
UNIT 7 SOME CRITICAL OPINIONS ON *TOM JONES*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, my purpose is to acquaint you with important critical views on *Tom Jones*. There is some indication of these views in other chapters of this block where I have used a remark or two of a critic to clarify my own position. My focus in those chapters has been on *Tom Jones*. Here, I consider a few critical attitudes. I wish to share with you the fact that a remark or comment quite obviously sheds light not only on the text but also the critic's own notions of good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. In that sense, all critics, and even the "common reader," invariably betray in their remarks their own prejudices and biases. The discussion in this Unit hopefully should inspire you to crystallise your own critical opinions.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit is heavy in terms of ideas and you have to read this at least twice to fully understand it. Through continuous pondering you should learn to distinguish between viewpoints.

Read Fielding's *Tom Jones* and then try not to think about it. I am sure you would not succeed in your effort. I am not saying you would like it. In fact, you may hate the novel. That proves the power of the book. Yes, you can never be indifferent towards *Tom Jones*. As a book, it is full of challenges and may appear 'dangerous.' When I read it the first time as a text for study in my M.A. course, I found it rather simple. Perhaps, at that time, I was interested only in the "story of the novel," in the events and episodes associated with Tom as he gradually moved towards marriage with Sophia. It appeared to be a love story set in the eighteenth century English surroundings. The story, as I saw it, started with Tom's birth and ended with his marriage. It was too familiar a thing and, therefore, lacked suspense. Confusing this story of Tom and Sophia with the novel as a whole, I thought that *Tom Jones* could hardly be called a significant literary work. It also set to nought Fielding's own professed aim as a writer to shun romances. For instance, what is the Tom-Sophia relationship if not a romance? How wrong I was! I didn't realise that this relationship was merely an excuse for the novelist to explore some very important areas of the English society of the period. At the same time, the novel contained immense comic value.

I say that *Tom Jones* is 'dangerous' as a book. It considers nothing unworthy of comment and leaves no vital area of human life untouched. More, it tends to shake a lot of our established notions. In the course of reading it, we may wonder whether anything in human behaviour is sacrosanct. I ask : Does modern criticism try to come to terms with the 'shocking aspect' of the novel?

7.2 THE PROBLEM WITH MODERN CRITICISM

I sometimes feel that Fielding's contribution to the development of fiction as a cultural weapon is underplayed in English criticism. Yes, there are innumerable references to his powerful irony. One also hears of the complex plot of *Tom Jones*. There are quite a few good long analyses of his craft as a novelist. But if you are asked to form a total view of his writing in general and *Tom Jones* in particular on the basis of most available criticism, you would find yourself guessing as to what he conveys to the reader in terms of an attitude or outlook. In the so-called traditional criticism, particularly written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some importance was accorded to humanism, moral values, goodness, honour, and so on. But the twentieth century criticism (we can also broadly call it 'modern' criticism) is wary of dealing with these things and considers only craft, technique and method worth the reader's attention. The question is : Why irony and plot-structure? Why not social criticism and an alternative strategy to evolve a moral-intellectual stance? Modern criticism circumvents these issues and merrily goes on to explore voices, narrative/narratives and structure/structures. There is no doubt that these are important. But are they important in themselves? A considerable chunk of 'modern' criticism gives evidence of this belief. And it is wrong. My answer to such a question would be different. I would say that irony and other fictional devices used by Fielding fulfil an important purpose. This means that we should mainly endeavour to understand that purpose.

To my mind, literary criticism should aim at formulating that which the writer wishes to convey to the reader. That should be in focus. Ask the modern critic this question and the response would be something like this : "Well, focus? O.K. Our focus should, of course, be on that which is to be conveyed to the reader. And what is conveyed is the sense of irony. Attitude? Yes, Fielding's attitude is ironical. Nothing is outside or beyond his irony." This would be a smart answer. But also a superficial one. Because "the sense of irony" and "ironical attitude" signify a rejection of everything in life, or at least placing right and wrong on an equal footing. It can be said that contemporary analyses of literature suffer from a barrenness not witnessed before. And this is because the contemporary critical comment deliberately, as if under a carefully chalked-out plan, avoids what Fielding wants to communicate to the reader.

As a great realist, Fielding looks at his society with deep critical interest and finds that society totally submerged in orthodoxy. To Fielding, this orthodoxy is spread over the entire English life. The writer of *Tom Jones* notes with concern and anger that all those with social authority and power in the eighteenth century society are bereft of sensitivity, fellow-feeling and kindness. They can be seen as callously going about their ways, giving the impression that nothing outside their immediate interest is of any value.

7.2.1 *Tom Jones* as Plot

Let us consider some critical opinions on *Tom Jones* in detail. R. S. Crane in his essay "The Plot of *Tom Jones*" focuses attention exclusively on Tom's character in its process of evolution through various encounters and happenings in the novel. In Crane's opinion, the value of the plot lies in the "capacity of its peculiar synthesis of character, action and thought." Crane examines the sequence of incidents under the overall pattern of action

and calls the plot a mere "substrate" and a "material system of action." According to Crane, the aspect to be emphasised is the artistic quality of a work which consists in evoking a particular emotion in the reader. It is this artistic quality which imparts plot to a novel.

Crane's idea of plot in *Tom Jones* is not complete without reference to the particular vicissitudes, ups and downs, in Tom's life and the way his fate is interpreted by the reader between the "beginning" through the "middle" to the "end" of the novel. In Crane's opinion, it is a comic, and not "tragic" pleasure that the novel affords. For Crane, Blifil "is no Iago" but one who suffers from gross "ineptitude" in spite of his manipulative skills. Crane says that Blifil "merely is a clever opportunist." All other characters with whom Tom interacts are also comic. Insofar as Crane is concerned, "comic" gives merely happiness. Crane does not appreciate the highly negative and threatening nature of Squire Western as well as his sister whom he calls "blundering pair of tyrants" and Dowling's role of an acquiescing, amoral confidante whom Crane defines merely as "the man always in a hurry." This is a way of saying that Tom is not faced with any real dangers since Blifil, Western and Dowling can only create minor obstructions. What about the tendencies they represent? Should the plot not address such questions?

Secondly, the success of the plot of *Tom Jones* lies according to Crane in its capacity to give comic pleasure to the reader. In Crane's opinion, this process suffers wherever Fielding brings in extraneous elements (he calls them faults) such as long episodes, narrator's intrusions and unnecessary introductory essays in each book. Obviously, episodes and long authorial comments, as Crane sees them, come in the way of the reader's enjoyment. The fault seems to lie with the pleasure principle which defines boundaries within which the action is to be viewed. Why say that Fielding is to merely tell a comic tale? For Crane, not instruction but pleasure is of paramount importance.

Thus, Crane's viewpoint reduces the appeal of the novel to the generation of comic pleasure. Crane argues that Tom's character is the comic rallying point of the novel and anything that falls outside the purview of the protagonist dilutes the artistic quality of the work. Because of this, Crane is unable to grasp the realism of the novel, which rests upon the intricate linking between characters — all enjoying their existence not merely vis-a-vis Tom or one another but also the environment within which they act. One can understand the value of the plot of *Tom Jones* a lot better by referring to the society and the forces at work therein. In fact, the plot can be seen not as an integration of action, character and thought in the novel with the quality of pleasure (as Crane puts it) but as a totality of the eighteenth century society captured by *Tom Jones* with its apparently diverse elements. *Tom Jones* as plot would appeal better if the beginning, the middle and the end are broadened to include all those episodes, essays and narratorial comments which reflect vitally on the eighteenth century ethos and take the reader out of the closed world of the novel. The narrator himself attempts it many a time in the novel and there is no reason why the reader should not do it for the purpose of comprehending the unified and linked-up significance of the work. The pleasure-centred neo-Aristotelian concept of plot prevents Crane from grasping the social critique which the plot of *Tom Jones* embodies in its totality.

7.2.2 *Tom Jones* Preaches a Doctrine

William Empson has unambiguously stated that Fielding set out to preach a doctrine in *Tom Jones*. He has reacted quite sharply to Crane's comment on *Tom Jones*. Characterising the view of the modern critic as limited and narrow, Empson has asserted that the modern outlook doesn't take cognisance of the historical reality taking shape in the novel and that it seeks in fact to avoid the concrete idea or doctrine projected through a character or pattern of situations. But the modern critic has a different set of priorities.

Empson says that “modern critics tend to assume both (a) that it isn’t artistic to preach any doctrine and (b) that the only high-minded doctrine to preach is despair and contempt for the world; I think that the combination produces a critical blind spot.” Obviously, as he has rightly argued, this comes in the way of appreciating a novel’s true worth. Empson remarks that “Badgered by neo-classicism and neo-Christianity and what not,” the modern critic remains ignorant about the “humanist, liberal, materialist” nature of Fielding’s writing and considers the views offered through the works as that “worldly advice of a “flippant libertine.”

Empson specifically picks up Fielding’s “habitual double irony” to show that in *Tom Jones* there is a conscious plan on the author’s part to put across a highly tangible principle of human response to established codes. To Empson, the evolution of Tom’s behaviour in the novel puts emphasis on honesty and courage. Tom’s need to learn “prudence,” and to absorb the ways of the world is great and there is a connection between this and the “chastity enjoined by religion.” But the doctrine “about the mutuality of impulse” under which individuals learn and re-learn from interaction can be enlarged to take care of other areas of social experience. This doctrine of behaviour is largely embodied in Tom’s evolution. Empson puts the doctrine to good use and is able to explain with its help the significance of the apparently unconnected episodes as also the introductory essays in the novel.

But Empson remains confined to the working of this doctrine and is seldom able to appreciate that Fielding treats society as a materialist entity. Empson fails to notice the clashes and antagonisms in the novel’s world which is stretched to extreme limits by warring interests. If Fielding had to familiarise the reader with a doctrine, he would have done so directly or through the behaviour of a character. May be, we can see an attitude, a critical, realist attitude evolving in the novel. But that cannot be called a doctrine, particularly of the kind that can be easily deciphered and “preached.” Empson is prevented by his emphasis on the Christian principle to locate the relevance of the last book which for him provides more than the moralistic answer. Empson says that “the decisive question in her (Sophia’s) mind is whether his (Tom’s) impulses have become corrupted; she is quite prepared again to refuse to unite by marriage the two largest estates in Somersetshire.” In my opinion, marriage or joining of estates isn’t the central issue in the novel and Mr. Allworthy or Sophia aren’t the judging or determining agents of the action presented. Instead, Fielding’s main purpose is to attempt a “history” of Tom, through which he wishes to capture the dynamics of the period in which Tom lived. In this “history,” Fielding wants to show that the environment is heavily weighted against any individual enterprise — marriage, love, social freedoms, and so forth. In this sense, Fielding’s introductory essays and the comments scattered all over the text are not “literary prattle,” as Empson calls them, but observations that put a question mark against all available modes of thought including the doctrine of “mutuality of impulse” that Fielding is supposed to project. If there is a deployment of double irony, as Empson asserts, its chief use in the novel is to assert realism, to acquaint the reader with the impossibility of resolving vital issues. “Comic” should be interpreted to mean “unreal,” something that the writer wishes to happen but knows that it cannot happen. Empson as a liberal humanist seems ill-equipped to appreciate Fielding’s realism.

7.2.3 Individualistic Notion Behind Sexual Ethic

Middleton Murry has discussed the ‘sexual ethic of Tom Jones’ and said that there is no specific principle governing the novel in respect of sexual chastity or purity. He perceives that it is broad virtues of human behaviour such as honesty, truthfulness and simplicity which constitute the core of Tom’s actions in the novel. It is pointed out at the same time that Tom is castigated on many an occasion by different characters for his sexual indulgences and indiscretions. However, Murry opines that Tom is not criticised for

them by the author and that Fielding would have us delve deeper into the circumstances of Tom's life to know the sexual ethic of the novel. The point to consider is: Why should Tom succumb to the charms of Molly Seagrim? In fact, they are not "charms" in the usual sense of the word. What happens is that she seduces Tom, and he on his side doesn't mind being taken advantage of. The reason for Tom's innocent responding to Molly's sexual advances is that he is new in this game of love. This is compared by Murry with Tom's relationship with Mrs. Waters. Murry sees Tom as striking an entirely different equation with Mrs. Waters where we witness more mutuality and spontaneity between the two. Still, what should we make of that nagging sense of guilt in Tom's mind which came from the memories of his sweet exchanges with Sophia? In spite of the fact that he saw little possibility of marriage with Sophia, Tom could not altogether forget the need to be loyal to her. Noticing that in both the relationships, Tom remains a passive participant, Murry is constrained to remark that Tom is "rather a backward lover; it is being desired that makes him desire."

However, what is problematic for Murry is to explain Tom's attitude towards Lady Bellaston. In this case, it is not easy to absolve Tom of breaching the code of honour, one of the broad virtues the novel is concerned with, in that he accepts regular money for performing the offices of love to Lady Bellaston. In Murry's view, this has turned a large number of critics against Tom for the depths of degradation that he has touched. Murry doesn't look at money this way and thinks that Tom considered it no more than financial help that a friend extended to him in time of distress. Murry's discussion takes note of this episode as he argues that Tom has maintained consistency vis-a-vis his larger ethic of which the sexual ethic is a part. Murry agrees to "the potential sordidness of the relation" but defends Tom on the plea that even though he lacked "positive physical desire for Lady Bellaston," he felt a sense of "genuine gratitude" to a friend. Or at least, Tom is paying back, as a point of honour, for the help Lady Bellaston has rendered him. To Murry, this is a reenactment of the scene between Lady Booby and Joseph, with the difference that Joseph had the benefit of guidance from Parson Adams in *Joseph Andrews*, while Tom had no such help.

Murry lays a great deal of emphasis on Tom's goodness which is both strength and weakness. This odd mixture of the two, endears Tom to us and also "leads him into his entanglements." Defining this trait apart from the novel, Murry says that "Good nature is a natural and effortless goodness expressing itself as imaginative sympathy with the joys and sorrows of others." A person of Tom's vigour and honesty may gradually move towards what can be considered right. Love in such a case might prove immensely helpful. In Murry's view, "Consummation of physical passion between a man and a woman of good nature who love one another, Fielding holds, very definitely, to be the supreme felicity attainable on earth. And that is the end of Tom's adventurous pilgrimage."

I have presented Murry's argument in some detail. This has greater significance than most discussions we come across elsewhere. Still, it fails to link the 'ethic' with Tom's specific circumstances. Murry discusses the ethic under the liberalist perspective where individuals evolve their own rules of conduct. The "sexual ethic," thus remains individual-centred and doesn't reflect upon the social constraints under which men and women operate. We are left to ponder whether Fielding propounds such a free libertarian principle. Murry doesn't take sufficient note of the author's attitude which is uncompromisingly critical of the social mores of the time. The 'ethic' of Fielding was a part of the larger moral principle Fielding wished to propound. This principle made Fielding critique even the norm by which Tom and Sophia (as husband and wife) would like to be governed. There is a sense of the approaching threat in the last pages of the novel under which Sophia and Tom would become less sure of attaining fulfilment. Going by the way the society was pulled towards city culture, young lovers bound in

marriage may have become more and more apprehensive about openness, goodness or inner discipline being able to bring mutuality and joy in matrimony. Fielding's strong sense of realism warned him against too much optimism and hope.

7.2.4 Absence of the Concrete Individual

Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* contains an important discussion on *Tom Jones*. Watt compares the novel with Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* and talks about the two kinds of realism these novels exemplify. By now, it would have been clear to you that realism stands for an author's interest in the society of his time and his purpose to find connections between the different forces active in it. Watt notes that the psychological aspect of human personality is almost totally missing in Fielding's novel and that it has a different conceptual mould than *Clarissa*. Watt tells us that *Tom Jones* uses the method of broad social comment and satire while the latter probes the consciousness of a character in relation with her or his behaviour. This can be seen as providing solidity to the particular character's existence. Saying that *Tom Jones*'s "basic direction is toward a return to the norm," Watt criticises the novel for what he calls its "static quality." In his opinion, the deciding ideological factor in Fielding's scheme of things is "his belief in the class premise" and that "The ultimate task of Fielding's plot ... is to unite the lovers without subverting the basis of the social order; and this can only be done by revealing that Mr. Jones, though illegitimate, is genteel." This according to Watt highlights Fielding's basic attitude which is anything but "egalitarian." Watt explains the point further by saying that "in *Tom Jones*, ... society and the larger order which it represents must have priority, and the plot's function, therefore, is to perform a physical rather than a chemical change: it acts as a kind of magnet that pulls every individual particle out of the random order brought about by temporal accident and human imperfection and puts them all back into their proper position." Watt's whole argument has its basis in his preference for the psychological "subjective dimension" that Richardson imparts to his characters, the quite explicitly stated complaint being that "Fielding does not make any attempt to individualise his characters." We may note here that Ian Watt uses the same concepts, such as "static" and "dynamic" or "social" and "individual", as those employed by Arnold Kettle in *The Introduction to the English Novel*. However, Kettle does not show pronounced preference for "the individualised" and remains firmly stuck to the view that a critic's job is to identify specific ideological and artistic tendencies and comment upon them than to "prescribe" one approach in preference to the other. On the other hand, Ian Watt is prescriptive.

7.3 CHANGING APPRECIATION OVER CENTURIES

Why is it that critical opinion on Fielding's *Tom Jones* is so strongly divided? We have the reference of Samuel Johnson who said that he scarcely knew "a more corrupt work." On the other hand, Johnson, says Boswell, "estimated the compositions of Richardson too highly." Boswell has further written that "In comparing those two writers, he (Johnson) used this expression; 'that there was as great a difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who could tell the hour by looking on the dial-plate.'" Later, in the nineteenth century, Coleridge remarked: "Upon my word, I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, the *Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned. And how charming, how wholesome, Fielding always is! To take him up after Richardson is like emerging from a sick-room heated by stoves into an open lawn on a breezy day in May." It is interesting to see how Johnson expressed fondness for an author who explored psychological depths of a human being and how Coleridge chose to admire a writer who dealt with manners. As we know, Johnson has all along been associated with the social and Coleridge with the psychological dimension in literature.

It seems that the nineteenth century was not so very hostile to Fielding as the eighteenth century. In fact, it was quite appreciative. See Thackeray paying such a huge compliment: *Tom Jones* "is the most astonishing production of human ingenuity. There is not an incident ever so trifling, but advances the story, grows out of former incidents, and is connected with the whole. Such a literary providence, if we may use such a word, is not to be seen in any other work of fiction." Thackeray said this in his lecture in 1840 on "The English Humorists". George Eliot in the course of her great novel *Middlemarch* comments thus on Fielding: "A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English. But Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs), when summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings." We have to particularly mark "his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under." Also, in spite of the broadside contained in the "least imitable parts of the work" (here, George Eliot is appreciative) and "when the days were longer," George Eliot is more than just indulgent and appreciative. Isn't it radically different from the way Fielding's works were received by his contemporaries such as Richardson and Johnson?

The division with regard to Fielding continues well into the twentieth century with Ian Watt unambiguously asserting that individualisation in characters, which Fielding sorely lacks, alone can ensure proper attack on a given social structure. Watt would have us believe that Fielding's comment was geared towards maintaining stability. Arnold Kettle has also said that Fielding had full faith in his world and was "very sure" of it. Kettle has further remarked that Fielding is "fundamentally confident — confident that the problems of human society, that is to say *his* society, can and will be solved by humane feeling and right reason."

7.4 LET US SUM UP

Does it not look odd that a major chunk of English novel criticism in the twentieth century does not give serious thought to Fielding? And it is not entirely due to the fact that Fielding wrote in the eighteenth century, the period in which the novel had not emerged as a full-fledged literary form. F. R. Leavis, for instance, did not consider it appropriate to include Fielding in the 'great tradition' of English fiction since, in his opinion, the novelist lacked depth of insight. In Kettle's *An Introduction to the English Novel*, Fielding has been discussed together with Richardson and Sterne as if by way of contrast.

At the same time, the nineteen-thirties and forties saw a renewed interest in Fielding, the critical attention shifting from abstract questions of manners and morality to the inner segments — plot, characters, irony — of the literary work. The shift has created a new problem of cutting off the work completely from the society in which it was written. *Tom Jones* in particular has been viewed as an eclectic work with no strong central perspective to bind the different strands active within it. One does not know for instance which character or voice to look towards for the right, serious answer. Neither the author-narrator, nor the many characters, particularly the good ones — Mr. Allworthy, Tom, Sophia, Mrs. Miller, Partridge — offer any definitive clue to the attitude or opinion that would be most suitable for the age of reason, social ascendancy and progress.

In my opinion, the problem lies basically in our own position in the twentieth century. If we look at literature as a means to afford pleasure and instruction at the superficial level, or as something that would make us aware of the issues of literary theory and philosophy, we would miss out on most of what Fielding has to offer.

In this way, we see appreciative as well as condemnatory responses to Fielding at different points of time in the last two hundred and fifty years. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these come from writer-critics who were not bound to the classroom or the seminar-hall. These writer-critics published in periodicals that reached the masses the way film and television do today. At the time, the periodicals made a great deal of impact on the tastes and preferences of readers. In fact, Johnson made the idea of the likely influence on readers the basis of his criticism. In their own way, the critics and writers of the earlier centuries openly shared their biases with readers. However, they were not narrowly partisan in the manner in which the modern critic is, tied down as he is to the modern bourgeois notion of literature as art alone. Most modern criticism seems to be strongly opposed to Fielding because he fosters among the readers the sense of ruthless questioning of humbug and double-dealing, and the sense of rejection of the dubious ways of the various power-centres operating in society. Perhaps, Fielding as well as a number of nineteenth century paradigms do not particularly suit modern capitalist interests. The selectiveness as well as circumspect responding of the modern cultural centres should be assessed in this light. We in the third world have to specifically relate to this aspect. And Fielding leaves most of us uncertain, if not actually disturbed. At least, that proves my initial contention that it is impossible to overlook or bypass Fielding.

7.5 GLOSSARY

- Romance :** A category of writing that presented an imaginary world and took the reader away from real-life concerns.
- Fictional devices :** This refers to the practice of a novelist who consciously manipulates characters, situations, etc. Such a writer would use everything in the novel as a device.
- Comic pleasure :** All writing can be broadly viewed as tragic or comic in terms of the pleasure it may afford. This means that there can be tragic pleasure (does it not sound paradoxical?) as well as comic pleasure. The original division was made by Aristotle.
- Totality :** It stands for the work of literature as a unified whole with a nature of its own.
- Neo-classicism :** The eighteenth century doctrine which sought inspiration from the great qualities and virtues of ancient classical literature. The scope of neo-classicism was limited to the narrow ideological requirements of the middle class.
- Liberal humanism:** The twentieth century non-class belief that seeks a separate territory for the freedom-loving and understanding individual who shuns any kind of role but that of an uninvolved observer in society.
- Libertarian principle :** It implies a kind of anarchic behaviour under which the person looks upon society as a restrictive agency.

Subjective dimension : Recognition of inner psychological processes behind the actions of characters.

**Some Critical
Opinion on
*Tom Jones***

Critic's position : The viewpoint – involving social sympathy, ideological support, political preference, etc. — from which the critic observes a work or trend.

7.6 QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree that Tom Jones should be primarily viewed as providing comic pleasure? Discuss.
2. Critically examine the statement that Fielding is far from a great novelist since he “does not give individuality to his characters.”