

UNIT 2 AS WE FIRST READ : *TOM JONES*

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

There is always a difference between the first and second readings of a text. The first brings forth a kind of initiation into the work. The second, on the other hand, brings us closer to a number of hidden features of the work. Before I present here a brief version of *Tom Jones* which I may call just 'a reading,' I wish to make a few preliminary remarks about this novel. To me, it is fundamentally a novel about the social structure that prevailed in England in the middle of the eighteenth century. This preliminary discussion will not only help in recapitulate some of the main features of the relationships/characters/events in *Tom Jones* but will also help establish a base for more detailed discussions in subsequent units.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Let us use Tom's story as an entry point into this extremely complex novel. **First**, Tom's character by itself would not acquaint us much with the spirit and energy that the novel in its totality embodies. In fact, Tom's character should be used as a point of entry into the novel and no more. In this way, we would be able to win familiarity with what can be termed the truth of this work. An acquaintance with incidents and happenings in Tom's life will reveal to us the conditions of existence at the time the novel was written.

Secondly, we witness in *Tom Jones* a gradual unfolding of complexities. For Fielding, the society of the period operated at a number of levels and these could not easily be identified in their peculiar working. Fielding does not make simple connections between different happenings in life since his purpose as a writer is not to offer explanations and answers. He does the opposite and makes the reader feel that pressures in the eighteenth century society are far too difficult for any individual to cope with, whatever the person's strength or capability. The social establishment is not only rigid and oppressive but also extremely powerful. Its value-system is also firmly entrenched in the psyche of the people. We realise that the novel sharply focuses upon a peculiar energy generated in human behaviour. When angry with the system, people criticise, fight and rebel. Tom's anarchic revolt and Sophia's adamant posture notwithstanding, the final picture emerging out of this process is hardly encouraging or inspiring. With Tom in jail and Sophia locked indoors in Western's house, the last pages of the novel present a grim account.

Of course, we see a movement against hindrances. However, problems multiply with each new development. This results in the regrouping of the forces hostile to the peculiar social energy I talk of. The reader is given to feel that this energy is not properly harnessed. In fact, narrow orthodox formations (the moral-religious system, patriarchy, etc.) create serious obstructions in its way. As the novel progresses, the reader helplessly watches that the agents of the *status quo* (Blifil, Square, Thwackum and Squire Western) consciously thwart any possibility of challenge to the interests of property and privilege. A clear sense of dismay is discernible at the end, with Fielding failing to offer any 'real' answer to the questions posed in the novel. In such a situation, the author could perhaps provide only a 'comic' solution. The question I want to pose is : Is this a success or failure of the author?

2.2 A READING OF *TOM JONES*

2.2.1 A Look at Tom's Story

The novel has been given the title *Tom Jones*. At the obvious level, the book is a story of Tom's life from the time he was born till the time he married Sophia. Let us take a glance at some important points raised through the depiction of Tom's life. The novel opens with the discovery of a young male child on the bed of Squire Allworthy. The child is given the name Tom Jones and is referred to as a bastard, an obvious object of ridicule, rejection and condemnation. The discovery puzzles and confuses the moralistic-traditional society of the time. The disturbed individuals and families of the place fail to adopt a sympathetic attitude towards Tom — Mr. Allworthy being the only exception to the rule. This great benefactor accepts the child as his own and gives good reasons in support of his decision. Allworthy's nephew Master Blifil and Jones share the generosity of the benefactor equally. The treatment that the two get bears testimony to Allworthy's sound principles of Christian behaviour and the reader is reassured that Jones would receive proper upbringing and care. The answer, therefore, to Jones's problem of preservation comes, as we see, from a good and understanding Christianity which unhappily is beyond the scope of most of the inhabitants of the place. What also strikes us is that Mr. Allworthy, because of his privileged position, could alone rescue the helpless foundling from difficult circumstances. It would have been totally different if Mr. Allworthy, the good Christian and an example of moral rectitude, were an ordinary person. We witness that Allworthy's decision to adopt the child starts off a whole series of loud and not-so-loud protests as well as suspicions about his motives. The question emphatically asked many a time in the novel is: Isn't Tom Mr. Allworthy's own son since, to the questioning and ever-suspecting people of the household, nothing else can explain the latter's action?

Allworthy's decision to adopt Jones is undoubtedly an act of transgression in traditional-moral terms. More, it clearly touches upon economic aspects such as the inheritance of land and money. The world of landed property and privilege has so far used Christianity to legitimise its existence and has pushed higher virtues beyond the purview of common people. Allworthy shocks the privileged group by consciously selecting the contrary way of interpreting his religion.

2.2.2 Problematic Nature of Squire Allworthy

However, we become conscious of a certain kind of pompousness in Allworthy. We note that he stands alone in the novel and enjoys a status high enough to be accepted as a moral judge of everything happening in his neighbourhood. Standing alone is not a happy situation — it denies to the person concerned a sense of involvement and participation in the common occurrences of life. Placed at a distance from everyone, Allworthy would

know only that which he perceived in others. This can create problems of comprehension and consequent taking of decisions. There is no denying that he may carefully go into the issues faced by the people at large and offer sane advice to them. But this, as we have seen, places him on a high pedestal by virtue of which he preaches to others (rather than sharing with them) the high principles of morality. Earnestness and sincerity of purpose give him a sense of superiority by which everyone at Somersetshire remains overawed. What I wish to emphasise is that interpreting situations in the light of Christian goodness and benevolence is Allworthy's forte and an active principle in his behaviour. On the other hand, standing apart from common action (disinterestedness and an impersonal attitude, come to mind in this context) and judging on the strength of reason and kind intention was indeed a value in the age of enlightenment. We become a bit puzzled, therefore, to see that Allworthy misjudges things quite frequently in the novel. When he does this, we become acquainted with that great irony of which Fielding is an acknowledged master. Consider for instance this statement of Allworthy :

You know, child, it is in my power, as a magistrate, to punish you very rigorously for what you have done; and you will, perhaps, be the more apt to fear I should execute that power, because you have, in a manner, laid your sins at my door. ... for, as no private resentment should ever influence a magistrate, I will be so far from considering your having deposited the infant in my house, as an aggravation of your offence, that I will suppose, in your favour, this to have proceeded from a natural affection to your child ... I should indeed have been highly offended with you, had you exposed the little wretch in the manner of some inhuman mothers, who seem no less to have abandoned their humanity, than to have parted with their chastity. It is the other part of your offence, therefore, upon which I intend to admonish you, I mean the violation of your chastity. A crime, however lightly it may be treated by debauched persons, very heinous in itself, and very dreadful in its consequences. The heinous nature of this offence must be sufficiently apparent to every Christian, inasmuch as it is committed in defiance of the laws of our religion, and of the express commands of Him who founded that religion (66).

Here, the author has deliberately chosen to withhold from Allworthy the true information about Tom's parentage. Having done this, he has given full freedom to the speaker to dilate upon the ills and evils of immoral behaviour. In addition, phrases such as 'abandoned their humanity,' 'violation of your chastity,' 'Him who founded that religion,' etc. underscore the pomposity of Allworthy unmistakably. We should also keep in mind the fact that the novel as a whole is to take a sharp critical look at chastity, constancy, humaneness and kind sympathy, with Jones seen as learning about them in the raw as he grows up. The author administers a series of shocks through Jones's conduct in difficult life-situations. In fact, under the broad scheme of the author, Allworthy is going to be thoroughly manipulated by Blifil, an aspect designed to show the hollowness of abstract principles which we uncritically adopt.

2.2.3 The Philosopher and the Clergyman – Their Comic (?) Nature

From here, we move on to the situation in which the job of imparting moral-intellectual guidance to Tom is assigned to Square and Thwackum by Allworthy. The author has conceived and drawn these two comically. While Square projects the secular atheistic outlook and lays stress on correct and consistent human behaviour, Thwackum understands everything in strictly religious terms. They are so much given to a mechanical representation of principles and ideals that every remark they make amuses the reader. Fielding uses them to a plan which is to provide through them an entertaining discourse on trivial as well as important matters that Tom and Mr. Allworthy face from time to time. So fond are the philosopher and clergyman of pronouncing judgement or

offering analysis that they never once sit back and ponder. Instead, they rush in to offer their simple predictable views. This is an example of how educators come to obstruct the mental growth of a pupil. On his side, ironically, Mr. Allworthy feels quite satisfied with the arrangement he has made for the moral education of Tom and Blifil.

The writer's plan under which Square and Thwackum work has another aspect to it. As the two teachers go about their business of leading the pupils on to the path of enlightened behaviour, they gradually come to serve a purpose other than comic and begin to seriously influence the action in the novel. This compels the reader to think that the consequences of their 'real' conduct could be sinister. For instance, their attempt at winning the attention of Mrs. Blifil is not merely comic. It is true that in this venture, both Square and Thwackum prove to be foolish while Bridget emerges as a clever manipulator. Still, the episode is too damning for the philosopher as well as the preacher. Can such people fulfil the charge which Mr. Allworthy has given them? In fact, combined with the conspiratorial skills of Blifil, the practice of Square and Thwackum can quite comfortably 'mislead' Mr. Allworthy himself who apparently is the reigning deity of the novel. Till the end of the novel, Allworthy keeps the reader impressed by his "all-worth" and sharp intellect. And yet much remains unachieved. In fact, Blifil almost brings about the destruction of Tom and sets at nought the happy prospects of Sophia. We, therefore, conclude that Square and Blifil become part of the big evil machine of the novel and that their 'comic' nature turns more and more dangerous and, therefore, un-comic as events unfold in *Tom Jones*.

2.2.4 What does Tom symbolise?

Tom's character stands out in the novel as one which is entirely 'unformed.' He appears to be a mere lump of clay. He has that classic inability to adhere to a given code since he would not understand its worth or relevance. It is a different thing that by nature he is kind and generous. Yes, 'nature' is the word. Therefore, good is not good or desirable *per se* in his case. Instead, it is 'natural' for him to be good. As the reader sees, Tom suffers a great deal for being naturally good and selfless. It is entirely understandable, therefore, that conventions, traditions and norms do not mean anything to him but as so many minor hurdles in the way.

We are particularly struck by Tom's attitude towards women. Tom always treats women, irrespective of their social standing, as equal to men. His behaviour in this context is not influenced by that exploitative attitude under which the males are supposed to *manage* the affairs of society and women have to merely act as their appendages. He contains within himself the purity of a 'human' than the distinctive traits of a 'male' which can be taken as a gender construct of a given society. This 'human' in Tom constitutes the essential good qualities both of men and women. In fact, in some respects, one can see more of 'the woman' than 'the man' in him — the softer, purer, more honest and empathy-prone aspects that we have come to historically associate with a woman's temperament. Apart from this, he can scarcely apprehend that people would act under narrow considerations of profit and on that account take advantage of anyone's gullibility and innocence. But, as noted above, innocence is Tom's strong point. It is this which sets him apart from those people, of high as well as low birth, who have become un-innocent in the process of living. Still another trait of Tom's character is that he is greatly courageous and fearless and has the requisite strength to go ahead in the business of fighting. He would more often than not be able to conquer his enemy if engaged in a fight with him.

So many qualities can be rarely visualised in an individual. It is this which suggests that Tom emerges in the novel more as an idea and a spirit than a flesh and blood character. I say 'idea,' not an 'ideal.' The latter has connotations of 'finishedness', something which

is already there for the human beings to look up to, something like that we find in Mr. Allworthy's case. No, Tom is not that kind of an ideal. On the contrary, Tom exemplifies the idea of 'spontaneity' and 'natural behaviour.' As an idea, Tom also critiques that which is detrimental to the naturally good aspect among people. If Tom's character is to be interpreted thematically, he can be viewed as that idea of spontaneity which remains in a state of constant struggle with a pre-existing structure of norms and conventions.

As we First
Read : *Tom
Jones*

2.3 RELATIONSHIPS IN THE NOVEL

2.3.1 Tom and Sophia in Togetherness and Contrast

In what way do we comprehend Tom's fascination for Sophia? We know that he has been quite intimate with Black Partridge's daughter, Molly Seagrim. Is it merely that Sophia is beautiful, elegant and has a goddess-like quality about her charm? No, Sophia is more than this idealised version of a woman. Her social helplessness against her father's ways is not an ordinary occurrence and leaves a deep impact on her personality. The impending threat of a marriage with Blifil lifts her up from an abstracted existence and reveals to her the horrors of certain doom. Sophia is so entirely convinced of her abhorrence for Blifil as husband that when Mrs. Honour, her maidservant, mentions Blifil "as a charming, sweet, handsome man," Sophia angrily remarks, "Honour, rather than submit to be the wife of that contemptible wretch, I would plunge a dagger into my heart" (320).

This is not the response of that doll-like figure who always moved about in sweet and protected surroundings. After Sophia runs away from home in the company of Mrs. Honour, we see her more and more as a concretised individual struggling to move away from a 'paradise' that was her home. She becomes more and more 'real' in this process. Yet, her escape from that unreal world strangely prevents her from becoming an ordinary person, a weak all-accepting individual who would get reconciled to anything because there is no way out in the particular circumstance. At the same time, she is definitely not like Tom in spontaneity or naturalness. But she has that which Tom doesn't — a sense of discipline where needed and an inner life which is a product of introspection and self-assessment. On the strength of this, she finally becomes a truly thinking individual. Mark her words in the letter that she writes in London to Jones :

A promise is with me a very sacred thing, and to be extended to everything understood from it, as well as to what is expressed by it; and this consideration may perhaps, on reflection afford you some comfort. But why should I mention a comfort to you of this kind? For though there is one thing in which I can never comply with the best of fathers, yet am I firmly resolved never to act in defiance of him, or to take any step of consequence without his consent.

These words of Sophia are required to compose a totality of understanding which as a viewpoint can help the individual to proceed towards virtue and goodness. I consider that Tom's 'naturalness' and easy vigour would soon weaken and lose themselves in anarchic self-destruction if not helped and sustained by a rational self-appraisal. And the trait of appraisal and questioning is to be 'acquired' with effort, it is not 'spontaneous.'

In *Tom Jones*, Fielding, a conscious and an analysing-commenting artist, shares with the reader the two perspectives of Tom and Sophia and indicates a meaningful linkage between the two. He seriously believes that the two perspectives complement each other and are in fact parts of a significant totality.

Though apparently dissimilar, the attitudes of Tom and Sophia have some common points. For instance, kindness and generosity are qualities they share. Again, both have the capacity to rise above their immediate personal interests. There is no denying that Tom is deeply in love with Sophia and would sacrifice anything to win her hand. Still, he decides many a time to sacrifice this wish if that ensured her safety and preservation. Sophia, too, places personal happiness far below her duty towards her father — she would not marry anyone if Squire Western did not approve of it. The only point she sticks to, and it is a high point of her self-assertion — is that Squire Western would not *choose* a husband for her. She makes it abundantly clear that if that happened, she would leave all and run away to the farthest corner of the world to preserve that highly personal and sacred territory of conscious choice. This is a trait of individual self-assertion. But we should not lose sight of the basic morality of this position. This can also be considered an attitude of self-abnegation that an individual adopts with a sense of conscious choice. Tom and Sophia seem to be moving in the direction of this attitude which they finally come to symbolise. It also imparts a unique value to their characters and transforms them into inspiring examples of conscious activist behaviour. Particularly in the case of Tom, self-abnegation comes out to be his strongest redeeming feature, strangely in one who apparently loved easy pleasures and indulgences and scarcely observed the high principle of constancy. But such is life!

2.3.2 Tom as Squire Western's Companion and Friend

In one important respect, Tom is closer to Squire Western than he is to Mr. Allworthy. There is no doubt that Tom has always remained attached to Mr. Allworthy as an obedient child. He has been brought up under the affectionate and indulgent gaze of a virtual parent. The essential spirit of this phase lasts in Tom's behaviour till the end of the novel. But there is no easy sense of give and take between Tom and Allworthy — they do not interact at the level of 'equality.' The one speaks with dignity and the other listens with reverence. On the other hand, Tom is a friend to Squire Western. They hunt, dine and laugh together. When Western learns of Tom's various affairs with women, he is pleased no end with his pal's successes. Western is conscious that Tom is of doubtful parentage, a bastard, mixing up with whom may violate the norms of social intercourse. More fundamentally, Squire Western is full of that raw energy with which Tom himself is abundantly gifted.

However, the difference between the two is equally immense — Squire Western is nature's own to the extent of being a beast. Bereft of true education in the ways of social conduct -- he has rarely, if ever enjoyed the benefit of advice from others — Western continues to remain till the end a wild and untamed animal. Mark the way he decided to leave the pursuit of his daughter midway as he caught sight of a hunter with a pack of hounds venturing out into the forest. There is still more crudity in his imposing strict physical restrictions on Sophia. Worse, he cares little for Sophia's right to choice in marriage and doesn't mind employing force to get her acceptance. Tom's attitude towards Sophia, as we know, is opposite to that of Western's. What can Tom make of such a friend as Squire Western? A good person, though thoroughly impulsive and unpredictable.

2.3.3 The Father-Daughter Angle

In fact, one should have a second look at Squire Western's 'goodness,' something by which his dear daughter stands befooled, born, as she thinks, to fulfil daughter-like duties to a 'great' father. She associates fatherhood with sanctity and quite strongly feels that the father should belong to an altogether different category. She has her way at the end of the novel but the terms of her victory vis-à-vis her father are highly 'emotional' and,

therefore, restrictive (for the disadvantaged female) as against rational and realistic. An attitude of this kind in the daughter does not make sense to the reader because of the emotional exploitation involved. In her case, it has been always been a one-way affair. Even though Squire Western is a picture of fondness, yet his love for the daughter is of a peculiar kind. It is unthinking. At the time of the final resolution of Sophia's marriage in Book XVIII, the reader may be swept off by the force of sentiment oozing from the daughter.

Perhaps, she doesn't have in mind Squire Western the man but the mythical father who brought his child into being. It is in this sense that I say Sophia is 'befooled.' The concept of a dutiful daughter fulfilling her filial obligation would hardly cohere with Squire Western's long and oppressive history of subjugating a wife because she was a woman, and, therefore, born to remain servile. Or maybe she sees the gap between the father and the real Squire Western and wishes that the two images join. It is interesting to note that Western is the only character in the novel who openly opposes a woman's right of equality with men and unabashedly preaches women's suppression.

Energy and amiability should look out of place in such a character and I wonder as to why Fielding should harp on his innocence and sweet foolhardiness. He appears 'comic' while struggling helplessly with his sister on account of Sophia's marriage. But we also notice that the context is different and that the brother is mindful of the money and estate the sister owns. Add to this the fact that the sister is a political being with opinions that would ring true as feminist even today. Fielding seems to have consciously visualised Mrs. Western's role vis-a-vis her brother in that Squire Western is raving mad most of the time and the sister is the right counter-force (her education, conduct and politics are at the root of this force) to check him. But Squire Western can also think of mundane matters like money even as he is an amalgam of folly, vigour and uncontrolled energy. This further compounds his role as a woman-hater.

2.4 LET US SUM UP

The novel initially appears to be the story of Tom and Sophia. But Tom has a benefactor, a mother, a couple of teachers and a number of friends. He also has quite a few enemies. In the same manner, Sophia is not merely an individual with that name but also a daughter and a niece. She also has a confidante. The situation of love in which Tom and Sophia are bound brings many other people into play. All these people have their own significance, apart from what they do towards the novel's central pair. I have given some hints of these in this unit. In the next one, I would go further into the ramifications of the action and plot that has been built around Tom and Sophia

2.5 GLOSSARY

Social energy:

The general emotion that affects and activates large groups of people at a particular time. Such an emotion is generated in transitional periods in history.

Patriarchy:

A specific mode of social organisation in which the male-dominated family structure is the rule. It particularly suppresses women economically socially and legally.

Inner life:

The point of solitude in a person's life in which emotions and feelings sustain the individual in situations of distress. This idea works behind expressions such as the thinking being.

Significant totality:

Georg Lukacs's concept. The unified experience that a writer captures in his/her work. The act of capturing implies that the writer considers the experience fully reflective of the nature of his society.

Individual self-assertion:

Quite close to "expression of individuality." This is seen in the case of a character who takes a bold stand, silent or vocal that works contrary to the interests of a group, an institution.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. As a novel, *Tom Jones* is deceptively simple, with a story that makes no significant demands on the reader. Do you agree?
2. Do you see the projection of a moral viewpoint in *Tom Jones* as one through which the author aims at correcting distortions in human behaviour? Discuss.