

Morality in Henry Fielding's 'Tom Jones'

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Abstract

The article discusses the moral-scheme of Henry Fielding's novel Tom Jones that has been labeled as corrupt and immoral by most of its contemporary critics. It analysis the reasons for being treated as such. Seemingly immoral characters Tom's admirable qualities are highlighted and what forces him to behave vilely is also studied. Instead finding him unrighteous, the author argues that he is normal human with its equal share of goodness and weakness that makes tom's character a lifelike, a welcome change from divinely pure, pious and one-dimensional characters as portrayed by fielding's contemporary novelists. Fielding did not want to create a necessarily moral text that ignored the truth of how people are. He believed human nature has capacity for good and evil and wanted to explore those contradictions. Further it is important to note that fielding was not advocating or defending any of the immoral behaviors of his characters, but merely presenting their actions as step on the road to greater wisdom. Indeed, each of the major characters already mentioned undergoes a learning process, and redemption is offered to anyone seeks it.

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Introduction

In TOM JONES, Hannah More in her memories relates that she never saw Dr. Johnson angry with her but once, and that was when he alluded to some witty passage in Tom Jones. "I am shocked to hear quote from so vicious a book," said Johnson, "I am sorry to hear you have read it; a confession with no modest lady should ever make. I scarcely know a more corrupt work." This was the 18th century view of the morality of Tom Jones. But the values have changed since then. We cannot, in our age, agree with Dr. Johnson Somerset Maugham says, "now, I should say that a modest lady would do very well to read the book before marriage. It will tell her pretty well all she needs to know about the facts of life, and a lot about men which cannot fail to be useful to her before entering upon that difficult state." We believe that Tom Jones is not at all an immoral piece of work. This can be evinced by the following discussion;

"To recommend goodness and innocence hath been my sincere endeavour in this history," so says Fielding. He cannot remain quite content to simple description or narration. He must also illustrate the "plain simple workings of honest nature," the true character of human goodness. So he avows in his important dedication, "I have endeavoured strongly to inculcate that virtue and innocence can scarce ever be injured but by indiscretion." Human nature, he holds, is mixed, and virtue is capable of indiscretion. Thus his moralistic bias is brought back to an honest realism.

While discussing the element of morality in Tom Jones, tom's lectures to the Quaker at Hambrook, to the Man of the Hill, his treatment of the highwayman, and his admirable counsels to nightingale must all be kept in mind. They speak of Fielding's attitude of 'good nature' and virtue. Fielding doubtless underrates chastity as a moral virtue, but he is realistic in recognizing that among the young it need not be the only virtue.

Fielding's views of goodness are at times curiously confused by a notion of psychological determinism, he gives us Tom and Blifil, born in the same house, trained in the same environment by the faulty tutors, and one boy is essentially good-natured and virtuous whereas the other is a complete scoundrel. A capacity for prudence is perhaps regarded as inborn, what fielding calls, after Cicero, *bona indoles*, certainly is this quality, howsoever named, fielding is sure Tom Jones has.

One might almost say that Tom Jones is a continual piece of propaganda for goodness, honour, and discretion or prudence. But genius keeps the moral elements from being oppressive. The central idea is that of an innate endowment of 'good nature'. Fielding dislikes greatly Thwackum's orthodox emphasis on grace; he is rather for an 'active principle' in the individual that stimulates to good works. "Mr. Jones," he tells us, "had somewhat about him, which though I think writers are not thoroughly agreed in its name, doth certainly inhabit some human breasts; whose use is not so properly to distinguish right from wrong, as to prompt and incite them to the former, and to restrain and withhold them from the latter." In one of his early poems ('Of Good Nature') fielding has called this 'glorious lust of doing well.' Good nature and a belief in it was certainly one of his strongest articles of faith. It not merely shapes Tom's ultimate fortune in the novel; it also shapes the contrast between himself and Blifil, seen in many episodes. Take for example, the pages that concern the little bird that tom had presented to Sophia and that Blifil frees. Tom makes every effort to recover the bird, and Blifil affects a sentimental compassion for a bird confined 'against the law of nature'.

Another curious episode concerns a tribe of gypsies and the punishment their law inflicts for "criminal conversation", a penalty very different from that of English law courts in Fielding's time. Episodes like these

are normally used to advance the action and to illustrate moral or social ideas cherished by the novelist. Some episodes like that of the Man of the Hill and that of gypsies dramatize ideas rather than further the action, but usually the fusion with the action is admirable, and the influence of the ideas is unobtrusive and most useful. In view of this intellectual and moral background for the action it is indeed curious that a modern critic could characterize the book as a picture of 'trivial life lived without ideals, from day to day, in perfect self-satisfaction.' That is to miss the whole point of Fielding's work.

Fielding considered that the deepest problem in human relations is to recognize the good natured man and distinguish him from his opposite. He therefore, exposes hypocrisy, and hypocrisy to him becomes the worst of sins, for if it were not for this terrible power, the good could always know and defeat evil. In Tom Jones, hypocrisy can be described as malicious deceit, the deliberate misleading of those who have reason to trust one. This is especially devilish as carried on purely for one's own selfish gain, even when involving another creature's destruction when an adolescent like Blifil shows himself to be 'sober, discreet and pious beyond his age, we may be sure, fielding distrusts him. When Thwackum is represented as effortlessly chaste, we may assume the parson will do harm. 'Blifil's appetites says Fielding, were by nature so moderate that he was able, by philosophy, or by study or by some other method, easily to subdue them. Blifil is ipso facto a hypocrite. The villain can also be recognized by his great ambition which is to heap up solid wealth for in all conflicts of desire he will choose property over persons.

"The question of the "morality" of Tom Jones is so closely bound up with the realism which is another of its main characteristics that it is almost impossible to treat them apart. In Jonathan wild, Fielding had a double object to carry on his lifelong war against humbug, and to show how poorly vice rewarded its votaries. Both these aims underlie Tom Jones but both are subdued to a wider aim to show life as it is. The provision which we have here made is human nature. The implication is that, if we can see the whole of human nature we shall find that some of it is in itself ugly, and some in itself beautiful. That which is ugly, makes people unhappy; that which is beautiful makes them happy. Fielding was content to leave to Richardson the convention of society, of 'Good Form', as it is called -the code of Charles Grandson. Its place is taken in Tom Jones, if at all, by that 'prudence' which Allworthy preached to Jones, and which is no more than the moderation that keeps a man out of it. The gist of the book's moral purpose to show the Human nature, ugly and beautiful alike, raised to a high power of activity, so that ugly shall we clearly perceived. Incidentally meanness, cruelty, hypocrisy, lasciviousness will be found to bring unhappiness in their train; but is a worse punishment to be a Blifil than to suffer as Bilfil ultimately suffered".

There is, however, ample scope in Fielding's moral view, for Charity is not for chastity. Sophia shows generosity to her lover when he is going to leave the town of hers. Tom Jones shows it in abundance to Black George and his

family, Mrs. Water to prove Bridget, Allworthy to all, and at last Tom Jones is kind and merciful even to the Rove and Villains. At last we can conclude with Fielding's observations: "I have somewhere read, that the great use of philosophy is to learn to die. I will not therefore so far disgrace Maine as to show any surprise at receiving a lesson which I must be thought to have so long studied. yet, to say the truth, one page of the gospel teaches the lesson better than all the volumes of ancient or modern philosophers"-and again in the prefatory note of the book 15, he writes, "there are a set of religious, or rather moral writers, to teach that virtue is the certain road to happiness, table doctrine, and to which we had one objection, namely that it is not true". So Fielding's Tom Jones is a propagation of this doctrine of Fielding. He quite like a man of literature, wanted to say what was so often thought but never so well expressed.

Reference

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