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The Life of Mr Jonathan Wild the Great

Henry Fielding · *1743 · original English text*

As it is necessary that all great and surprising events should be produced by great and eminent men, so the lives of such may be styled the quintessence of history. Fielding's irony is already at work: the "great" man of this book is a thief-taker and a villain. The hosted text is the original English, Project Gutenberg #5256, complete. Quote Book I, not the modern introduction about the historical Jonathan Wild.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is Fielding doing when he calls a notorious criminal "great," and how should a school read a satire that uses the language of greatness for a life of fraud and betrayal?

"As it is necessary that all great and surprising events, the designs of which are laid, conducted, and brought to perfection by the utmost force of human invention and art, should be produced by great and eminent men, so the lives of such may be justly and properly styled the quintessence of history."

Book I, Chapter One

The book is a satire of "greatness" understood as power without virtue. Jonathan Wild, in Fielding's telling, is an informer and a receiver, a manager of thieves, a man who climbs by betrayal. The historical Wild is sketched in a modern introduction at the head of this file; quote Fielding's Book I, not that introduction, as the opening. Teach the irony plainly, for older students (11–12). This is not a crime manual and not a celebration of the gallows.

KEY CHARACTERS

Jonathan Wild
The "great" man of the title, whose climb is a satire of power without virtue

The narrator
The ironic biographer who uses the language of greatness in order to unmask it

THE QUINTESSENCE OF HISTORY

> *"As it is necessary that all great and surprising events, the designs of which are laid, conducted, and brought to perfection by the utmost force of human invention and art, should be produced by great and eminent men, so the lives of such may be justly and properly styled the quintessence of history."*
>
> Book I, Chapter One

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01

The Wholesome Uses of Great Men

BOOK I, CHAPTER ONE

The chapter heading, in the old spelling, promises the wholesome uses drawn from recording the achievements of those wonderful productions of nature called great men. The first sentence sounds like praise. It is not simple praise.

- The heading uses "SHEWING" and "GREAT MEN" as printed; keep the old spelling
- The first sentence is exact, including "the quintessence of history"
- Fielding says we may learn, more effectually than by precept, what we are eagerly to imitate or carefully to avoid
- A short modern introduction about the historical Wild (born about 1682, executed at Tyburn in 1725) stands first in this file; do not quote it as Chapter One

> *"As it is necessary that all great and surprising events, the designs of which are laid, conducted, and brought to perfection by the utmost force of human invention and art, should be produced by great and eminent men, so the lives of such may be justly and properly styled the quintessence of history."*
>
> Book I, Chapter One

02

A Pedigree of "Greatness"

THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF BOOK I

Mr. Jonathan Wild, or Wyld (for he did not always agree in one method of spelling his name), is given a mock descent from Wolfstan Wild, who came over with Hengist. The joke is already a judgment.

- Keep "Wild, or Wyld" and "Wolfstan Wild" as printed
- The early life is a satire of biography's pomp, applied to a villain
- Teach the irony; do not read the pedigree as straight history
- For older students (11–12)

03

The Art of Betrayal

THE MIDDLE OF THE BOOK

Wild's "greatness" is the management of other men's crimes, the taking of informer's wages, and the betrayal of companions. The book is unsparing, and it is comic in a hard key.

- Do not put a catalogue of crimes on the map. Name the method: he rises by using other people
- Heartfree, if you meet him here, is a measure of the good Wild is not
- The satire of public "great men" is part of the point; handle that political edge with care, as an argument, not as a rant of our own
- This is not a book that asks a student to admire the thief-taker

04

The End of Greatness

THE CLOSE

The gallows is the ordinary end of this kind of greatness. Teach it as the satire's last word, with gravity, not as a joke about hanging only.

- Do not invent a last-minute repentance the book does not give, and do not invent a triumph
- The historical Wild's Tyburn is mentioned in the file's introduction; the novel has its own close; keep them distinct if you cite both
- The moral is Fielding's irony: greatness without virtue is not greatness
- For older students; a hard comic tale

05

The Hosted File

PG #5256

The hosted text is complete, original English, 1743. Quote Book I, not the modern introduction, as the opening.

- Keep "SHEWING," "Wyld," and the older diction
- It may be read with Amelia and the earlier comic novels as Fielding's range: here the comic epic is turned upon a villain
- For older students (11–12)
- The book is a satire, not a true-crime life, even though a real Jonathan Wild existed

False Greatness · A Satire of Power · Betrayal · Virtue and Vice · A Mock Biography · The End of a Climb

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. Fielding's Book I begins: "As it is necessary that all great and surprising events... should be produced by great and eminent men, so the lives of such may be justly and properly styled the quintessence of history." A modern introduction about the historical Wild stands first; do not quote it as Chapter One.
2. The book is a satire of "greatness" without virtue. Teach the irony plainly, for older students (11–12). It is not a crime manual and not a celebration of the gallows.
3. Keep the old spelling: "SHEWING," and "Wild, or Wyld."
4. The historical Jonathan Wild (born about 1682, executed at Tyburn in 1725) is sketched in the introduction. The novel is a satire, not a straight life. Keep the two distinct.
5. The hosted text is complete, original English, 1743, PG #5256.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #5256, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/fielding-jonathan-wild/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.