



E-ISSN: 2706-8927
P-ISSN: 2706-8919
IJAAS 2019; 1(1): 239-240
Received: 10-06-2019
Accepted: 15-07-2019

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Picaresque Elements in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2019.v1.i1a.792>

Abstract

Though *Tom Jones* has been abundantly eulogized for its architectonic structure, cohesive form and the organic and compact plot construction by critics like Coleridge, Edwin Muir and Dorothy Van Ghent and several others, yet it is an undeniable fact that it is written after the manner of the picaresque novel and unmistakably possesses some of its important characteristics. No doubt, its hero is not a rogue; but it, like a true picaresque novel, makes the hero undertake a journey frequently, pass through a succession of scenes and situations, involve in a number of adventures on the roads and inside inns, meet persons of different types and tempers, and in this way give a realistic picture of society.

Keywords: Picaresque, Elements, Henry, Fielding

Introduction

The picaresque novel originated in Spain with the publication of *Lazarillo de Tormes* in 1554. This was followed by a number of novels including *Don Quixote* (1605) in Spain. The picaresque novel differed from the romances of chivalry in Spain in that while the hero of the romances of chivalry was an ideal knight, the hero in a picaresque novel was a rogue. From Spain the vogue of the picaresque novel spread to England through translations or such novels as *Lazarillo de Tormes*. The picaresque novel was naturalized in England with *Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), *Moll Flanders* (1722), *Jonathan Wild* (1725), *Peregrine Pickle* (1751), *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753), and *Roderick Random* (1798).

In a picaresque novel, the incidents in a series are held together by the presence of a hero who is himself a vagabond and who undertakes a journey. This may be a journey in both space and time. As against the organic structure, the picaresque novel has an episodic structure. The incidents in the picaresque novel do not always have the cause and effect sequence. The adventures of the hero in different social settings in different places provide a realistic picture of different strata and sections of society.

The concept of the *picaro* underwent some modification by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The *picaro* no longer remained an outcast. He began to share the standard and values of the ruling bourgeois also. Certain picaresque elements existed in the life and personality of Henry Fielding and in the society in which he lived. The age of Fielding was a pre-rail-road age in which the journeys on horseback through the countryside confronted the travellers with adventures in different sections of society. London had an environment which the writer of a picaresque novel could draw upon. It had a large number of rogues, robbers, sexual adventures and orgies of drinking. As about Fielding's personality, he had inherited a picaresque strain from his father, Colonel Fielding, who had a wild ancestry. As a result of litigation between his maternal grandmother and his father over his (Fielding's) deceased mother's estate, Fielding had the experience of adventures during his childhood itself. For fear of being kidnapped by his father, he ran away from the school to his grandmother's house in Salisbury. Fielding's youth was full of sexual adventures. In 1725, he tried to kidnap an eighteen-year-old girl Sarah Andrew. He was a high spirited youth, strikingly handsome. A number of women had been charmed by Fielding's ready wit and good looks. He himself fell in love with Charlotte Cradock in 1730, eloped with her and married her in 1734. According to Macallister, his life was guilt-ridden. He lived like a rake. He established sexual relations with his maid servant and married her six months after she had become pregnant. His life as a barrister would have provided him opportunities for presenting before the court, the cases of rogues involving adventures and misadventures. While the picaresque strain in his blood accounts for the picaresque elements in his novels, the sober Gould strain is responsible for the non-picaresque – in fact, even anti-picaresque, element in his novels – an element which provides a beautiful contrast to the picaresque element.

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The story of *Tom Jones* follows the pattern of the picaresque novel. *Tom Jones*, the hero of the novel, is a foundling, mysteriously discovered one night in the bed of the wealthy, virtuous and benevolent Mr. Allworthy. The kind squire brings him up and educates him. But Tom incurs the wrath of his benefactor, with the result he is turned out of his house. Now begins the travels of *Tom Jones*. Accompanied by a schoolmaster, Partridge, he sets out for London. On the way he meets with a number of adventures, some of which are of amorous nature. He goes from place to place stopping at numerous inns on the way. He joins the army as a volunteer but being seriously wounded in a fray, cannot accompany the soldier with whom he wants to go. He meets several strange persons, one of whom is The Man of the Hill, who wilfully leads a lonely life. He falls among gypsies in whose camp he spends a night. Finally, he reaches London. But his adventures do not come to an end there. He meets Lady Bellaston, a lustful woman who for sometime support him in London. Misfortune, however, persistently dogs his heels and he is imprisoned in London for injuring Fitzpatrick fatally. But the later recovers from the injury, Jones is released from prison. He goes straight to Allworthy and is reconciled to him. The latter accepts him as his nephew, and so Tom is soon married to his beloved Sophia Western. In this way, the story is a long string of adventures in different scenes and situations, and is out and out picaresque in its nature and form.

The picaresque form in *Tom Jones* is highlighted in several ways : (i) in the second part which is picaresque in form out and out, the narration of the ten days of journeys in the maximum number (291) of pages as compared with the narration of twenty years' period in part I in 222 pages and of thirty days' period in part II in 251 pages indicates that the action (i.e. journeys) in a unit of time forming part of these ten days is presented in far greater detail in far larger number of pages than the action of a unit of the time of the same length is depicted in either the first part or the second part with far longer stretches of time covered in fewer numbers of pages. (ii) when observed from the point of view of time and space and the amount of action contained therein, the compression and concentration of as many as three journeys of Tom, Sophia and Squire Western in 52 pages, in the same locale or area from Somersetshire to London and within the same period of ten days (as scenically shown in the novel) deepens the impression of the picaresque form upon the reader. (iii) The central placement of the picaresque form in part II between parts I and III brings the picaresque form into relief. (iv) The picaresque form is brought into relief not merely in Tom's journey in space and time but also in his vertical journey from lower status to higher status in society and from lower society to higher society. (v) The picaresque form contributes to the imitation and revelation of a wide range of life including (a) marriage, (b) loose morals, (c) connubial infidelity (d) theatre and masquerades (e) the conditions of travel, and (f) vanity and affectation of the upper classes.

The picaresque element has its aesthetic effects. It contributes to delight – to various emotive elements and the beautiful mosaic of contrasts. The adventures of the hero during the journey involve either fighting or sex, the former creating tension and the latter contributing to thrill and comic element. The picaresque form introduces a linear episodic shape into the plot of *Tom Jones* which is otherwise organic.

In characterization the picaresque element creates a variety of impressions. The hero *Tom Jones* leaves upon us two impressions --- (1) the impression of a rogue as conceived in the pre-eighteenth century picaresque novel and (2) the impression of a respectable bourgeois as conceived in the eighteenth century picaresque novel. Characters with various degrees of roguery and respectability range on both sides of Tom. This is how a mosaic of contrasts – the contrasts of both kind and degree – is created in characterization in the novel as a whole.

Thus, like a genuine picaresque novel, *Tom Jones* offers a criticism of the age whose picture it presents; it gives a vivid, satirical portrayal of the corrupt society of the eighteenth century England. *Tom Jones* is a good man, and yet he suffers and falls a victim to deceit and treachery, cruelty and revenge. Again, like a great picaresque narrative, it has innate moral purpose. As a matter of fact, its purpose is quite wide and universal: it ridicules folly and frivolity, vice and weakness of mankind in general with a view to improving the social life as a whole.

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