

# Tom jones as a picaresque novel essay sample

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Although Fielding called his novel a 'comic – epic in prose', the epithet of 'picaresque' would be equally justified. This, of course, does not contradict Fielding's own claim, for the picaresque is in many ways related to comic epic, the picaresque novel being epic in scope and comic in nature.

Generally speaking, the picaresque novel as derived from the Spanish word for 'rogue', *picaro*, is concerned with the life story of a clever and musing adventures who proceeds by tricks and roguery through a series of adventures.

The picaresque fiction which had its origin in Greek and Latin word literature as in the case of Odysseus, the hero Homer's *Odyssey* who was driven around the known world by the wrath of the god Poseidon just as Tom is driven about England by his fate. Fielding's great master was the Spanish writer Cervantes. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* had appeared almost century earlier, and another novel in the same picaresque tradition, *The Adventures of Gil Blas of Santillane* by Alain Lesage had appeared about a decade before Fielding's *Tom Jones*. A picaresque novel has in addition to a roguish hero, long journeys an episodic structure, and realistic lowlife descriptions.

The fact is Tom himself is a picaresque hero. From the view points of the critics he is the epitome of 'unheros'. Brought up as a foundling, he indulges in activities which more often than not fall a hair – breadth sort of actual criminality. He is notorious for beating up his mates though this justifiable on the ground of his innate nature. He is one who trespasses into the territory of Square Western in the pursuit of a prey.

His adventurous nature also reveals itself in his breaking his arm while trying to prevent Sophia's accident on a horse. But his voracious sexual appetite would certainly entitle him to the rank of a picaresque hero. Even while being enamored of Sophia, and in spite of her reciprocating his love, Tom is guilty of indulging sexually with the game keeper's daughter Molly. His subsequent escapade with Mrs. Waters only corroborates his knavish nature.

It is significant that ever barring Tom Jones himself, his confident little Benjamin alias Partridge is a highly amusing character that parallels Sancho Panza in the picaresque Don Quixote. Although Fielding does not state explicitly in Tom Jones as he does in Joseph Andrews that it is written with the Spanish master's great example in mind it is impossible for the reader to be unconscious of the technical and spiritual relation between the two novels. Little Benjamin is the counterpart of the Don's squire. Many of their characteristics are one and the same : both are credulous and gallus in the extremes, both follow their masters in hope of gain , both are ' homespun', both frequently make penetrating comments on the behavior both of their masters and society at large.

Edwin Muir points out that in any case a tale centered on a hero had to be kept going, and at the same time, a number of characters had to be given an excuse or appearing. Characters such as Allworthy, the Squire, Tom himself, partridge, Jenny Jones, Fitzpatrick and Mrs. Waters keep appearing and reappearing throughout like novel. Partridge reappears as little Benjamin and Mrs. Jones as Mrs. Waters.

Journey and variety of incidents is the staple of the picaresque. The author repeatedly reminds the readers of the parallel journeys of Tom and Sophia of bringing them agonizingly close to a meeting and then separating them again. One of the main themes of the novel is flight and pursuit and twelve of the 18 books in Tom Jones are concerned with this pursuit. If it is Sophia who initially pursues Tom Jones, later it is Tom who pursues Sophia.

Mr. Western on his part is also pursuing Sophia. The road to London is lettered, as in Thomas Nash's picaresque novel *The unfortunate Traveler*, with experiences and incidents of the most varied kinds. Tom joins a band of soldiers, has a fight with Ensign Northerton, rescues Mrs. Waters, makes love to her, is woken up by Fitzpatrick at the middle of the night, is amorously pursued by Mrs. Bellaston, is convicted and sentenced to death on the charge of man slaughter, and so on. Rightly has the picaresque novel been called the comedy of manners.

The picaresque novel is essentially an episodic novel, the novel brings a series of heroic adventures which are connected only by the fact that the events happen to the same person. Obviously this is an apt description of Tom's journey to London – he moves from the band of soldiers to Hazard Hill to Upton Inn, to the gypsies to London with one incident having little or no casual relationship to the next. It is interesting to note that several characters are at best only tangentially related to Tom's story – Harriet Fitzpatrick, the Millers, and the Nightingale. Some scenes like Partridge at the theatre are included for the sheer delightfulness of their humour. Other

like lady Hunt's proposal and the man on the hill can only be referred to as being episodic digressions.

The picaresque novel is not purely a novel of adventures. It has an innate moral or satirical purpose. Also the picaresque novel is synonymous with low comedy at that. Tom Jones is no exception. Certain characters like Square, Thwackum, Squire western and even Tom Jones himself are the source of great humour. While Square and Thwackum reveal themselves as charlatans masquerading as philosophers, the hollowing figure of Squire Western certainly belongs to stage comedy. They are also epitome of hypocrisy and dishonesty. Partridge the immutable Sancho Panza blundering on the most crucial issues of Tom's life, is likewise a farcical character.

Tom Jones has several traits of the picaresque tradition, yet unlike the picaresque novel, tom Jones has a coherent, well-knit and well planned plot.