

## The Vicar of Wakefield

### **Character List**

#### **The vicar**

The protagonist and narrator of the novel, the vicar is virtuous, intelligent, moral, and religious. Though he has great pride in his family, he does not possess much worldly wisdom. He is often deceived by the appearances and behavior of those around him. He has a difficult time with the many misfortunes his family suffers, but learns the value of fortitude by the novel's end. He is sometimes referred to as Dr. Primrose.

#### **Deborah**

The vicar's wife, Deborah Primrose is smart and independent, but given over to vanity and pretensions to a higher social status. She is particularly prideful of her daughters.

#### **George**

The vicar's eldest son, George Primrose is an educated but naive young man. His journey into the wider world produces no great success, but does confirm his virtue and good character.

#### **Olivia**

The vicar's eldest daughter, Olivia Primrose is extremely vain, and concerned with her social status. Her reputation is nearly ruined through her relationship with Squire Thornhill, and she ends up consumed by guilt and resentment over it.

#### **Sophia**

The vicar's second eldest daughter, Sophia Primrose is less vapid than her sister is, but also cares for her social status. She falls in love with the (seemingly) penniless Mr. Burchell, who is impressed with her modesty and virtue.

#### **Moses**

The vicar's second eldest son, Moses Primrose is kind but gullible.

#### **Dick**

Dick Primrose is one of the vicar's two young sons.

## **Bill**

Bill Primrose is one of the vicar's two young sons.

## **Mr. Burchell**

Initially introduced as a handsome and intelligent, though penniless young man, Mr. Burchell is eventually revealed to be a disguise behind which Sir William Thornhill hides. Through this disguise, he and Sophia fall in love, and marry after he reveals his true identity.

Sir William Thornhill's reputation rests on his having led a profligate youth but having reformed. Indeed, Burchell's virtue and wisdom - which is doubted by the Primrose family after they suspect him of sabotaging their plans to send the girls to town - make sense when he finally reveals his true identity.

## **Squire Thornhill**

The Primrose family's young, handsome, and roguish landlord, who tricks his way into the family's confidence and then seduces Olivia. It turns out that he has conned several women in this way, leaving them to work as prostitutes after having his way with them. Eventually, his plan to ensnare the Wilmot fortune through marriage to Arabella is foiled. Nephew to Sir William Thornhill.

## **Ephraim Jenkinson**

A scoundrel and a trickster, Jenkinson bilks the vicar and Moses out of their horses before later reforming to act as the vicar's confidante and assistant in prison. At this point, he reveals how much work he performs for Squire Thornhill, and is discovered to be young and attractive when not covered by disguise.

## **Solomon Flamborough**

One of the Primrose's neighbors, Solomon is a friendly and honorable man.

## **The Miss Flamboroughs**

Solomon Flamborough's two daughters, and neighbors to the Primrose family. They are slighted by the Primrose girls for being too low-class, despite their sweetness.

### **Arabella**

George's fiancée at the beginning of the novel, Arabella Wilmot is elegant and modest. Even after she is fooled into accepting Squire Thornhill's marriage proposal later in the novel, she remains devoted to George. She is an heiress to a large fortune.

### **Mr. Wilmot**

Arabella's father, who initially prevents the marriage between Arabella and George after being insulted by the vicar's opinions of marriage, and learning about the vicar's loss of fortune. Proud of his wealth and blustering, he later accepts George as an adequate son-in-law.

### **Mr. Arnold**

The wealthy master of the house where the vicar has lunch after accepting the invitation of Mr. Arnold's butler, who is pretending to be the master. Mr. Arnold is also Arabella Wilmot's uncle.

### **Mrs. Arnold**

Mrs. Arnold is Mr. Arnold's wife and Arabella's aunt.

### **Lady Blarney**

Lady Blarney is one of the fashionable ladies the Squire brings to the Primrose family to impress them. She later turns out to be a disreputable and abandoned lady of the town.

### **Miss Carolina Wilelmina Amelia Skeggs**

Miss Carolina Wilelmina Amelia Skeggs is one of the fashionable ladies the Squire brings to the Primrose family to impress them. She later turns out to be a disreputable and abandoned lady of the town.

### **Farmer Williams**

Farmer Williams is a kind and amiable neighbor of the Primrose family. Knowing he has feelings for Olivia, Deborah uses him as leverage to push the Squire into proposing to her. After this scheme fails, Farmer Williams and Olivia are engaged until she runs away.

**The butler**

The Arnold family servant pretends to be Mr. Arnold himself, and invites the vicar to lunch at the house, where he reveals radical political opinions. When the vicar pleads for Mr. Arnold not to fire him, the butler acts as an ally to the vicar.

**Sir William Thornhill**

Sir William Thornhill is uncle to Squire Thornhill. He spends most of the novel disguised as Mr. Burchell.

## **The Vicar of Wakefield**

### **Summary – Chapter wise.**

#### **Chapter I**

The vicar, Dr. Primrose, narrates the novel, he tells his backstory.

Not long after taking his vow, the vicar decided to marry. He chose a good-natured Englishwoman - Deborah - and they loved each other dearly. They live in an elegant home in a pleasant neighborhood, even though he sometimes laments the rambunctious school-boys and obnoxious kindred who live near them.

The vicar and Deborah have six children: in order of decreasing age, George, Olivia, Sophia, Moses, Dick, and Bill. He describes the girls as capable of being both vivacious and serious depending on their moods. The vicar dotes on his children, and proudly explains how his son George studied at Oxford, and intends to pursue a learned profession. Overall, he finds his family "all equally generous, credulous, simple, and inoffensive".

#### **Chapter II**

The vicar mentions that he has a fortune of his own, and thus donates his small clergyman's salary to orphans and widows. As he keeps no curate (an assistant), he personally knows everyone in the parish.

One of his favorite topics to discuss is that of matrimony. In fact, he has written and published passionate tracts arguing that a husband or wife should never remarry if his or her partner dies. He believes a person should remain chaste in his or her beloved's memory.

George, the eldest son, becomes engaged to Miss Arabella Wilmot. Both families are overjoyed, and spend months celebrating, even though the couple has not yet set a date. Together, the families dine, the ladies dance and study, the men hunt, and everyone has a delightful time.

One day, unfortunately, the vicar shows Mr. Wilmot (Arabella's father) his study on matrimony. Mr. Wilmot vehemently disagrees with the vicar's position, and has in fact been married more than once. The marriage agreement is threatened by the intense argument.

However, in the midst of the argument, the worst news arrives: the vicar's fortune is gone, embezzled by the merchant who was responsible for guarding it.

Faced with this new discovery, Mr. Wilmot definitively refuses to grant Arabella's hand to George.

### **Chapter III**

Finding themselves poor, the vicar's family has few options. Therefore, he is encouraged by the offer of a vicar job in a distant neighborhood, which would pay fifteen pounds a year and allow the family some farmland to manage. The family is discouraged by the prospect of moving, but he reminds them that they are now poor and must acclimate to fewer luxuries. Before they move, he sends George to town, hoping that the young scholar might find some work through which to support his family.

Despite their reticence, the family sets out for their new home. Along the way, they spend the night in an inn. There, the vicar tells the innkeeper about their situation, and the latter tells them about their new landlord, Squire Thornhill, who has a reputation for both the world's pleasures and women.

At the inn, the vicar and his family meet Mr. Burchell, a young and intelligent man who is also poor. They pass pleasant conversation together, and the young man rides with them to their new neighborhood, to which he was also traveling. Along the way, the vicar and Mr. Burchell discuss philosophy.

At one point, Mr. Burchell points out Squire Thornhill's home, and explains how the squire is dependent on the generosity of his introverted uncle, Sir William Thornhill. The vicar has heard of Sir William, and knows his excellent reputation of "consummate benevolence". Mr. Burchell confirms this impression, explaining that Sir William was dissolute and foolish when he was young, but has since grown more respectable in penance for those youthful follies.

At one point during the journey, Sophia falls from her horse into a stream. Without a moment's thought, Mr. Burchell heroically leaps after her and saves her life.

## **Chapter IV**

The vicar describes his new neighborhood. It is mostly comprised of middle class farmers who are polite, but lack gentleness and good manners. However, the local citizens are happy to have a new vicar, and welcome the family. The family's new house is located at the foot of a sloping hill, before twenty acres of excellent land for which they are responsible.

Soon enough, the family settles into its new life and routine, the ladies maintaining the vestiges of good breeding despite the change in circumstance. For instance, the ladies insist on entertaining new friends and dressing up. On their first Sunday in town, the vicar reprimands them for wearing fancy dresses, insisting they will draw scorn from their poorer, less genteel neighbors. They agree with him, and cut up their fine clothes to make Sunday waistcoats for Dick and Bill.

## **Chapter V**

Often, the family spends time outside, in a beautiful area where honeysuckle and hawthorn grow, amusing themselves with reading and song.

One day, a young man darts by in pursuit of a stag. He stops to introduce himself as Squire Thornhill, and begs the young ladies for a song. Though it displeases the vicar, Deborah encourages the girls to comply. The vicar notes that the whole family seems taken by the squire, eager to please him.

After the squire leaves, Deborah describes the day as "a most fortunate hit". The vicar discerns that Sophia does not much care for the squire, but that Olivia fancies him. He warns the family against pursuing a friendship with someone outside of their social class, insisting that "disproportionate friendships ever terminate in disgust". Nevertheless, the family rejoices later that night when the squire sends a gift of venison. The vicar remains silent, believing he has already made his point.

## **Chapter VI**

While the girls prepare the venison, Mr. Burchell arrives to visit. The vicar is happy to see him, as he respects Mr. Burchell and knows his reputation in the neighborhood as the poor gentleman who frequently moves between friends, relying on their hospitality before traveling to another friend's home.

However, the vicar is disconcerted to observe Mr. Burchell's attentions towards Sophia. He later criticizes the man to his family, but is admonished for his harshness by Sophia and Moses.

## **Chapter VII**

The family holds a party for their landlord and his friends, the chaplain and the feeder. It is a great success. At dinner, the vicar toasts the church, and the chaplain commends him on it. Moses and Squire Thornhill attempt to debate religion, but the squire's arguments are too convoluted and silly for Moses to understand. Throughout the evening, the vicar continues to note how Olivia is taken by the squire.

After the Squire and his friends leave, the family discusses him. Deborah is proud to note his attentions towards Olivia, and "exult[s] in her daughter's victory as if it were her own". The vicar voices his disapproval of the man, insinuating that that the squire is immoral and insisting that no "free-thinker" will ever have his daughter's hand. Moses counters that it is not the squire's opinions, but rather his actions, that should matter. Deborah follows to say that she knows several young women who have happy marriages with "free-thinkers," and that Olivia is well enough versed in modern subjects to manage controversy. Olivia defends herself, insisting she has read a great deal on the subject.

## **Chapter VIII**

Mr. Burchell visits the house again, but the vicar is less pleased with the man than before because of Burchell's apparent attachment to Sophia. Interestingly, the vicar and his family notice that Burchell's wit and wisdom seems to improve with each visit.

One day, the family and Burchell begin to discuss poetry while dining outside. Mr. Burchell believes that contemporary English poetry boasts only a combination of "luxuriant images" at the expense of a plot. It is, he continues, full of "epithets that improve the sound, without carrying on the sense".

He then recites a long ballad, which tells of a hermit who invites a lost traveler to spend the evening in his cell. While they rest by the hermit's fire, the hermit tells the traveler how he is at peace with his surroundings, but notices that the traveler seems heartbroken. As he tries to convince the traveler to forget about his earthly love, the hermit realizes that the traveler is in fact a woman. The woman then tells her story, about how her father once tried to marry her to



all the worthwhile suitors in the land, while she loved only a poor but wise man named Edwin. Eventually, a dejected Edwin left to die in solitude, and she now seeks a place to die as he did. The hermit then joyously reveals that he is in fact the very Edwin, and the lovers reunite.

The vicar notes that Sophia is taken with the ballad. Suddenly, they hear a gunshot nearby, and Sophia leaps into Mr. Burchell's arms for protection. A moment later, the chaplain appears, having shot a blackbird. After asking pardon, the chaplain sits with them and flirts with Sophia.

Deborah whispers her approval to the vicar, noting that Sophia has potentially made a "conquest" as Olivia had with the squire. The chaplain tells them that the squire intends to throw a ball for the girls on the following night, and then asks Sophia if she will grant him her first dance. However, she refuses, saying that she should grant her first dance to Mr. Burchell. To the vicar's surprise, the young man politely refuses to attend.

## **Chapter IX**

Squire Thornhill brings two fashionable ladies - Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs, though their names are not provided until later - to visit the vicar's family. The party convenes outside to practice some country dances. When they realize they lack sufficient female partners, the family invites the Miss Flamboroughs, two neighboring girls, to join them.

Afterwards, everyone converses over an elegant supper. The vicar notes that his daughters and wife are impressed by the "high life, and high lived company" of the two rich ladies. He is concerned that his family will eventually seem ridiculous and pretentious by mixing with a higher class. Nevertheless, the fashionable ladies seem quite fond of Olivia and Sophia, and ask whether the girls might accompany them home. The vicar politely refuses the request; as a result, his daughters are sullen for the rest of the night.

## **Chapter X**

The vicar notices that his daughters are forgetting their lessons on humility and temperance. Instead, they are indulging in the "pride that [he] had laid asleep, but not removed". They grow vain, overly worried about their complexions, and begin to abstain from their chores.

Similarly, they speak disparagingly about the Miss Flamboroughs, whom they now deem too coarse and common, and attempt to talk only of fashionable, highbrow subjects.

One day, a gypsy passes nearby, and the vicar indulges his daughters by giving them a shilling with which to get their fortune told. After meeting with the gypsy, they express their great happiness at what they learned - Olivia was foretold to marry a squire, a Sophia to marry a lord. Paired with their recent changes in acquaintance, this incident leads the family to think themselves "designed by the stars for something exalted". They believe their fortunes are rising, and expect the squire to soon propose to Olivia.

Towards the end of the week, the fashionable ladies send word that they look forward to seeing Olivia and Sophia at church. Anticipating the meeting, the girls convince the hesitant vicar that they must take their horses, rather than walk, in order to appear genteel. When Sunday comes, he leaves before them to prepare for the service, but they never arrive. After the service, he returns home and meets them on the road. It turns out that the horses refused to budge, after which the family "had met with a thousand misfortunes". The vicar notes that their attempts at gentility had failed.

## **Chapter XI**

Humbled by their recent embarrassment, the family agrees to join the neighboring Flamborough family for games and snacks on Michellmas eve. However, they are appalled when the two fashionable ladies (their names now given as Lady Blarney and Miss Carolina Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs) arrive to discover them playing these silly games. The ladies had been worried about the family's absence from church, and came in search of them. They are ardent in insisting on their affection for the vicar's daughters.

The entire group spends the evening together. The vicar's daughters and Deborah are overjoyed to discern that the society ladies are discussing two open positions in town, for which they might recommend the Primrose girls. Strangely, Mr. Burchell, who is also in attendance, constantly remarks "Fudge!" whenever the ladies say anything.

Deborah broaches the topic of sending the girls to town with the vicar, and he agrees to ask the fashionable ladies about it directly. They agree that Olivia and Sophia could succeed there, but note that they must first attain confirmation of the girls's reputations, simply as a formality. They offer to attain the reference from Squire Thornhill, whom Lady Blarney

identifies as her cousin. The vicar and Deborah are quite proud, certain that the squire will provide a good reference.

## **Chapter XII**

The family schemes and plots together, to determine how to best take advantage of the impending opportunities. They decide to sell Colt, one of their horses, in order to buy a more attractive one for the girls. The vicar asks Moses to bring Colt to the market to arrange a good trade.

While Moses is gone, the family learns that Squire Thornhill has spoken well of them to the ladies. Mr. Burchell visits, and even though he had annoyed them at the previous dinner, they decide to ask him his opinion on the situation. His reservations about their plan annoy them further.

Moses soon returns, but without a horse. He explains that he made a profitable trade, obtaining some valuable silver-rimmed spectacles in exchange for Colt. However, the vicar examines the glasses to discover that the rims are not actually silver. It seems Moses has been swindled.

## **Chapter XIII**

The family is ashamed of their recent disasters. One day, Mr. Burchell and Deborah argue over the girls' plan to go to town, and Deborah grows emotional and irrational. She accuses Burchell of having selfish reasons for dissuading them, and he angrily insists he will depart both their home and the countryside in general. He announces that he will come by only once more, to say goodbye.

The vicar reprimands his wife for her rudeness, but she stubbornly insists Sophia deserves better company than a poor man like Mr. Burchell. When Sophia insists that Mr. Burchell has always been "sensible, modest, and pleasing" to her, the vicar feels a prick of conscience, but quickly forgets it.

## **Chapter XIV**

As it seems like the girls will indeed soon leave for town, the vicar decides to sell the family's other horse to obtain a better one. This time, he travels to the fair himself.

Several hours pass, and the vicar can hardly interest anyone in the horse, since it seems the beast has several medical conditions. Eventually, the vicar agrees to have a drink with a fellow clergyman. In the ale-house, the vicar is impressed by a respectable older gentleman, who both seems intelligent and exhibits charity when he gives a poor boy some money.

After the other clergyman leaves, the vicar approaches the old man (Ephraim Jenkinson, though we do not learn his name until later), and they quickly impress one another through a discussion of church matters. The vicar is taken by the man's grasp of complicated ideas, and is flattered to learn that the old man has heard of the vicar's opinions on matrimony.

Eventually, they share their reasons for being at the fair. The old man had come to buy a horse for his tenant, and an agreement is quickly struck for him to buy the vicar's horse. However, the vicar does not have sufficient change to break the old man's bill. Therefore, the old man writes a statement that he swears Solomon Flamborough, the vicar's neighbor and a colleague of the old man's, will honor by paying the clergyman himself. The transaction being done, they part ways.

On his way home, the vicar grows nervous at having accepting a draught (the document of payment) from a stranger, and his worst fears are confirmed when Solomon tells him that he has been tricked by Ephraim Jenkinson, "the greatest rascal under the canopy of heaven".

The vicar arrives home embarrassed, but is distracted to find his daughters and wife in tears. It turns out that someone has spoken ill of the girls' reputation to Squire Thornhill, and so he will not sponsor their trip to town. The vicar wonders who would want to spread rumors about his harmless family.

## **Chapter XV**

The family asks around to determine who has slandered their name, to no avail. One day, one of the young boys discovers a letter case that belongs to Mr. Burchell. In the case is a letter that seems to denounce the reputations of Olivia and Sophia. Naturally, they are incensed.

Soon afterwards, Mr. Burchell visits their house, and the vicar assails him with violent criticism. The family is so angry that they do not allow him to speak. Eventually, Mr. Burchell grows equally angry, and threatens that he could have the vicar arrested for opening mail that does not belong to him. With a promise never to return, he leaves.

## **Chapter XVI**

Squire Thornhill begins to visit the family more frequently, and the vicar notes that "the hopes of having him for a son-in-law [as Olivia's husband], in some measure blinded us to all his imperfections". The greatest evidence of the squire's intentions comes when the family commissions a portrait of themselves posed as great historical figures, and the squire asks to be included. He is painted as Alexander the Great, sitting at Olivia's feet. Though the family is overjoyed by his request, they are dismayed to realize that the painting is far too large for their modest home, and hence must be awkwardly propped against a wall. Many townspeople make fun of the situation.

One day, Deborah decides to probe into the squire's intentions, and slyly asks him whether he knows of an appropriate suitor for Olivia. When she suggests that they are considering Father Williams, the squire vehemently refuses to support such a match, citing his private sentiments as his reason. The family naturally takes this as further evidence of his desire to propose.

## **Chapter XVII**

Farmer Williams visits the family one day when the squire is there. The farmer's clear passion for Olivia seems to bother Squire Thornhill, and Olivia suggests to her father that the squire must have a reason for delaying in his proposal. The vicar and Deborah then decide to set a date by which Squire Thornhill must act, after which they will give Olivia's hand to Farmer Williams. Slyly, they let the squire know about this date.

When the allotted time passes, the disappointed family prepares for Olivia's impending marriage to the farmer. One day, they are having a nice time together, during which the youngest son Bill sings a song entitled "An Elegy on the Death of a Mad Dog." In the song, a man is bitten by a dog he loved, which saddens his neighbors, who believe he will die of the bite. However, they are happy when the man survives and the dog dies instead.

Happy, the vicar notes how grateful he is that his family has such "tranquility, health, and competence".

Suddenly, Dick arrives with news that Olivia has left in a post-chaise with a gentleman who kissed her and said he loved her. Incensed, the vicar demands his pistols and prepares to set out after whomever this man is, but Deborah and Moses chide him for his excessive passion,

and he calms down. After settling, he reflects on how he has lost his worldly happiness, and will have to find it in the afterlife.

The next morning, the calm and confident vicar prepares to set out after Olivia, whom he will welcome back despite her sin, hoping to guide her to repentance.

### **Chapter XVIII**

The vicar first suspects Squire Thornhill of the crime, but finds the man alone at home. Thornhill is shocked to learn of what has happened. The vicar then suspects Mr. Burchell, whom he remembers recently seeing in conversation with Olivia. He walks towards the races, where he sees a crowd of people. There, he believes he sees Burchell, but is not certain.

After walking about seventy miles from home, the vicar falls into a fever from stress and despair. He is forced to stop at an inn, where he stays for three weeks while recovering. Left to his thoughts, the vicar develops a shame in his pride, since it had caused him trouble.

After recovering, he sets off back towards home. On his way, he comes across a company of actors, and enjoys conversing with them as they travel together. However, he is embarrassed to be in their company when they arrive in the village, so he breaks off for an ale-house. There, a man asks him about his relationship to the company, and the vicar denies any association with them. The men then discuss politics for a while, and the man (who later is revealed as the butler) invites the vicar to dine at his home.

### **Chapter XIX**

The vicar accompanies the man to a magnificent mansion, where they continue to discuss politics over dinner. The man proves to be almost radical in his opinions, boasting that liberty is his ultimate goal. The vicar agrees that liberty is important, but believes that some men are born to rule while others are born to submit. He also argues that the rich are helpful because they diminish monarchical power by trying to claim it for themselves. It is within the middle class that art, wisdom, and virtue may be found. The vicar concludes by saying that he has known of many people who claim to be for liberty even though they are truly tyrants.

The man insults the vicar over his opinions, but they are interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Arnold, the house's true master. It turns out that this man was only the butler, pretending to be the master.

Mr. Arnold apologizes to the vicar, but the latter is distracted to see Miss Arabella Wilmot, the young woman who was engaged to his son George at the novel's beginning. It turns out that Mr. and Mrs. Arnold are her aunt and uncle. Seeing that his niece cares for the vicar, Mr. Arnold invites him to stay for a few days.

The next morning, Miss Wilmot asks after George, and the vicar sadly explains that he has not heard from his son for over three years. They talk through the afternoon, until they encounter the company manager of the theatre troupe, who sells them tickets to the show, in which Horatio will be played by a young man who is perfect for the role even though he lacks any acting experience.

At the show that night, Miss Wilmot and the vicar are shocked to realize that this young man is in fact George Primrose. When George sees them in the audience, he bursts into tears and flees the stage. When the vicar later explains the situation to Mr. Arnold and his wife, they send a coach for him so he can join them at the Arnold home. Though seemingly very sad, Miss Wilmot also expresses some happiness at the impending reunion.

## **Chapter XX**

George joins the Arnolds, his father, and former fiancée. The vicar is surprised to discover that George lives in poverty, since he was supposed to earn money for the family.

Eventually, George tells the story of his adventures. He first went to London and met up with his cousin, as planned. He intended to work as an usher at the academy, but the cousin discouraged him from this plan, instead suggesting he become a writer. George liked the idea, but found little success in writing about topics that actually interested him.

One day, he ran into a classmate from Oxford - Ned Thornhill, whom the vicar knows as Squire Thornhill. Pitying George, the squire hired him as a personal assistant. Though George performed well in the position, the squire was generally more impressed by a sycophantic marine captain. Over time, George became less impressed with the squire, whom it seemed loved flattery above all else.

Eventually, the squire asked George to fight a duel on his behalf, in a matter concerning a lady's honor. Though he felt terribly about it (especially since he did not know whether his opponent's accusations were sound), he performed well.

When Squire Thornhill had to leave town and could not take George with him, he suggested George contact his uncle, Sir William Thornhill, to secure a post there. Carrying a recommendation letter from the squire, George bribed one of Sir William's servants to secure an interview with the man. However, Sir William discerned from his nephew's recommendation that George must have fought a duel for the squire, and dismissed him as an unsuitable man.

Exhausted and discouraged, George visited a man named Mr. Cripse, who arranges for people to work in America as veritable slaves. Mr. Cripse promised to appoint George as a secretary to a Pennsylvania synod on Indian relations, and though George doubted the man, he was desperate enough to agree. However, an old captain friend learned of George's plan, and instead convinced George to sail to Amsterdam, where he could teach English to the Dutch.

George spent his last money on passage, but realized when he arrived in Amsterdam that he could not teach English without first knowing Dutch. He then travelled to Louvain (in France) to teach Greek, which he learned at Oxford, but found little demand for it. He turned then to music, but found that France had much better musicians than him.

While in France, he reunited with his cousin, who set George up with a job buying pictures for rich people. Though George knew little about paintings, the cousin convinced him that it was more about conning people than actually knowing about the work. After working shortly in this field, George worked as a tutor with a young man traveling through Europe. Eventually, the student left him behind, and George was stranded again.

He made his way back to England, where he earned a living by disputation (arguing). He intended to make his way back to his family, but along the way encountered the acting company. He knew one of the actors, and was hired by them to play Horatio.

## **Chapter XXI**

The butler has become a friend to the vicar since the latter convinced Mr. Arnold not to fire him. He informs the vicar that Squire Thornhill has made overtures to Miss Wilmot, and will be visiting. When the squire does arrive to pay his compliments, he is surprised to find the vicar there, and asks after Olivia.



It is clear that the squire is pursuing Miss Wilmot, but she does not seem pleased by it, instead mostly devoting her attention to George. One day, the squire happily announces that he has found George an ensign's commission in a regiment traveling to the West Indies. George is pleased, but the rest of the group (especially Miss Wilmot) is sad to see him go.

After George leaves, the vicar sets off for his own home. Along the way, he stops at a public-house for a drink, and converses with the affable innkeeper, who tells him how loathed the squire is by his tenants in the area. While they talk, the landlord's wife enters, complaining about a female guest who continues to stay there even though she has no money. The vicar hears the girl pleading for pity, and realizes it is Olivia. He rushes to her, finding her in a wretched state, and forgives her.

Olivia tells her story. It was indeed Squire Thornhill who abducted her. It turns out that the fashionable ladies were actually ill-bred tramps from town, who were acting as decoys to get the vicar's permission to send Olivia and Sophia to London. Mr. Burchell's letter - which was *actually* insulting the reputation of these ladies, and not of the Primrose girls - scared them off, which is why the fake appointment to London spots never went through.

Olivia soon after married Squire Thornhill in a secret, Catholic ceremony, but was then removed to a type of brothel where other women lived. She learned soon enough that the squire had married

eight other women in a similar manner. Realizing how some of the women had acclimated to their lives as prostitutes, she confronted the squire, who threatened to give her to a friend if she did not behave. She then fled the house, and begged passage on a stage-coach that brought her finally to the inn where the vicar found her.

## **Chapter XXII**

The vicar and Olivia depart for home, but he leaves her at a nearby inn so he can prepare the family for her return. However, he arrives to find his home violently aflame. The family is distraught outside, with the two youngest boys trapped in the house. The vicar burst inside and rescues them.

The family is amazed by their sudden loss, but are happy to be alive and safe. Nobody has been hurt save the vicar, whose arm was scorched in the rescue. Their neighbors prove

generous in the aftermath, and the family is more prepared to accept Olivia back in the face of the calamity.

When Olivia arrives, Deborah initially acts coldly towards her. The vicar chides his wife, insisting that "the real hardships of life are now coming fast upon us, let us not therefore encrease them by dissension among each other". Deborah agrees, and warms to her daughter.

### **Chapter XXIII**

The family works to recover from their calamity. Their neighbours continue to prove helpful, especially Farmer Williams, who cares for Olivia despite her recent shame. Nevertheless, she is not interested in him, and instead stewes in her grief. The vicar tries to amuse his daughter with stories, but she only broods on her misfortune. Soon enough, her grief turns to jealousy and resentment of Sophia.

The family is further upset to learn that Miss Wilmot has been engaged to Squire Thornhill. The vicar sends Moses to Miss Wilmot with a letter describing the squire's true character, but Moses finds it impossible to gain an audience with her. Therefore, he leaves it with a servant.

Eventually, the family (save Olivia) manages to find some cheerfulness by reflecting upon the kindness of their neighbours.

### **Chapter XXIV**

The family regularly breakfasts outside at the honeysuckle bank, even though it makes Olivia melancholy since this is the spot where she first met the squire.

One day, they are alarmed to see that man approaching. When he joins them, acting as though nothing has changed, the vicar angrily calls him a "poor pitiful wretch". After attempting to feign ignorance, the squire angrily concedes that he will keep Olivia as wife and allow her to keep a lover. When the vicar more violently insults the squire in turn, the latter threatens that the vicar will soon regret such animosity, and then leaves.

The Squire's threat proves to be true. The next morning, a steward arrives to demand rent that the vicar obviously cannot pay. The family begs him to apologize to and negotiate with the squire, but he refuses to "tamely sit down and flatter our infamous betrayer".

The next morning, two officers arrest the vicar for non-payment of rent. He instructs his family to gather their things and prepare to depart immediately.

## **Chapter XXV**

The family walks with the vicar and the officer towards prison, followed by fifty of the county's poorest parishioners, who are sad and angry to see their curate taken. When the parishioners grows angry enough to assault the officer, the vicar rebukes them, and they fall back.

The travel is slow, largely owing to the vicar's injuries from the fire. Eventually, they arrive at an inn near the prison, where the family stays while the vicar and officer continue to prison. When the vicar arrives there, he is surprised to find the prisoners engaged in revelry and merriment. He generously purchases more liquor for them, and the party continues.

At the party, the vicar sits alone until a young, friendly man offers him some blankets for the night. The vicar enjoys conversing with this intelligent person until he recognizes some of the man's ideas, and pieces together that it is the scoundrel Ephraim Jenkinson. Ephraim offers profuse apologies for previously cheating the vicar, noting that his sins have caught up to him and landed him in prison. The vicar forgives him, and notes that Ephraim looks much younger than he did before. Ephraim then explains that he has several disguises that allow him to look younger or older at will.

## **Chapter XXVI**

The next day, the vicar's family visits him. They have rented rooms in the area for the girls, while the boys are allowed to stay in the prison with him. Olivia does not join the family, as she has taken ill.

The vicar instructs his family on how they will weather this situation: Sophia must take care of her sister, Deborah must care for him, Moses must find work to support the family, and the young boys must read to the vicar.

Over the next days, the prisoners prove themselves a rather lewd and raucous bunch, so the vicar decides to reform them. He delivers an impromptu sermon about good behavior in the common room, and the prisoners actually respond well to it.

That night, when the family returns for dinner, they welcome Jenkinson to join them. Though he is friendly towards the boys and admiring of Sophia, Moses is bothered when he recognizes the criminal's voice and remembers the spectacles con. However, he accepts Jenkinson's sincere apologies.

Jenkinson then asks the vicar how he ended up in the prison, and the older man tells his story. When the story finishes, Jenkinson suddenly runs out of the room, strangely saying he will soon find a solution.

### **Chapter XXVII**

The vicar continues with his plan to reign in the debauchery of the inmates, hoping to bring them closer to God. For a few days, they make fun of him for his sanctimony, but eventually come to respect and appreciate him. He also devises plans to make their situation more comfortable, such as assigning them little jobs and instituting rewards for good behavior. By the end of a fortnight, he "had formed them into something social and humane, and had the pleasure of regarding [himself] as a legislator".

One day, he gives a speech about how the best way to reform a state is by encouraging virtue rather than by harshly punishing vice. That way, men would be encouraged to improve society, rather than learning to disdain it.

### **Chapter XXVIII**

Olivia visits her father, and he is struck by the terrible change in her appearance. She begs him to submit to Squire Thornhill, but he refuses to implicitly condone the way he treated her.

Jenkinson overhears their conversation, and questions the vicar about his reasons for refusal. The vicar explains that he could never approve of Thornhill's marriage to Arabella, since he believes the man has already given his hand to Olivia. Jenkinson then suggests he write to Sir William Thornhill, to explain the nephew's conduct. Agreeing, the vicar sends the message and waits anxiously for a reply.

The vicar's health, meanwhile, is suffering, due to both distress and his burnt arm. Jenkinson brings even more terrible news: Olivia has died from her heartbreak. Beaten, the vicar dismisses his pride and agrees to submit to Squire Thornhill. However, his message of acquiescence is refused. The squire had intercepted the vicar's message to his uncle, and now wishes only ill to the older man.

Right after the vicar receives the squire's reply, a distraught Deborah arrives with the terrible news that Sophia has been snatched away by ruffians in a post-chaise. The villain did not appear to be Squire Thornhill.

A few minutes later, Moses arrives with a letter from George, bearing good news. Deborah is relieved to receive this message, noting that it means George must not have received a letter she sent him, asking him to avenge Olivia's shame upon Squire Thornhill. Though the vicar is incensed that she attempted to prompt violence, he too is relieved that the letter did not reach George. Together, they read George's letter, which expresses great contentment with his post.

The vicar earnestly thanks God for his son's safety and happiness, but is minutes later distraught when a bloody prisoner is brought to his cell. It is George, bound in chains for having attempted to attack the squire. After calming his father down, George tells his story: before he reached the squire, four of that man's servants beat him senseless and then had him arrested. Feeling guilty, George asks his father for some advice on fortitude, and the vicar decides to deliver that advice to the whole prison population.

### **Chapter XXIX**

The vicar delivers his sermon to the prison. He argues that life is built more on suffering than on happiness, which is why religion is important. Religion promises greater rewards to the poor and unhappy than it does to the happy, since the former will better appreciate the joys of heaven once they arrive. He ends by begging his audience to take comfort in their situation, since impending death will bring ultimate bliss with it.

### **Chapter XXX**

Soon afterwards, the vicar learns that Sophia has been recovered. Mr. Burchell brings Sophia to the prison, and the vicar apologizes to that man for his false accusations. Mr. Burchell forgives him, explaining that he was not at liberty to correct the vicar's otherwise understandable assumptions about his (Burchell's) character.

Sophia tells her story. She was walking innocently one day and then was suddenly snatched up. Luckily, she saw Mr. Burchell through the coach window, and screamed for help. Though he was able to stop the coach, the villains escaped.

The relieved vicar offer Sophia's hand to Mr. Burchell, who reminds the vicar that he has no money to offer. The vicar dismisses the concern, insisting that Burchell is a worthy man. Though he makes no promise one way or the other, Mr. Burchell then orders refreshments from the inn to be brought to the family.

The vicar is sad to tell Sophia about her brother. Overhearing the story, Mr. Burchell asks if the young man's name is George. When George enters the room, he and Mr. Burchell recognize one another, and George seems ashamed. Before they can speak in depth, however, a prison servant enters with news that a man in a coach has arrived and expects to see Mr. Burchell. The latter sends word that he will arrive soon, and then confronts George about trying to attack Squire Thornhill. The vicar intervenes to offer the letter George received from Deborah. Though Mr. Burchell still considers the attack a crime, he admits the letter does offer some justification.

Then, to the family's surprise, Mr. Burchell reveals that he is truly Sir William Thornhill. Everyone is overjoyed and shocked, though Sophia seems a bit disconcerted to discover that her love is so far above her station. Deborah begs forgiveness for having once spoken so coarsely to him, but Mr. Burchell dismisses her concern.

Sophia is asked to describe her captor, and Jenkinson (who is also in attendance) recognizes the description as belonging to Timothy Baxter. With Sir William's blessing, Jenkinson convinces the jailor to grant him two men with which to apprehend Baxter.

Sir William, having medical experience, then prescribes a medicine to help alleviate the vicar's arm pain. The jail servant reappears, now identifying the man in the coach as Squire Thornhill, who wishes to be seen. Sir William agrees.

## **Chapter XXXI**

Squire Thornhill enters, and refuses to answer to any accusations. He denies having seduced Olivia, and insists that the vicar has been jailed for a legitimate offense. Faced with a lack of evidence, Sir William can accuse his nephew of nothing except for a lack of mercy.

When Jenkinson and the two servants return with Baxter, however, the squire shrinks back in alarm. Jenkinson identifies himself and Baxter as the squire's criminal accomplices, and notes that Baxter has confessed to having kidnapped Sophia so that the squire could then pretend to rescue her and thereby gain her confidence in hopes of seducing her as he did Olivia. The squire calls upon his servants to defend him, but they realize he is now powerless, and confess their dislike for him. They also offer further proof of his insidious behavior, and Sir William laments the "viper I have been fostering in my bosom". He then demands George be released, and promises to settle all affairs before the magistrate.

At that moment, Miss Arabella Wilmot and her father arrive. They were in town preparing for the wedding the next day, and saw little Bill Primrose playing. He told them of his father's plight, and they have come to visit. The vicar muses on the nature of coincidences and "how many seeming accidents must unite before we can be clothed and fed".

Sir William tells Arabella the truth about Squire Thornhill, and she is overjoyed to be released from such a villain. She further confesses that she has always loved George, but that the squire lied to her by sending George away and then convincing her he had left to marry someone else. When the family presents George, who has by this time has cleaned up and dressed in his regimentals, she pronounces her love for him.

The squire, now incensed, then reveals that he no longer needs his uncle's protection or fortune, since he has already signed the contract ensuring him the Wilmot fortune. Whether or not he marries Arabella, she now lacks control of her dowry. Despite this distressing news, the lovers are unfazed. Mr. Wilmot panics a bit, but Sir William rebukes him for valuing money over his daughter's happiness and salvation from such a rascal.

Jenkinson then inquires whether the contract would be valid if the squire was already married. Startled, Sir William insists that a previous marriage would negate any contract. Jenkinson then reveals that though the squire asked him to create a false marriage license for the ceremony with Olivia, he had actually obtained a real license, hoping to one day use it to blackmail the squire. Therefore, Olivia and the Squire were actually married, and the contract for the Wilmot fortune negated.

Suddenly, Olivia herself arrives. It turns out that Jenkinson had lied about her death in hopes that it would inspire the vicar to submit to Squire Thornhill and thereby be released from prison, where he would otherwise surely die from his wounds.

The squire's fate now solidified, he drops to his knees and begs mercy before his uncle, who promises him a meager allowance and nothing more.

After the squire leaves, everyone rejoices in their happiness. Only Sophia remains distressed, and is doubly saddened when Sir Williams asks whether she would like to marry Jenkinson, a handsome young man of character. When she refuses, he jokingly notes that she must then marry him. He then earnestly admits he has never met a woman who loved him for himself (and not for his fortune), and that he is rapturous to have met such a beautiful woman like her.

Everyone prepares to retire to the inn next door, and Sir William and Arabella leave some money for the grateful inmates. Later than night, alone, the vicar pours his heart out to God in thankful prayers.

### **Chapter XXXII**

The vicar soon learns that his own fortune has been recovered from the merchant who stole it. He personally marries Sophia to Sir William and then Arabella to George. He then throws an elegant feast for them, and his many parishioners arrive to congratulate him.

The vicar also mentions what he knows about Squire Thornhill. The man lives alone with a relative, and is trying to learn the French horn.

The vicar ends his narrative by remarking that "I now had nothing on this side of the grave to wish for, all my cares were over, and my pleasure was unspeakable. It now remained that my gratitude in good fortune should exceed my former submission in adversity".



## **The Vicar of Wakefield - Themes**

### **Prudence**

Especially in the first half of the novel, the vicar is defined by his sense of prudence. For him, prudence (or wisdom) involves living a life of moral righteousness, trusting in mankind's implicit goodness. However, the second half of the novel reveals the limits of such prudence. Through the vicar's many mishaps - several of which he could have prevented had he employed a more cynical view of people - Goldsmith suggests that man needs more than prudence to navigate the world's evils. Instead, man also needs fortitude and a willingness to doubt and question the motives of others. Certainly, the novel does not condone immoral behavior, but it does suggest that a delusional assumption of wisdom can often cause serious problems.

### **Fortitude**

The theme of fortitude serves as the guiding force of the novel's second half. *The Vicar of Wakefield* has often been compared to the Bible's Book of Job, and with good reason. The characters, particularly the vicar, are subject to many trials and tribulations throughout the story, and must ultimately rely on intense fortitude in order to weather these trials. When faced with true calamity, the vicar must rid himself of pride, and recognize the limits of his prudence, so that he can become the true man of God he always thought himself to be. By the time he delivers his sermon on fortitude to George and the prisoners, he truly represents a man poised to weather difficulties through personal strength. The reader is thus exhorted to model his own behavior on the vicar's.

### **Religion**

Religion is obviously an important theme in the novel, considering the protagonist's job. Though the book does have a moral message, it reflects an ambivalent relationship with God. Despite his flaws, the vicar does try to model a good, virtuous life for his family and strangers alike. And many of Goldsmith's contemporary critics were impressed by his ultimate message, that man must endure hardship on Earth in anticipation of a greater life in heaven. However, the vicar has a discernible lack of intimacy with God; he certainly tries to live a godly life, but does not necessarily engage in any deep prayer or communion. Instead, he uses his sanctimony to favor behavior he approves of, and to validate his more selfish

desires for his family. The overall suggestion is that a sense of God permeates the vicar's life, but that it might often only operate on a superficial level.

### **Disguise and Deception**

The novel is rife with disguise and deception. Characters are never who they seem to be, and adapt different masks, identities, and personas both to confuse the reader and each other. In many ways, this repeated trait reveals some of Goldsmith's view of humanity. The vicar and his family assume Squire Thornhill is a good person and that Mr. Burchell is not. Moses and the vicar are duped by Ephraim Jenkinson, and the vicar is fooled by Mr. Arnold's butler. The two rich, fashionable ladies prove to be frauds. All of this deception reinforces Goldsmith's point that prudence has limits, since the family eventually realizes that virtue alone cannot ensure success, happiness, or safety in a world of duplicity. The Primrose family lacks true wisdom because they assume their godly wisdom serves them well, and they as a result are almost destroyed.

### **Family**

Family is extremely important to the vicar - he derives a great deal of pride and satisfaction in his wife and children. However, this love of family also serves to blind him to reality. He praises their excellent temperaments, and overlooks their flaws and foibles. Further, he lapses into a gentle hypocrisy because of his pride in them. Though he often outwardly argues that people should accept their station in life, the hopes of his daughters infect him, leaving him blind to the machinations of Squire Thornhill. The family thus operates as an insulated organism in the novel, and one that does not necessarily prove the most successful way of navigating the world. This is not to say that Goldsmith does not find value in the family; rather, he seems to counsel the reader that one must uphold one's individuality and discernment, and not fall prey to the cloistered ignorance that often comes from remaining too close to one's family.

### **Social Class**

In many ways, social class is one of the most pernicious forces in the novel. Despite the vicar's outward support of poverty, the Primrose family cannot accept having lost its upper-middle class status. Because they continue to see the world in terms of social class, they prove blind to Squire Thornhill's machinations, and question good people like Mr. Burchell

and the Flamborough girls. Even as their attempts to act above their station embarrass them, the Primrose family continues to push for a certain level of appearance.

Goldsmith is clearly mocking their pretensions, and yet his views on class are a bit more nuanced than immediately apparent. While the squire is the grossest manifestation of the upper class, Sir William proves a benevolent and noble man. The sense is that money and title can corrupt, but also that they can be channeled in virtuous and altruistic ways. The Primrose family eventually does attain their desired social station after the vicar's fortune is restored and Sophia marries Sir William, but this success only comes after many trials that effectively curtail the family's pride and teach them the error of their pretensions.

### **Gender**

Gender proves an interesting theme because of how closely the novel adheres to the traditional gender norms of 18th century British society. The men make the decisions and hold the power; the vicar is the unequivocal patriarch who determines the conduct of his family members. His daughters are vain and romance-oriented, and are notable only for their nubility, marriageable status. Arabella is viewed in the same way, despite being more genteel and elegant. Only the vicar and his sons are allowed to enter the public sphere and engage in commercial transactions. By contrast, when Olivia leaves the family home to elope with the squire, she is considered utterly ruined and beyond redemption. Her virtue is her most salient characteristic, as it was with all young women during the time. The novel is a perfect encapsulation of the way gender was viewed in Goldsmith's era, which is interesting considering how wonderfully he challenges narrative conventions throughout the story.