

Tom jones and the wisdom of discernment



Tom Jones is a comedic novel by Henry Fielding that relays moral messages in an entertaining format, often demonstrating the downfalls of making assumptions, and of not questioning someone else's motives in certain situations. Tom himself repeatedly is lied to and lied about, and at the novel's beginning, and in Tom's most youthful state, he often fell for these deceptions. Considering the novel a bildungsroman, Tom goes through the growing process of being deceived to mature into a wiser character who has a better understanding about misconceptions and how humans deceive to get ahead. Though Tom sometimes must learn these lessons the hard way, he ultimately ends the novel having developed wisdom and discernment that other characters always seem to lack. Through Tom's discernment skills, Fielding encourages readers to develop their own critical thinking as not to fall prey to the schemes and misjudgments of other man.

Many adults that Tom encounters have also failed to develop skills in correctly judging another man's motives, Benjamin Partridge included. Partridge is full of misconceptions, starting with the idea that Tom Jones is Squire Allworthy's son. He furthers his error in believing that Tom ran away from Squire Allworthy. According to the text, " He concluded, therefore, that the whole was a fiction, and that Jones, of whom he had often from his correspondents heard the wildest character, had in reality run away from his father" (370). Not only does Partridge wrongly assume that Tom ran away from home, but he further spins the yarn in his favor, concluding that by sending him back home to his incorrectly presumed " father," then he would find himself back in the good graces of Allworthy. According to the narrator, " If he could by any means therefore persuade the young gentleman to

return home, he doubted not but that he should again be received into the favour of Allworthy, and well rewarded for his pains; nay, and should be again restored to his native country” (410). Partridge constructs this scheme and fictionalized reward based on a false understanding of the situation. The reader is cued in to the idea that this person may not entirely have things figured out, as the scene is introduced with Partridge being “ one of the most superstitious of men” (409) and the reader is told he is a believer in “ omens.” The ironic tone clues the reader in; imparting a lesson in discernment to the reader and to Tom simultaneously. Fielding uses irony here to allow the reader themselves to become more discerning of situations, to be smarter than Partridge while being less naive than Allworthy.

Like Partridge, Allworthy misjudges characters in the novel and does not think to be suspicious of a person’s motives. This is because he is so altruistic and blameless that he never thinks of how he may be being deceived. Fielding uses these foils of one another in hopes that both the reader’s and Tom’s skills of discernment will develop to the point that they fall somewhere in between the two extremes. In this way, they will not be taken advantage of or make false assumptions of others, they will critically think through scenarios and come out ahead. According to the narrator, “ As for Jones, he was well satisfied with the truth of what the other had asserted, and believed that Partridge had no other inducements but love to him.” Unfortunately for Tom, not only does Partridge have ill intentions towards him, but several characters throughout the novel manage to lie to and about Tom, and some deceive Tom regarding his class and lineage. In many ways,

the novel is Tom's journey from naivety to learning to question others and detect deceit, as he fails to do with Partridge in the above passage.

The narrator goes on to describe Jones as someone who possesses “ a blamable want of caution and diffidence in the veracity of others” (410), which does imply that Tom has trouble with believing people with false intentions, as is the case with Partridge in the above passage. Of the characteristics that allow people to read someone else, the narrator explains, further in the passage, “ To say the truth, there are but two ways by which men become possessed of this excellent quality. The one is from long experience, and the other is from nature; which last, I presume, is often meant by genius...” (410), This moment is an interjection from the narrator, who presumes that a man is either born with this skill in discernment, making them a rare genius, or they learn the hard way, by falling victim to dishonest persons. The narrator explains, “ a man who hath been imposed on by ever so many, may still hope to find others more honest; whereas he who receives certain necessary admonitions from within, that this is impossible, must have very little understanding indeed, if he ever renders himself liable to be once deceived” (410). Thus we have a lesson from Fielding, as the old saying goes, ‘ fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, shame on you.’ Fielding does not deny that dishonest people exist or that they will ever cease to exist, but he does encourage readers, through Tom's journey, to become more wary, to be less easy to deceive and manipulate. To fall prey multiple times is one's own fault, because they are not learning from their experiences or gaining discernment skills.

As far as Tom Jones is concerned, Fielding has not given him the gift of this “genius,” which is clear to the reader at this point, since he is repeatedly falling prey to deception. The narrator states, “As Jones had not this gift from nature, he was too young to have gained it by experience; for at the diffident wisdom which is to be acquired this way, we seldom arrive till very late in life; which is perhaps the reason why some old men are apt to despise the understandings of all those who are a little younger than themselves” (411). The last line may have been directed to both Squire Allworthy and Benjamin Partridge, both of whom have failed to learn necessarily skills of discernment or understanding their fellow man. Whereas these two men are older than Tom and still have not learned the aforementioned lessons, there is still hope for Tom. By the end of the novel, Tom has learned from the experience of being deceived, and by the novel’s conclusion, he has become wiser in the motivations of man. His development of the skill of understanding others leads his virtues of discernment and wisdom to surpass the two older men mentioned in the passage, Partridge and Allworthy. Tom being the transformative character, the reader is therefore encouraged to model his behavior in their own lives.