
UNIT 5 ARTISTIC UNITY OR SOCIO-CULTURAL CONCERNS?

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous Unit we looked at some of the key characters in *Tom Jones* and the problems of characterisation. In this Unit let us look at another aspect of Fielding's technique as a novelist – the question of plot. Some believe that there are several extraneous elements in the novel which can be easily deleted without any adverse effect on the overall plot. Is this true? Or is it that each detail is relevant and integral to the scheme of the whole novel? By reading this Unit carefully, you will be able to formulate reasoned answers to these questions.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The modern critic lays special emphasis on the unity of a literary work – that element of the book which keeps its different parts together. This element is related to the principle of form, call it the plot, the structure or the arrangement of happenings and events under a conscious artistic plan. In our opinion, such an emphasis would naturally work against the meaning and message of the literary work. While reading a novel, should we enquire whether its descriptions and representations cohere with one another to move towards an artistic unity? One cannot have much quarrel with this principle in the abstract but difficulties occur when it is used by the critic to question the validity of certain loose-looking episodes or references. In the first place, the central concern of a work can comfortably coexist with certain other major or minor concerns. In fact, in a novel, which itself is a "loose" form, many "extraneous" elements can be introduced by the author for the sake of commenting upon the general issues of the period in which he or she lived. But more importantly, the so-called minor or secondary episodes or incidents may engage the attention of one reader more than that of another. This happens because the minor elements may have something inherent in them that sets the mind of a specific reader or set of readers thinking. I have in mind the third world reader today who needs more than artistic unity. So far as *Tom Jones* is concerned, it is full of references, comments, characters and happenings that do not appear to be strictly relevant to the Tom-Sophia relationship, presumably the central concern of the novel.

Fielding can certainly be accused of bringing in a great many extraneous elements in *Tom Jones*. I refer to those elements which do not fit in with our notion of 'the novel,' a straight description of events under the overall requirements of a plot-line. Whatever falls outside these requirements becomes under this view not merely unnecessary, but downright objectionable and wrong. Think of those introductory essays given at the beginning of each book in *Tom Jones*. And there are eighteen "books" in the novel. That means eighteen essays. The titles of some of these essays are: "Of the SERIOUS in Writing, and for what Purpose it is introduced"; "Of Love"; "Of those who lawfully may, and of those who may not write such Histories as this"; "Containing Instructions very necessary to be perused by modern Critics" and "A Farewell to the Reader."

It seems that Fielding has chosen these topics at random and that he wants to share his ideas directly with the reader. It also gives us the impression that Fielding does not consider it necessary to relate these ideas in a direct sort of a way to the evolving action of the novel — for him it does not matter whether those ideas have a bearing on the novel or not. Ian Watt has remarked that Fielding assumes the role "of a guide who ... feels that he must explain everything which is to be found there; and such authorial intrusion, of course, tends to diminish the authenticity of his narrative." This is what we see superficially. But is this actually the case? In the first place, what are those ideas about? Among the topics picked up here by me, there are things like "the serious" in writing and the purpose for which it is done, love, the implications of novel as history, the job required of the critic and the act of final leave-taking by the author. Fielding's wording of the topics suggests that he is informal and relaxed in tone, to the extent of being casual. All this can make us demand that the novelistic depiction be edited and these essays be scrapped. Would it make a difference to the novel? Those among us who consider these essays redundant would obviously say that it would not only make no difference to the novel at all, but in fact add to the quality of presentation, making the whole thing look pointed and sharp. I do not agree. Yes, these essays do not affect the unfolding of the story in any way and are in that sense dispensable. But without them, the novel would not be the same. It will lose in its enjoyment-giving capacity and take us away from the narrator-author's friendly presence. Can we afford that? Considering the pros and cons of Fielding's intrusive nature, Ian Watt admits that "Few readers would like to be without the prefatory chapters, or Fielding's diverting asides, but they undoubtedly derogate from the reality of the narrative." For Watt, "the reality of the narrative" consists in an altogether different fictional mode, the one that Samuel Richardson, Fielding's contemporary adopted. Surely, for Fielding the most important aim of a novelist is to provide guidance as well as enlightenment to the reader rather than what is termed "experience."

5.2.1 The Instructional Aspect

Secondly, do we not need to know something about the issues that Fielding has touched upon in these essays? Isn't literature in general and the novel in particular supposed to provide instruction to the reader? The eighteenth century writer — think of Swift, Pope or Johnson — understood the importance of instruction much better than their counterparts in the twentieth century. The question we have to ask is : Where do we look for the broadly acceptable views on important aspects of life? Do we leave that job to the opinion-maker in religion, in politics, in social-ideological-cultural journalism? In Fielding's scheme of things, all these areas from which the opinion-maker operates in the modern world, western as well as the rest, merge into the wider area of the novel. Let us not forget that Fielding performs the twin role of entertainer and educator in his time

and that for him it is as important to acquaint the reader with the right views as to give pleasure.

Thirdly, in the specific context of the plot, Fielding thinks it appropriate to equip the reader intellectually to grasp the truth of the presented description and to judge for her/his benefit the behaviour, manners and morals of the characters in the novel. Fielding does not expect the reader to go into the complex aspects of morality, truth and courage on her/his own and in fact thinks it his duty to add to the common sense of the reader. The introductory essays given at the beginning of the books in *Tom Jones* have this specific perspective-related significance.

5.3 THE MANY EPISODES IN *TOM JONES*

Critics, particularly modern critics, are divided on the validity of the “not infrequent *longueurs*” in *Tom Jones*. The Man of the Hill episode is one of these. Some others are : Mrs. Fitzpatrick’s narrative; Tom’s encounter with the gypsies on his way to London and complications of the Nightingale affair. Do they merely add to the bulk of the novel? In the sense that they reveal a number of features of the characters involved in them, they surely take us deeper into the social reality of the period. In my view, an episode is a crystallisation of certain general tendencies of behaviour at a particular time. In this way, it can lend breadth to the envisioned life in the novel. We can with its help construct explanations of the thorny issues that emerge in the course of the main action of the novel. They constitute the world in which Tom and Sophia fought their specific battles. By offering various choices of action and alternative strategies of behaviour, they also significantly break the finality of the central narrative. What Tom and Sophia did was because they chose to do so and that they could go another way if they so desired.

5.3.1 Why is the Man of the Hill Episode Integral to the Novel?

To illustrate the points made above, let us take a close look at the Man of the Hill episode which has been specifically at the centre of controversy among most twentieth century critics. Its analysis can help us identify Fielding’s larger social as well as moral concerns. The analysis may also shed light on Fielding’s view of the epic nature of the novel. R. S. Crane, an American critic of the New Criticism school, for instance, is not happy with Fielding’s various comments, explanations and episodes in the novel because with their help, he thinks, Fielding merely “states” his position. Particularly, Crane is not sure about the “positive values this (the Man of the Hill’s episode) may have” in the plot structure of the novel. On his side, Fielding has presented the episode as the old man’s “History” and “Story.” Fielding’s purpose ostensibly is to integrate “his History” and “Story” into that of *Tom Jones*. Secondly, the Man of the Hill’s story – the account of his life from early years to old age – is fact-based. Isn’t that what we mean by history? But “Story” also signifies a fictional account – something that individuals in their context perceive and present. The Man of the Hill himself tells his story. May be, he wants to justify his decision to stay alone, totally cut off from the world in which he was born. Hence the story – an imaginative construction – is told by him. Let us then look at some of the important aspects of the “Story” and “History” presented by Fielding in the old man’s words. From the meeting of Tom Jones and Partridge, both travellers, with the Man of the Hill springs in the novel “a very extraordinary adventure,” which is not merely in terms of an incident involving robbery and physical attack. It is also Tom’s and Partridge’s confrontation with a person who went through the highs and lows of life and experienced a great deal of pain. That is how the account of life of the Man of the Hill is “the story of an unhappy man” which Tom and his companion hear with uncommon interest. It is a tale with a beginning when the Man of the Hill was a child and an end when he had after a lapse of a whole active life reached the conclusion that “Man alone,

interest. It is a tale with a beginning when the Man of the Hill was a child and an end when he had after a lapse of a whole active life reached the conclusion that "Man alone, the king of this globe, the last and greatest work of the Supreme Being, below the sun; man alone has basely dishonoured his own nature, and by dishonesty, cruelty, ingratitude, and accursed treachery, has called his Maker's goodness in question, by puzzling us to account how a benevolent Being should form so imperfect and so vile an animal" (431). It is a long sentence and the Man of the Hill seems to be struggling with words to say something profound. While in this characterisation of human nature, man has been referred to as "the king of the globe" and "the last and greatest work of the Supreme Being," there is the realisation, based on observation and experience, that he is actually "imperfect" and a "vile animal."

At the time of expressing this view of mankind, the Man of the Hill is an old man and has lived in seclusion for a long time. He remains firm in this belief in spite of the strong argument that Tom presents to him. As we see, only once (when the old man talks to Tom and Partridge), does the old man budge from his decision to keep away from humans and enter into an open exchange of views with a fellow being. Tom, the avid listener in this episode, speaks but little. Tom's comment occurs only at the end of the account. Here, his aim is to comprehend and interpret, in his own specific context as a learner, the old man's version of a series of happenings.

If we calculate, the old man has talked of events, personal or social, that took place in the late seventeenth century England. The reader of the novel is supposed to feel one with Tom in this curiosity, honest concern as well as absorption of truth about social life. This seems to be the intention of the author. As Fielding sees it, Tom is the discerning, critical, evolving, error-committing and learning character. The account of the Man of the Hill is a part of Tom's education.

An important aspect of the personality of the Man of the Hill is that he has travelled a great deal during his life — from home to Oxford and from there to London and many small towns and villages, as well as the countries of Europe. He shares with Tom Jones this trait of moving around the world in order to seek peace of mind. In fact, there are many more similarities between the character and circumstance of Tom Jones and those of the Man of the Hill. For instance, the Man of the Hill has an unloving mother and an affectionate, well-meaning father. He also has a brother taking to evil ways and becoming a strong adversary to the younger brother, a good and promising lad. The exposure of the Man of the Hill to the environment at Oxford, London and elsewhere reminds us compellingly of the ordeals suffered by Tom during his journey. Both are by temperament good, helpful and generous. If Tom listens intently to the "History" of the Man of the Hill, it is largely on account of these and other similarities. What I mean is that in this sense does the story of the old man become "History," or at least a part of Tom's history. When Tom's attention is disturbed by the queries and silly interventions of Partridge, he (Tom) shows clear annoyance and irritation, not merely because those are acts of discourtesy. There seems to be a great amount of turmoil and churning in the mind of Tom as he listens to the step-by-step progress in the account of the Man of the Hill.

From the way Tom and the Man of the Hill strike a friendly relationship in the beginning of their meeting, we get the impression that Tom Jones is standing face to face with his own future. In the particular context, the Man of the Hill feels obliged that Tom saved his life when it was under threat from the robbers. This is how the two respond to each other at the very moment they begin their conversation which leads to the long account of the life of the Man of the Hill :

"Whoever you are, or whithersoever you are going," answered the old man, "I have obligations to you which I can never return."

"I once more," replied Jones, "affirm, that you have none : for there can be no merit in having hazarded that in your service on which I set no value. And nothing is so contemptible in my eyes as life."

"I am sorry, young gentleman," answered the stranger, "that you have any reason to be so unhappy at your years."

"Indeed I am, sir," answered Jones, "the most unhappy of mankind."

Here, does Tom not feel the way the old Man did in the bitterest phase of his life? As a consequence, the old man suddenly becomes interested in Tom's affairs. He goes on :

—Perhaps you have a friend, or a mistress," replied the other. "How could you," cries Jones, "mention two words sufficient to drive me to distraction?" "Either of them are enough to drive any man to distraction," answered the old man. "I enquire no further, sir. Perhaps my curiosity has led me too far already."

"Indeed, sir," cries Jones, "I cannot censure a passion which I feel at this instant in the highest degree. You will pardon me, when I assure you, that everything which I have seen or heard since I first entered this house, has conspired to raise the greatest curiosity in me. Something very extraordinary must have determined you to this course of life, and I have reason to fear your own history is not without misfortunes" (402).

In fact, we notice that Tom takes the initiative in this conversation and implores the old man to acquaint him with the experiences he has had in life. Why? "Your own history is not without misfortunes" sends such strong indications of the existence of pain in Tom's life that for a moment the reader may well forget the existence of the Man of the Hill and focus entirely on Tom's state of mind.

The point I am trying to make is that the social environment has a lot to answer for in the case of the Man of the Hill. That is one reason why Fielding refers in such elaborate terms to the atmosphere in Oxford and London. Why did the Man of the Hill feel insecure and vulnerable in the early phase of his life? In this context, Fielding deliberately builds up a contrast between the old man and Tom in spite of the many similarities we notice between the two. Tom has himself been a bastard child, a foundling. There are few, if any, kind gentlemen in Tom's surroundings who would take care to defend and protect the weak. Squire Allworthy is an exception. On the other hand, there are hordes of cheats, thieves and rogues roaming the streets who might offer an alternative path of career to an able-bodied young man aspiring to gain riches and the attendant comforts. During his time, the Man of the Hill joined the group of gamblers and Tom could equally well join such people against whom he happens to defend hapless men and women. Since both have an uncommon amount of morality and fellow-feeling, basic Christian virtues in their cases, they somehow manage to steer clear of vile ways.

However, that does not change the social scene around them. It is this, in my opinion, that Fielding unquestionably emphasises in the Man of the Hill episode, something that we tend to forget in our long and extended discussions about plot structure, Fielding's characterisation, irony, method of narration, and so forth. To my mind, there is an essential linkage between this vision of society and the deployment of various techniques by the author to acquaint us with the world in which he, the author, lived. The significance of the Man of the Hill episode lies in that it is more strictly "realistic, narrowly "historical" than the "History of Tom Jones" which can in a restricted sense be termed a "success story" involving a large number of chances and coincidences to support it. Fielding, the honest perceiver of social trends, carefully includes the meeting

Tom Jones with the Man of the Hill so that he could go into the dynamics of Tom's progress with a critiquing presence in the novel. William Empson has said that through the old man's account, "Fielding meant to give a survey of all human experience (that is what he meant by calling the book an epic) and the Old Man provides the extremes of degradation and divine ecstasy which Tom has no time for; as part of the structure of ethical thought he is essential to the book, the keystone at the middle of the arch ... the whole setting of the book in the 1745 Rebellion gets its point when it interlocks with the theory and practice of the Old Man. So far from being "episodic," the incident is meant to be such an obvious pulling together of the threads that it warns us to keep an eye on the subsequent moral development of Tom." The typical western reader of today can scarcely see the logic behind the existence in *Tom Jones* of the Man of the Hill beyond the fact that he is a clumsy, and therefore, unnecessary presence. Should we not think about the reasons behind the western reader's lack of sensitivity towards the horrifying social scene in England? We can scarcely overlook the number of incidents through which Fielding's novels alert the reader to murders, rape, molestation, waylaying, etc. on the country roads and in the towns. Is this realism of no value to the modern reader? The 'developed' western world seems to shy away from its "History." It wishes to derecognise its past. Fielding as a presenter of social reality during this time causes embarrassment. The modern western critic is understandably more interested in the irony and the abstract philosophy behind the irony in Fielding's novels. The reader of a third world country would do well to doubt the various abstract appreciations showered upon Fielding. I assert that these appreciations have their roots in modern-day western politics and ideology.

In fact, the difference, if not contrast between the Man of the Hill and Tom Jones helps us appreciate the emergence of the colossus-like figure of Tom Jones, a figure that lets us interpret the eighteenth century society as a playfield for the sporting exploits of a hero. As against the deep and total seclusion of the Man of the Hill stands the struggling and participatory character of Tom Jones who understands his scenario differently. The pursuit of a goal, the endeavour that the existing structure allows a hero equipped with the self-assurance of a competitor, lends immense appeal to Tom's character. Tom is a fine combination of broad virtues, such as honesty and truthfulness, and an amorality that hits strongly at conventional rigidities as well as hypocrisies of the day. The contrast between the attitudes of the Man of the Hill and Tom Jones also shows Fielding's intellectual-perspectival tilt towards the successful completion of Tom's journey through life. It is a choice for "comedy," a successful resolution of problems through the author's intervention. Fielding seems to have seriously decided to pull Tom out of that feeling of nothing being "so contemptible in my eyes as life."

The intellectual churning taking place in Tom's mind as he listens to the story of the Man of the Hill, seems to finally slow down as the Man of the Hill comes to the end of his account. Now, Tom is at the end of the tunnel. He has taken stock of the upheavals in the life of the Man of the Hill and come to the conclusion, tentatively at least, that the old man took an extremely idealistic view of his circumstances. At this juncture, Tom doesn't share the old man's final view (yes, the view has a finality that is oppressive) about life :

I was now once more at liberty, and immediately withdrawing from the highway into the fields, I travelled on, scarce knowing which way I went, and making it my chief care to avoid all public roads, and all towns, nay even the most homely houses; for I imagined every human creature whom I saw, desirous of betraying me.

At last, after rambling several days about the country, during which the field afforded me the same bed, and the same food, which Nature

bestows on our savage brothers of the creation ... [availing myself of] an opportunity of once more visiting my own home; and of enquiring a little into my affairs, which I soon settled as agreeably to my brother ... [whose behaviour] was selfish and ungenerous ... and from that day to this my history is little better than a blank (428-429).

There is a ring of the pristine sincerity and moral rightness in these words of the old man, as denoted by "homely houses" and "Nature bestows on our savage brothers of the creation," the tone of the speech being that of hurt innocence and purity. However, Tom is not impressed by the wisdom. He goes over and comprehends in detail the story which is, as he sees, a version of the narrator in spite of the facts constituting the truth of the story. This is Tom's comment based on his analysis :

In the former part of what you said," replied Tom Jones, "I most heartily and readily concur; but I believe, as well as hope, that the abhorrence which you express for mankind, in the conclusion, is much too general. Indeed you here fall into an error, which, in my little experience, I have observed to be a very common one, by taking the character of mankind from the worst and basest among them; whereas indeed, an excellent writer observes nothing should be esteemed as characteristic of a species, but what is to be found among the best and most perfect individuals of the species. This error, I believe, is generally committed by those who, from want of proper caution in the choice of their friends and acquaintance, have suffered injuries from bad and worthless men; two or three instances of which are very unjustly charged on all human nature

... If there was indeed much more wickedness in the world than there is, it would not prove such general assertions against human nature, since much of this arrives by mere accident, and many a man who commits evil, is not totally bad and corrupt in his heart. In truth, none seem to have any title to assert human nature, since much of this arrives by mere accident, and many a man who commits evil, is not totally bad and corrupt in his heart. In truth, none seem to have any title to assert human nature to be necessarily and universally evil, but those whose own minds afford them one instance of this natural depravity; which is not, I am convinced, your case (431-432).

On the surface, this speech is addressed to the Man of the Hill. We notice breaks in the sentences, changes and modifications in words, and the general uncase with the way the argument is given form. Tom's uncertainty and hesitation, particularly in the beginning when he frees himself from the straight, unilinear logic of his companion reflects a mind out in the open to search its specific path. However, there is no given path; Tom has to make his own on the basis of his requirements in a world that has moved away from the ways it pursued earlier, even at the time the Man of the Hill was young. The period in which the old man went through the ups and downs of life and the one in which Tom is journeying, literally and metaphorically, have a gap of at least sixty years, quite significant in the context of English history — the seventies and eighties of the seventeenth century and the twenties and thirties of the eighteenth century.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have seen the importance attached to artistic unity in modern critical thought. Literary texts are readers's texts in the final analysis. The idea of the author "talking" to the reader is important in a particular kind of a novel. Apart from an entertainer, the novelist is a teacher and a moral guide. We have also discussed the significance of the many "stories" and episodes in *Tom Jones*. The Man of the Hill

episode is an integral part of the novel. The episode is a "History" that puts Tom in perspective. The reader is required to think of the two historical periods in comparison with each other – the late seventeenth century and the mid-eighteenth century. The realism of the Man of the Hill episode may be embarrassing for the modern western reader. How does it strike you as a third world reader?

5.5 GLOSSARY

- Artistic unity:** This refers to the concerns of the modern western critic according to whom the inner components of a work should well cohere under an aesthetic pattern. The idea has its source in Aristotle.
- Authorial intention:** Sometimes, events in a work, driven as they are by their internal logic, move out of the control of the author. In such a case, the conscious purpose of the author stands subverted. In the process, the author learns a great deal from his/her own representation.
- History and Story:** The former is taken generally as a representation on the basis of facts. The story, however, is wholly imaginary. The question is: How does the story have a bearing upon history? The relationship between the two is the crux of fiction criticism.

5.6 QUESTIONS

1. Can the various episodes in *Tom Jones* be dispensed with? What is Fielding's purpose behind their inclusion in the novel? Write a reasoned answer.
2. The novel is supposed primarily to give pleasure (comic or aesthetic) to the reader. Discuss *Tom Jones* in the light of this statement.