire a pistol at anyone who tries to attack her virtue. She answers,

"To be sure, ma'am...one's virtue is a dear thing, especially to us poor servants; for it is our livelihood, as a body may say: yet I mortally hate firearms."

(Book VII, chap. VII)

Self-contradiction by a character also gives an ironic effect. Honour argues on both sides of the question about Tom:

"To be sure one can't help pitying the poor young man, and yet he doth not deserve much pity either, for demeaning himself with such kind of trumpery. Yet he is so pretty a gentleman, I should be sorry to have him turned out of doors. I dares to swear the wench was as willing as he; for she was always a forward kind of body. And when wenches are so coming, young men are not so much to be blamed neither; for to be sure they do not more than what is natural. Indeed it is beneath them to meddle with such dirty draggle-tails; and whatever happens to them, it is good enough for them. And yet, to be sure, the vile baggages are most in fault...."

(Book IV, chap. XII)

The last kind of substantial irony, symbolic irony, can be found in Fielding's novels, particularly Tom Jones, for example in the use of Sophia's muff as a symbol. At the beginning, it is used as the symbol of union: by the muff, Sophia learns that Tom loves her and Tom in turn learns that she loves him. Later, the muff becomes ironically the symbol of disunion: at the Upton inn, Sophia leaves her muff and decides to leave Tom to go to London. However, it brings Tom and Sophia towards reunion at the end of the story.

Fielding often pretends that his knowledge of events is limited; he does not know the course of events any more than his reader. Partridge denies Tom's accusation that he has told Mrs. Miller the identity of Tom, saying perhaps a witch has told her the secret. Fielding also pretends not to know his character's motives. Western persuades Tom to prolong his visit after Tom has broken his arm:

"...and Jones, either from the love of sport, or from some other reason, was easily persuaded to continue at his house."
(Book V, chap. VII)

The reader knows well that it is his love for Sophia that persuades him to stay longer.

Fielding's one important method of ironic characterization is the direct ironic misstatement explaining the motives of his characters. Captain Blifil and his brother plan to marry Bridget and be an heir to Allworthy's fortune:

"...the doctor and his brother thought it an act of benevolence to give being to a human creature who would be so plantifully provided with the most essential means of happiness."
(Book I, chap. XI)

Thwackum and Square are also credited with motives in planning to marry Bridget:

"... these two learned personages ...had, from their first arrival at Mr. Allworthy's house, taken so great an affection, the one to his virtue, the other to his religion, that they had meditated the closest alliance with him."

(Book III, chap. VI)

Besides these examples, there are many other smaller substantial ironies. In Tom Jones, substantial irony plays an important part throughout the book. The conflict between goodness and evil, warm-heartedness and cold-heartedness is presented in both straightforward and ironic form from the largest actions to the smallest. Tom represents the good qualities; Blifil represents the bad ones in the direct playing of the theme, but the ironic treatment makes Tom seem a devil and Blifil a saint.

Eleanor N. Hutchens comments on the other method of irony, verbal irony: "Verbal irony may be divided into four types - the denotative, the connotative, the tonal and the referential."² In denotative, the ironic word is the opposite of what is meant, such as, the word "good" in these passages:

"Everyman must die some time or other," answered the good woman, "it is no business of mine. I hope, doctor, you would not have me hold him while you bleed him."

(Book VIII, chap. III)

"Among other good principles upon which this society was founded, there was one very remarkable; ...that every member should, within the twenty-four hours, tell at least one merry fib, which was to be propagated by all the brethren and sisterhood."

(Book XV, chap. III)

The denotative irony is brief, sharp and less interesting than connotative irony; however, it is useful in producing the total impression of the novel, within the limit of comedy and morality.

Tonal irony is the clash of tone with sense or other tone. The ironic tone stresses the true attitude by contrast. Fielding's presence as author allows him to produce a variety of tones for ironic effect. Tonal irony is achieved by the arrangement of words, ordering of clauses, phrases and punctuation. "Indeed," "at last," "never," "only," and many other words and phrases are used for tonal irony. Fielding uses tonal irony to reveal hypocrisy and self-deception. For example, his exciseman firmly says that he will not sacrifice his Protestant religious beliefs to the Jacobite³ cause, even though there would be excisemen under the members of the Roman Catholic church as well:

"No, no friend, I shall never be bubbled out of my religion in hopes only of keeping my place under another government; for I should certainly be no better, and very probably might be worse."

(Book XII, chap. VII)

"Never" is spoken in a tone of heroic resolution; "only" provides a tone of contempt. From the tone, the reader will take this speech as one of stout religious loyalty and the self-interested statement.

The tonal irony keeps the reader on the alert; some phrases or clauses may appear unimportant but they are not. Although the whole tone of the novel is humorous, there is also rationality or firm opinion of what is true and right. Tonal irony is always spoken

in the voice of one who is mistaken, so there is a sense of naivety which may be appealing, funny and contemptible.

The irony of reference is found in the use of words which refer a subject to something else and, in its comic opposition, point out the real nature of the subject. Fielding uses this method with learned subjects - law, medicine, classical literature, politics, science or military craft. He gives the subject an air of dignity, method, reason or importance which does not belong to it and at the same time emphasizes its lack of the quality suggested.

As a lawyer, Fielding often uses legal terms in his novels. For example, Fielding compares Mrs. Western with the bailiff. Mrs. Western insists on delivering Sophia to Blifil like the bailiff who tries to deliver the unhappy debtor to the goaler (Book VII, Chap. III). There are also medical references as Fielding treats Sophia's passion for Tom as a disease. Fielding argues that the diseases of the mind are like those of the body. He uses "symptoms" and "distemper" to discuss Sophia's love and her temporary relief from it when she learns of Tom's love for Molly:

"When she first began to perceive its symptoms, the sensations were so sweet and pleasing, that she had not resolution sufficient to check or repel them.... This incident relating to Molly first opened her eyes. She now first perceived the weakness of which she had been guilty; and though it caused the utmost perturbation in her mind, yet it had the effect of other nauseous physic, and for the time expelled her distemper."

(Book IV, chap. XII)

We can see the careful scientific explanations of the reactions of Partridge and Honour to strong drink:

"Now, that part of his head which Nature designed for the reservoir of drink being very shallow, a small quantity of liquor overflowed it, and opened the sluices of his heart; so that all the secrets there deposited run out."

(Book X, chap. V)

"Now, Mrs. Honour had unluckily poured so much of this liquid fire down her throat, that the smoke of it began to ascend into her pericranium and blinded the eyes of Reason, which is there supposed to keep her residence, while the fire itself from the stomach easily reached the heart, and there inflamed the noble passion of pride."

(Book XI, chap. VIII)

Classical literature gives Fielding opportunities for referential irony. He explains the inability of the coachman to perform his work after his fight with the sergeant at the Upton inn:

"An ancient heathen would perhaps have imputed this disability to the god of drink, no less than to the God of war; for, in reality, both the combatants had sacrificed as well to the former deity as to the latter."

(Book IX, chap. VI)

War and high politics give ironic dignity and importance to low and common matters. For example, Susan, the Upton chambermaid,

...entering the field of battle,
immediately filed to that wing where her
mistress maintained so unequal a fight
with one of either sex.

(Book IX, chap. III)

Fielding's referential irony which includes both metaphor and the obvious reference of the chapter headings, such as OF LOVE (Book VI, chap. I), gives comparisons which are useful to his critical comedy. It relates incidents and characters to greater

matters, situations or thought in addition to joining the other three forms of verbal irony to achieve the total effect.

In connotative irony, Fielding suggests a comic moral view that a thing may be good or true in one sense but bad or false in others. His use of "proper" helps explain this point:

"The captain was indeed as great
a master of the art of love as Ovid was
formerly. He had besides received proper
hints from his brother, which he failed not
to improve to the best advantage."

(Book I, chap. X)

The word "proper", which is used to mean appropriate, provides connotations of praiseworthy conduct which are comically inapplicable to the Blifil game.

Fielding's use of connotative irony is mostly for didactic purpose. We can see the recurrence of several words like "honour," "wisdom," "decency," "gentleman." Sometimes the purpose is to sharpen characterization; sometimes to point out an event or a turn in the plot; and sometimes it is purely to make the reader laugh. Irony is the means by which Fielding keeps Tom Jones within the moral view and the comic; the connotative irony, with the other three types, contributes to this end. Although Fielding's irony is simple and straightforward, his verbal irony, especially the connotative, is not entirely obvious. Readers who are not highly educated may not understand it; in particular foreigners who cannot distinguish the exact tone will completely miss Fielding's ironic point.