

The Satiric Art of William Hogarth

William Hogarth started life at the bottom. He was the son of an impoverished Grub-street writer whose project for a Latin-speaking Coffee-House landed him in the Fleet prison for debtors. Hogarth consequently left school to serve a less than prestigious apprenticeship as a silver plate engraver. However being determined to escape poverty, he set up his own business engraving shop – cards and various ephemera. This soon moved him toward his true calling in satirical prints. He met, and married the daughter of Sir James Thornhill, the one native English painter to successfully compete with continental masters of the grand style. Hogarth himself turned his hand to painting in an attempt to break into the lucrative market for conversation pieces (a group portraits), and he later advanced his own claims as an artist with solid efforts in portraiture and history paintings.

But it is with his “Modern Moral Subjects”, or so he called them, that Hogarth made a respectable living and for which he is chiefly remembered. These “Pictur’d Morals” illustrate a tale by dramatizing a series of events that Hogarth would compose as a painting (much like “author’s do”, he later wrote) then sell the resulting prints by subscription.

Throughout his career, he was a tireless champion of English art, a dedicated if rebellious member of various art societies, and a sworn enemy to the shallow idolatry of Old Masters with their “dead Christ’s, holy families, Madonna’s and other dismal dark Subjects.” Outside the art world, Hogarth played an active part in London life as a chief proponent of the Engraver’s Copy right act of 1735, as a founding member in such institutions as the Foundling Hospital, the St. Martin’s Lane Academy, and the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks, and as an elected governor for the St. Bartholomew’s and Bethlehem Hospitals.

Even in this brief survey of Hogarth’s life, we should be able to note the obvious value of studying his work in our efforts to digest various aspects of 18th century literature and society. As a man, Hogarth rose through, moved among and recorded observations of almost every conceivable society then extant in London. If nothing else, Hogarth’s graphic art can bring tangibility to our sense of an historical background. More specifically as a satiric artist, on which I will focus, he exhibits interest, concerns,

models and techniques which are clearly relevant to the moral satire of Swift, Pope, Gay and Fielding.

Rather than offering a general survey, I would like to proceed by comparing three examples of Hogarth's work. This I hope will illustrate both some of the traditions he inherited and how his moral satire operates by using them.

Firstly there is the conversation piece, or group portrait, a form in which Hogarth received some acclaim given his talent for capturing likenesses. The problem of painting so many figures is naturally one of unity and, in this particular example, The Wollaston Family, Hogarth achieves a remarkable success by creating a social drama. Mr. Wollaston is uniting two separate groups by drawing the attention of one table to the Card-playing of another, the focus of this genial unity is Mr. Wollaston's gesturing hand and his acknowledged position as host.



The Wollaston Family (1730)

Compare this with one of Hogarth's efforts in History-Painting; this one, The Good Samaritan, he painted without fee for St. Bartholomew's Hospital (probably as much to prevent an Italian from doing the job than out of personal charity). Again the Healing Hand of the Good Samaritan is the focus of the work.



The Good Samaritan (1737)

I must digress for a moment to look at the significance of history paintings, for the continental tradition in this form stood as the model of achievement much as the classics did for any educated writer. History painting was held supreme among the visual arts because it brought to painting the prestige of history; a prestige derived from history's primary moral function. A traditional notion articulated by both Roman and Renaissance

authors, history found its only justification in its usefulness for instructing contemporary thought and action. Thus Machiavelli's *History of Florence* has very little to do with the history of Florence but a great deal to do with how Machiavelli thought his native city should be conducting itself. In this vein, continental painters in the 17th century, particularly those assembled by Louis XIV, sought to create powerful, and generally political, messages by handling great historical events in the grandest of manners. Le Brun, for example, fuses the historical Alexander the Great to the living Louis XIV thereby transferring the former's idealized glory onto the latter. Not surprisingly, English patrons were anxious not to be outdone and a long tradition of importing continental painters resulted, as with Van Dyke and Rubens.

The French, of course, could not allow so exalted an art form to go without rules and the foremost of these was unity and effect. The history painting was to contain one great action to which every component of the work, every gesture, expression and glance, corresponded. In theory, this made the positive moral of the action irresistible.

If we note Hogarth's treatment of the biblical story of the good Samaritan, we see that, yes, the focus of the painting is a positive action embodying the key virtue of charity. But on the dictum of absolute unity, Hogarth significantly dissents. In the background we see a Levite priest indulging in his role and ignoring the one crucial action. In this departure, Hogarth displays his basic view of humanity. The good act, however real, is isolated and ignored in a proud and greedy world. Just so in Gulliver's Travels, lone acts of charity by Japanese Ship Captain or Pedro de Mendez are buried under a sea of selfish greed. Hogarth's sense of reality will not permit him to indulge in unbounded optimism after the continental fashion.

Moving to the "Modern Moral Subjects" and the first plate in A Rake's Progress, we find that Hogarth completely inverts the positive unity of history painting and thus creates a new, ominous composition which depicts, as central, an evil and selfish act which is in turn ignored and exploited by other greedy individuals.

To begin with, we notice Tom Rakewell's hand. Whereas the hands of Mr. Wollaston and the Good Samaritan are out stretched in kindness and generosity, Rakewell's hand is making a gesture of betrayal. He is offering a handful of his newly inherited money to placate the mother of Sarah Young, a working class girl whom Tom

has seduced and impregnated under the promise of marriage (note the ring in Sarah's hand and the love letters in her mother's apron). Sarah Young is the Christian model of humility, industry, charity and genuine love, the kind of which grows more popular as the 18th century progresses. This act of betrayal symbolically launches the young Rake on a course of debauchery which predictably leads to destruction.



The Rake's Progress: Plate 1

Surrounding this act of folly, Hogarth sets a number of figures, each absorbed in their own efforts to win money from the young spendthrift. The attorney, for one, steals gold while the Rake is otherwise occupied. Hogarth's art stresses the isolation of figures, their individuality and self-absorption, and as a result the maintenance of unity becomes a concern. His solution is to fill the background with instructive materials which reflect upon and explain the meaning of the central act.

Ronald Paulson, the authoritative last word on Hogarth's life, suggests that Hogarth uses enclosed spaces and sense of confinement to provide artistic unity and to illuminate the internal psychologies of major characters. Echoing the Lockean picture of the mind, a room, by its decoration, records the experience of its occupant and thereby defines that character. Once defined in this fashion, the characters are basically fixed. Hogarth does not mean to suggest an absolute determinism, for the symbolic presence of a figure of grace, like Sarah Young, points to the possibility of choice and an alternative to sin and destruction, even if this choice is never made.

So with a Hogarth print we must read the background to illuminate its full meaning. In the case before us, what is important about this room is that it is in a state of transition, from being the abode of a miserly father, to that of a spendthrift son. In its original state the room defined the father and thereby the environment in which the young rake was formed, or more correctly, malformed.

The poor state of the room, the spare furniture, the shoe freshly resoled with the cover of a Bible, a disused cooking spit and smoking jack, a fur cap, a save-all candle holder, and the closets and boxes jammed with either collected junk or financial documents, all speak of a barren life absorbed solely in the pursuit of money. Tom, like the starving cat, found no nourishment here. In contrast, the son, fresh from Oxford (where else), has ransacked the room to uncover all its riches and has hired an attorney to count his money, a tailor to outfit him in the latest fashion, and a drapier to hang the decorations for an ostentatious funeral. The state of the room displays the clash of psychological unities as the son rebels against the father's humble world and pursues the aristocratic life. The greed of money gives way to the greed of pride as Rakewell the miser gives way to Rackwell, the rake.

With this technique, Hogarth not only presents the past and present in the story, but forecasts the future as well. As his first act, the son is draping the room in funeral black both for his father's death and his own. The motto "Beware" hangs ominously over the heads of Sarah and her mother. This prophecy is fulfilled as Tom continues to spurn Sarah, pursues his every impulse, and sinks quickly into ruin and madness.

With the unity of rooms, Hogarth presents a psychology of self-absorption - a view widely shared by chief satiric authors of the time. Interestingly, his artistic

technique allowed for the mixture of reproach for sins with sympathy for causes. Alexander Pope (except when handling Dunces), Fielding and Johnson all exhibit this type of double-vision. Swift, though frequently acting on this view in life, could never mitigate the individual's absolute responsibility and his satire is thus remarkable in its lack of sympathy for folly.

Hogarth's "Modern Moral Subjects" turn continental history painting into an entirely English form, preferring realism to idealism, the common place to the classical, pessimism to optimism, cheap prints to grandiose tapestries, and harsh Puritan judgments to the Catholic notion of divine absolution.

It was with this in mind that Henry Fielding described Hogarth as a "comic History-Painter" just as he describes Joseph Andrews as a "Comic Epic in Prose."

To conclude I would like to note that Hogarth, Presbyterian by birth, echoes with his work the Puritan impetus to moralize by example. Thus with all his works we can, as he himself does with his series Industry and Idleness, suggest morals for the stories.

For A Rake's Progress, we might take one from the "Interpreter's house" in The Pilgrims Progress:

"Let this man's misery be remembered by thee, and be an everlasting caution to thee."

Or from Dr. Hoadly's commentary on A Rake's Progress and its constant refrain

"O, Vanity of Age"

Or from St. Paul:

"Greed for gain is the root of all evil."

Or perhaps from Newton's laws of motion, the second of which seems the most apt of all:

"For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction."