
UNIT 3 **IMPORTANT THEMATIC AREAS IN *TOM JONES***

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3.0 **OBJECTIVES**

In this unit, I shall acquaint you with the complex nature of *Tom Jones*. Yes, we should first appreciate the way an author has represented what can be called the action of the novel – the way the author has allowed freedom to various meanings or significances so that they emerge in the novel on their respective strengths. I prefer to call these significances “thematic areas.” There are many important themes in *Tom Jones*, such as religious, ethical and moral. You can further expand the scope of the discussion and bring socio-historical developments within its ambit. I say this because Fielding is more than a novelist or a literary writer – he is a social commentator and historical analyst. This is clear not merely from the prefatory chapters he has added to each book in the novel but also the manner in which he has remarked about the behaviour of characters in specific situations. I plan here to focus more upon the behaviour of characters and the situations in which they find themselves.

3.1 **INTRODUCTION**

In the previous unit, we saw the particular equation of benefactor-beneficiary, teacher-pupil or at best father-son between Mr. Allworthy and Tom. As we noted, Mr. Allworthy came across as a repository of wisdom and Tom as an eager though inconsistent learner of it. We also saw that there always remained a great distance between the two at the level of communication. How about Tom vis-a-vis other characters? I took up this question in the context of Tom's relationship with Squire Western, the former an innocent, fun-loving vivacious youth of dubious birth and the latter a member of the landed gentry, the high and mighty section of society in eighteenth century England. Traditionally, this section had its own view of alliances. We begin this unit with a consideration of women characters in the novel.

3.2 VARIETIES OF FEMALE REPRESENTATION—FROM LOW TO HIGH STRATA

We are struck by a great variety of women characters in the novel. It is indeed surprising how Fielding assigns such clear and distinctive traits to each one of them. He must have had a large fund of social experience to draw upon and a keen eye to set apart one type of female existence from another. I say this because unlike men, who have a share in the power-structure at different levels in the world of the novel, women have to be largely restricted to their sexuality.

3.2.1 Bridget as an Intelligent User of Skills

As noted above, Bridget Allworthy, in spite of her superior social status, is 'wooded' (a mild form of being sexually approached) by a number of people at different points of time. She is not good-looking. Still, marriage with her can be planned by aspirants such as Captain Blifil, and the senior Blifil. Square and Thwackum, too, consistently try to win favour with her. What is clear is that these four have always hoped to attain money or power through sexually exploiting, and more pertinently, subjugating her. Bridget knows it quite well and thinks of using it to further her own ends — a quite 'legitimate' way in the circumstances to use her position as a woman. In Fielding's view, "So discreet was she in her conduct, that her prudence was much on the guard, as if she had had all the snares to apprehend which were laid for her whole sex" (54). She cleverly manipulates the philosopher and the clergyman and reduces the two to the level of abject seekers of sexual favours. We should also not forget that it is Bridget who is the first woman in the novel to violate the code of matrimonial sanctity, by which her great brother swears so much, and gives birth to a bastard who, as we see, raises her role of committing ever-new violations of the sexual-matrimonial code to a different level altogether. And ironically, the dead Bridget has had her way in the end in so many different senses. She is able to do so largely because social privilege protected her from crude encroachment by any of the males. Also, she is less gullible because of superior upbringing and education than other women in the novel. Be that as it may, we are presented through her with an attitude of counter-violation of the all-suppressing patriarchal code by a woman. This planned act of negation by her can be appreciated 'comically' and 'heroically.'

3.2.2 Molly Seagrim and Mrs. Waters

Molly Seagrim attracts the reader's attention more compellingly as a symbol of aggressive female sexuality. Fielding seems to be deriving a great deal of fun from her depiction, but the laughter of 'comedy' is seldom at her cost. Instead, he clearly upholds Molly as a powerful symbol of human vigour and raw sexual power. Molly has none of the prudish, hypocritical sense of chastity of which Fielding accused the heroines of Richardson's novels. In fact, Fielding visualises Molly in excessive animalistic terms. It occurs to us later that this wild, unrestrained, almost overflowing sexuality becomes in the novel a sharp comment on Lady Bellaston's promiscuous behaviour. We see Lady Bellaston planning her affairs cynically with different men on the strength of skills and home-work. In the latter's case, sexuality changes into a sick routinised behaviour. Tom himself loses much of his dynamism and gusto as he interacts with her. Her morally debilitating influence upon Tom is comprehended quite well by Sophia herself. This is reflected in her certain rejection of Tom till things reveal themselves in a radically different light at the end.

Mrs. Waters offers yet another variety of female behaviour. She has a long history of sexual and social harassment. The two harassments can't in fact be separated. But we discern in her a distorted sense of values regarding relationships. Perhaps, her affair with Captain Waters, a military officer with no rootedness in settled existence, has left an indelible mark upon her — a mark of easy utilitarian relationship. Any new male can catch Mrs. Water's fancy and a series of such happenings may eventually land her in a hopelessly shocking situation.

On the surface, we may note a few similarities between Mrs. Waters and Tom in their attitude to sexual morality. But a close look would reveal that insofar as the relationship between the two is concerned, Tom is an object of seduction, to which he undoubtedly succumbs rather easily, while Mrs. Waters is the seducer. More, we have seen Tom behaving innocently in all situations unlike Mrs. Waters who can't be called innocent. Fielding's purpose seems to be to confront the reader with the disastrously unsettling idea of incest at a later stage. In fact, we do not become entirely free from the horror of Tom having possibly gone to bed with his own mother. In this case, chance only helps. But chance or no chance, the situation is such, with Tom's recklessness and lack of serious perspective and Mrs. Waters's worse than amoral ways (we have to distinguish between the two), that the protagonist of the novel might as well have been his mother's partner in sex. Still more than chance, it is the omnipotent narrator who rejects the option and decides to make the novel an epic and, therefore, pull Tom out of the possibility of incest. If the author's decision were to make the work a tragedy, the novel would be a repetition of *Oedipus*. But that is not the genre to which *Tom Jones* belongs in its basic spirit and attitude. However, Mrs. Waters helps us see the enormity of unscrupulous sexuality — it becomes crude and excessive in her case with the passage of time. In this way, the purpose behind the introduction of Mrs. Waters in the novel is not merely to contribute to the complexity of the plot but to offer another variant of female behaviour. With its help, we can judge the inanity of Mrs. Fitzwater, whose sob-story appears episodic and narrow in scope as well as the cynical disregard for ethics and scruples behind Lady Bellaston's well-orchestrated operations.

3.2.3 Lady Bellaston's Degradation and Vacuity (?)

Fielding considers Lady Bellaston in strictly moral terms and finds her deficient in 'nature' as well as 'education.' She is presented as actively participating in masquerades where the men and women of the upper stratum of society entertain themselves. The scene is typically eighteenth century and reflects a growing amount of laxity in morals among people in higher London circles. When Tom, innocent as he is, is exposed to this atmosphere, he does not see the moral degradation and vacuity underlying it. On her part, Lady Bellaston is struck by the looks of Tom and plans to keep him as her lover. A cool player of games in fashionable London, Lady Bellaston employs clever stratagems to keep Tom away from Sophia and uses her social standing as well as money to ensure that he remains firmly in her grip.

However, there is one aspect of her personality in which this projection of Lady Bellaston is questioned in the novel. Here, I refer to Lady Bellaston's inherent fears as an insecure woman in the presence of Sophia's sweet and dignified ways. Lady Bellaston is highly individualistic, self-centred and mean. We hardly see any idealism or moral sense left in her. On the other hand, Sophia is driven by a superior sense of love. We perceive an intense urge in her to self-question. Sophia is torn apart between her lover and filial duty. These things have all along remained alien to Lady Bellaston. In this clash of values, Lady Bellaston is bound to lose. The presence of a superior sensibility has made her still more jealous of a woman totally reassured of winning Tom's love. The sense of jealousy in Lady Bellaston points towards that whole boredom of the stagnant life (the particular social formation) into which the upper stratum of the English society has

fallen and which denies its women the pleasures of being honestly and loyally related to the members of the opposite sex. If we look back from the scenes of London life to the way people went about their business in Somersetshire, we realise that the high and mighty as well as the poor and helpless remained firmly rooted in a life of relative stability and honesty there. On the other hand, the London atmosphere is too cynical and cold to allow simple pleasures of natural give and take. Lady Bellaston becomes acutely aware of the growing loneliness and uncertainty in her existence as a woman. This is specifically caused by her watching Tom as totally absorbed in the thought of joining with his beloved Sophia. The only way Lady Bellaston can assert herself in the situation is to thwart the efforts of the two lovers to join each other.

Where does the novel come to an end — in Book seventeenth or eighteenth? It is again a difficult question to answer. Fielding seems to be keeping the two options open and inviting the reader to make his/her own choice. Looking at the novel from a close realistic angle (words such as convincing, acceptable and logical come to mind in association with 'realistic'), we feel that Tom has become too helpless and weak (he cannot fight the whole structure single-handed) to even wriggle out of the situation in the given circumstances. The 'logic' of events in the novel strongly suggests that Tom is destined to fail, which in his specific case means losing Sophia as well as all connections with Mr. Allworthy. This points towards the likely success of Blifil's sinister plans, who operates in the novel in the manner of Fate, out to systematically destroy Tom's prospects of fulfilment at the end of his journey.

The narrator says as much in the seventeenth book and calls Tom's situation desperate. But this kind of 'realism' does not seem to go well with the *spirit* of the novel. Instead, Fielding sets much store by the 'comic approach' which stresses the vital significance of human intervention moved by the urge to change. It is this urge and attitude which inspires the narrator to continue into the eighteenth book and tell the reader confidently that Tom and Sophia were not born to fail.

3.3 FIELDING'S NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

3.3.1 Role of the Narrator

I shall discuss at length the question of narration in a separate unit. This is essential since the importance of this fictional device is immense. However, a brief comment is necessary here.

I see a kind of omnipotence in the narrator of *Tom Jones*. He can do whatever he wants to. He can, for instance, give a specific direction to the course of events and influence decisions of characters. More, he can defend his actions with the force of argument. This serves a useful purpose in the novel and compels us to think about the identity of the protagonist. Normally, the author is himself the narrator. However, we come across many authorial comments that are to be accepted by the reader as such and those others where the author talks tongue-in-cheek. The problem is further compounded when we see the narrator at work not in the sense that he narrates a saga but that he creates a saga after his own liking and judgement, and narrates it in the very process of creating it. The author himself combines this kind of role in *Tom Jones*. Still, as the action unfolds, we see a distancing between the narrator and author as well as the creator and author. This has happened because the 'history' called *Tom Jones* has been conceived in the broadest possible comic mould — a serious analyst and commentator wearing a comic mask has taken upon himself to 'create' a 'history' according to the law of probability and convenience. Nay, this serious-comic voice does not accept any discipline for itself and,

in fact, rides rough shod on territories of morality, religion, ethics, love, beauty, carnal pleasures, meannesses, etc.

Those who see the narrator as the author himself, would face the difficulty of proving that the whole unfolded 'drama' in the novel can be no more than an extension of Fielding's consciousness – that the unifying element in the novel is the author's understanding. This goes against the clash of perspectives in the novel with Fielding not willing, or being able, to provide coherence to a number of discordant voices. Tell me who is right or wrong – Mrs. Waters, Allworthy, Bridget, Tom? What I think is that the totality of the novel constitutes a dramatic interplay between various parts and these parts have an existence independent of the author's consciousness. Yes, in the absolute sense, the serious-comic narrator has been conceived and created by the author but once that has taken place, the narrator has begun influencing and determining the course of happenings unrestrained by the author. If we do not accept the concrete existence of the narrator/narrators in *Tom Jones*, we would be hard put to comprehend those points in the novel's progress where things stop 'moving.' We notice that wherever this happens, the narrator butts into not merely explaining many things, but invents arguments, situations, chance happenings, and even total reversals of fortune. The narrator never fights shy of taking the blame for such interventions and bravely moves on to tell unbelievable things. And the joke is practised invariably under the pretext of 'history.' I feel that the serious analyst and commentator has withdrawn himself many a time from behind the mask or, to put it differently, allowed the mask to be peculiarly shaped by the comic intention. Most of the voices, then, are masks. In either case, Fielding the author seems to watch helplessly the movement of the action.

3.3.2 Places as Segments of Life : the Country, the Road, the City

An important thematic aspect of the novel is the division of life in segments. These particular representations bear the stamp of the place to which they belong. Together, these concrete segments bring to life the whole diversity as well as interrelatedness of eighteenth century English life. As a faithful observer of contemporary situations, Fielding presents the true picture of his surroundings, doing it with the intensity and passion of a creator of history.

There are three distinct places in the novel — Somersetshire, the road (paths, towns and villages spread over the distance between Somersetshire and London), and the city of London. As far as Tom is concerned, these three represent distinct phases in his development. For instance, Somersetshire stands for a dull and stagnated existence. In spite of the two learned men, Square and Thwackum (who interpret situations specifically), the place has been managed and governed since a long time by narrow perception and belief. Magistrate Allworthy uses his intellectual might just to help people out of the errors they commit. Squire Western quarrels or socialises with neighbours on the basis of ordinary principles. The common people — men and women — fight it out in physical terms whenever a disagreement between them takes place. Others steal or snatch. If chance permits, they also cheat. Among the clever ones, Blifil mixes truth and lies to good effect so that he can outwit the best of men. But what we largely see is a pattern under which the movement is circular — you come back to the point from where you started. I draw your attention to Sophia's mother who married the wrong man. The daughter Sophia is also going to marry a wrong man (Blifil) under circumstances that are essentially similar. To think of another detail, Partridge, the supposed father of Tom, is constrained to leave the place and Jones is equally well forced to run away from it. This place also strongly suggests that movement and liberation lies elsewhere though Tom and Sophia who run away with this consciousness do not know where and how exactly they can attain deliverance. What is certain is that Somersetshire holds no hope.

The second place, the road, stresses Tom's need to move and explore. The road also gives Tom scope to reach another place where joining with his beloved may be possible. It holds our hope. On her part, Sophia becomes gradually aware of the value of marriage with a person gifted with natural goodness. This 'road' is rough and difficult, both literally and metaphorically. But it is here that the action is. There is no place better than the road to present the vibrant life of eighteenth century England. Fielding gives us a rare view of the people on the move. The reader sees the soldiers going to fight for causes that may determine the political nature of the country. But these soldiers, in their amorphous military formation behave as individuals with whom the common reader can easily identify, and whom our hero joins for a short period. In fact, Tom thinks for a while to become a soldier — the only difficulty with him is that a career in the military will take him away from his other 'destination,' Sophia. Fielding persists with the depiction of fights, journeys, escapes, etc. in the Man of the Hill episode also. We can imagine, too, the variety of social life that the England of the eighteenth century contained — the innkeepers, travellers in stage-coaches, doctors, priests, barbers, or the gypsies making merry in a secluded part away from the road. The 'road' as a phase of Tom's search and exploration, as mentioned above, is not smooth or straight and can give unexpected jolts to the traveller.

The city of London offers a radically different picture. There is 'life' all right but no movement, apart from that which is noticed on the surface. The world of intrigue and scandal is seen to engulf everyone. We also perceive a conflict between the country squire (Allworthy, Western) and the lord (Fellamar) in London. For Western, it is unthinkable to have Lord Fellamar as son-in-law — the two worlds of status and privilege (of the countryside and the city) being in a state of antagonism. As Lady Bellaston and Lord Fellamar become active to tame and ensnare Sophia, one feels that there is no chance whatsoever of Sophia and Tom uniting. Here, Fielding raises the question of Tom's efficacy as a hero struggling for survival in an atmosphere fraught with threats and dangers. Still more serious is the issue that contending groups converge upon London, a world which itself is quite crisis-ridden, to find a solution of their problems. As we have discussed elsewhere, the city of London makes the possibility of 'comedy' extremely narrow as the fighting faculties of Tom gradually decline.

3.3.3 Breadth of Fielding's Realism

It is easier in the case of *Tom Jones* than most other English novels to move out of the presented situations. The narrator remains insistent that *Tom Jones* is not a fictional work but history. The division of the description into three clear parts takes us into the manner in which the countryside and the city coexisted and reflected upon each other. Coexistence is a weak word since the relationship between the two social segments was anything but kind and peaceful. The metaphor of the city in *Tom Jones* signifies a moribund life-mode and the sooner it is replaced or wiped out by the country (Tom-Sophia intervention), the better. The writer could not adopt a harsher attitude towards the social set up of his time. Understandably, it evoked a violent response.

Fielding's sense of realism stands further enhanced by his view of the countryside which, as he sees it, contained a large amount of the natural and spontaneous. In spite of this, Fielding offers a thorough-going critique of the good as well as the negative characters in the countryside by persistently presenting them as targets of ridicule or irony. He does not seem to be sufficiently sure that the vigour and zeal of the simple people can see the society through. In many cases, Fielding understands the ills and evils of Somerset to be entirely insurmountable.

The road has more of the political aspect to it as against the social. Here, the current of 'life' is stronger. Rebellion by a section of society and the effort of others to quell it is a constant point of reference. What England seems to need is a check on lawlessness but in Fielding's view, this check should contain in large measure the support of the common people – Tom's gusto is quite akin to Molly's. Fielding's prescription is not narrowly literary — an entertainment through fiction that makes the reader aware of the follies, ills and evils of human behaviour through deployment of technique. This is what most English and American criticism is preoccupied with. Instead, the prescription is political because of which *Tom Jones* shocked the eighteenth century reader. If Johnson tended to reject it as immoral and 'vicious,' he did so because he understood it as going against established norms. For Johnson, these forces were of morality and decency in life.

From here, we move on to the higher plane of social history. The novel is not merely Tom's story but history. Tom signifies the emergence of a new group of people in the eighteenth century English society. This group took independent positions and enjoyed critiquing and rejecting whatever obstructed its social progress. The group had an outlook of optimism and constructive intervention. This approach marked the behaviour of characters such as Tom and Sophia who were enlightened and modern in the true sense of the word. However, Fielding finds the scope of their onward journey in the novel rather difficult. We see in the novel a fine interplay of actual, fearsome conditions on one side and individual intervention on the other.

We should also not lose sight of the fact that human initiative may not succeed necessarily. The energy and dynamism of individuals is to be tempered by a great deal of wisdom. One way of successfully countering the challenge of orthodoxy and social stagnation is to evolve an alternative strategy of action. 'Nurture' is to play an important part in this strategy, meaning thereby that people like Molly, Partridge, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Waters have to be left behind in favour of those who would acquire genuine moral superiority through intellectual daring and economic power. Fielding is strongly convinced of this.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

Fielding in *Tom Jones* plays the important role of a presenter who not only knows all but also controls the action. From time to time, Fielding as narrator steps forward to put across a view. The strength of his representation is that he allows his narrator to comment on questions and issues as also to change the perception of characters at crucial junctures. Men and women in the novel's territory have the freedom to move about freely but only under the critical gaze of the author-narrator. The act of grasping and determining situations in such fiction is broadly done through the author's attitude. In the case of *Tom Jones*, the criticism offered is sharp and the tone adopted is playful. And comic. The range of view and comment being vast and all-embracing, we realise that most vital areas of English life of the century have been significantly dealt with. Arnold Kettle has rightly remarked in his *Introduction to the English Novel* that "Fielding's own social attitudes ... evoke a response remarkably precise and controlled ... It is with English society at large ... that he is primarily concerned. And between the large panorama, this general interest, and ourselves Fielding himself stands (larger, more insistent than any of his creations) directing our attention, controlling our reactions..." (74-75)

Tom Jones may help us reflect upon the hypocrisy and callousness of societies, nations and regimes in the modern world and inspire the reader to fearlessly critique them through word and action. Most of the criticism coming from western countries seems to wilfully overlook this aspect. This practice of academic criticism quite rampant in cultural centres today clouds our understanding of such fictional classics as *Tom Jones*.

Our job as students and teachers is to struggle for a fresh human-centred perspective. More than others, Fielding needs to be rescued from such vastly influential considerations as plot-structure, irony and artistic authenticity.

3.5 GLOSSARY

- Significances:** The word is popular with modern critical theorists. The plural in the term is deliberate since this is supposed to critique the validity of one, all-important meaning. "Significances" in a novel relate to the different characters and situations.
- Power-structure:** Privileges in a society have a logic and a pattern which evolve from the fact of birth, money etc. Politics, religion and morality manifest the interests of entrenched sections who together constitute such a structure.
- Sexuality:** This particularly refers to female sexuality which is sought to be curbed and undermined in terms of morality and tradition. The word denotes a natural physical urge in both males and females.
- Animalism:** Animal-like behaviour in human beings. Tom Jones and Molly Seagrim are good examples of it. Even though the term is positive if contrasted with hypocrisy, by itself it locks in "culture" and developed human traits.
- Utilitarian:** Not related to ideas or morals. According to it, things are understood in terms of their narrow usefulness. A bourgeois trait.
- Narrator :** The idea behind this word is that the author's opinion or voice may be different from that of the teller of the tale.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. In what way do the women characters in *Tom Jones* appeal to you? Have they been set apart from men in the world of the novel? Give reasons in support of your answer.
2. What is the significance of places in *Tom Jones*? Do they stand for different sets of codes prevalent in the eighteenth century English life? Discuss.