

Q. 1. Do you agree with the view that in 'Tom Jones' there is too much plot ?

Or

Do you agree with the statement that the struggle of Tom and Sophia against Blifil and all that he stands for is at the very centre of 'Tom Jones'.

Or

Can you justify Coleridge's enthusiasm for 'Tom Jones' as one of the three most perfect plots ever planned ?

Or

Write a note on plot-architecture in Fielding with special reference to 'Tom Jones'.

Or

Attempt a brief critical appreciation of the plot of 'Tom Jones'.

Or

Write a critical note on the Plot-construction of 'Tom Jones'. Does it deserve the high praise it has gained from some critics ?

Or

Comment on the plot-construction of 'Tom Jones'.

Or

"The plot of 'Tom Jones', in its unity and complete uses, is nearly as perfect a plot as can be." "The conventional talk about the perfect construction of 'Tom Jones' is absurd." Adjudicate between these two statements.

Or

Comment on the unity and completeness of the plot of 'Tom Jones'.

Or

What is meant by the 'Architectural qualities' of 'Tom Jones' ?

Or

With reference to 'The History of Tom Jones' it has been said that "no plot has ever been carried through with more consummate skill."—(Walter Allen). Consider how acceptable this point of view is.

Ans. Fielding is a master plot-builder. Before him only short stories had been told well in English prose. Those writers who had chosen to deal with a variety of characters and events in a single

narrative had either jumbled their incidents together in meaningless confusion, or had adopted the simple and monotonous device of Defoe, stringing them on a single thread of conservative experience without the emphasis that can be obtained from skilled grouping. Fielding for the first time shows the large and firm design in his works. He is the master of his narrative. Smollett, his contemporary novelist, though had a richer imagination than that of Fielding, yet lacked the craftsmanship of Fielding. Smollett's novel is a chain of adventure, loosely linked together by the life of the central hero.

Admiring Fielding's art of plot-construction Prof. Digeon has observed: "Fielding is like a master of a house who is showing his visitors round; he takes them only where he wishes, and he has made a personal choice of what he is going to let them see. With this sovereign artist we are always brought back to the idea of a personal synthesis of different elements." Prof. Murphy praises the dramatic qualities of Fielding's plots. Allen finds in him 'architectonic quality.' According to Digeon, Fielding observed the law of the epic with increasing fidelity. "He gave the example, the formula of a more exacting method of building up the plot which never quite disappeared after him." A critic of the London Magazine was, obviously, struck with the plot-construction of Fielding and his conception of the novel. He described it as "a novel prose epic composition" which "like such all good compositions consists of a principal history, and a great many episodes or incidents; all of which arise naturally from the subject and contribute towards carrying on the chief plot or design."

The following are the chief traits of the art of plot-construction in *Tom Jones*:

1. A Wonderful Work of Art

The plot of *Tom Jones* has evoked the admiration of practically all critics. "What a master of composition Fielding was" I exclaimed Samuel Taylor Coleridge. "Upon my word I think the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *The Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*, the three most perfect plots ever planned." In Walter Scott's opinion *Tom Jones*, was "the most masterly example of an artful and well-told novel." Thackeray pronounced the novel as "a work of construction, quite a wonder."

2. Unity of Structure

The plot of *Tom Jones* is well-organized and unified. There are no loose strings in it. Everything is under the control of the novelist. Not an incident that does not advance the story has been incorporated. We might cut out half of *Don Quixote*, or add, transpose, or alter any given romance of Walter Scott, and neither would suffer. Roderick Random and heroes of that sort run through a series of adventures, at the end of which the fiddles are brought, and there is a marriage. But the history of *Tom Jones* connects in the very first page with last, it is marvellous to think how the author could have done, before he began to put it to paper.

About the plot of *Tom Jones*, Walter Allen says that no plan has ever been carried through with more consummate skill, and the skill can be truly appreciated only after the book has been closed. "In reading one is delighted with the swiftness of narration." Fielding "relieved the novel of the tyranny and constraint of the letter... he gave it altogether a larger, wider, higher, and deeper range."

3. Unity of Design

Fielding has maintained in *Tom Jones* a remarkable unity of design. The integral part of the story is maintained in spite of the diffusion of the matter so widely spread over the canvas. The unity of time, place and action have been observed with the artistic consciousness of the novelist. The unifying factor is love. "It is pleasant," writes Oliver Elton, "to consider *Tom Jones* as a puzzle and to see how well the plan works out." The most important unifying factor is the love affair of Tom and Sophia; for still others, the conflict between Tom and Blifil; for others again, the quasi-picaresque sequence of Tom's adventures with women and on the road. The novel is a distinctive whole and due importance is given to all the threads of the story. It is the intricate scheme of probabilities, involving moral choices, mistaken judgements and accidents of Fortune, which binds its many parts together from the time we first see Tom in Allworthy's bed until we leave him calmly enjoying his double good luck, at the end of Book XVIII.

4. Subordination of all Details to the Main Story

The unity of *Tom Jones* is not secured by mere limitation of the subject-matter. The book is a large, full, complex book, abounding in incidents and character. There is certainly nothing meagre or contracted about it. The unity of all the whole is achieved solely by means of a severe subordination of all the multitudinous details to the central plan. In the long and elaborate history hardly anything is found which does not in some way or other contribute to carry forward the main action to its conclusion.

5. Incidents Interlinked and Interconnected

In *Tom Jones* incidents are inter-connected. Every incident—even such a detail as that of a guide mistaking the road to Bristol—has a necessary place in the train of events which brings about the denouement. At the end of the book it is discovered that almost everyone of these seemingly trivial incidents has a necessary place in the train of events. With two exceptions hardly any could have been omitted as irrelevant or superfluous. (Out of these two events one is Sophia's rescue of her muff, which her father had thrown into the fire).

In reality Fielding wrote, "there are many little circumstances too often omitted by injudicious historians, from which events of the utmost importance arise. The world may indeed be considered as a vast machine, in which the great wheels are originally set in motion by those which are very minute, and almost imperceptible to any but the strongest eyes."

6. Management of Characters

Fielding's plots are equally remarkable for their management of characters. The fitting of the characters on the plot is most judicious. He places them in close proximity to the exigency of the situation. No character seems to be misplaced. However, there is the Man of the Hill who does not in any way tend to advance the story. But he is not misplaced, only he can be removed without damaging the plot-structure of the novel. Like Dickens and Smollett, Fielding does not introduce characters merely for their sake; he introduces a character with an eye on the parts which he or she would be required to play in the working out of the plot.

7. The Element of Plausibility in Plot

Fielding was a realist. He regarded novel as a piece of social history. Hence he had an eye on the possible, the probable and the plausible. He did not impose any violent strain on the credulity of his readers. Plausibility is one of the virtues of Fielding. He writes in such a manner as to make the incidents and situations look very natural. He keeps the flight of his imagination under strict control and lets his fancy not roam wildly.

8. Cause and Effect Relationship

There is a cause and effect relationship between incidents. They seem to happen in the most causal way, following one another, or arising out of one another, just as incidents do in real life. Yet at the end of the book it is discovered that almost every one of these seemingly trivial incidents—even such a detail as that of a guide mistaking the road to Bristol—has a necessary place in the train of events.

9. Suspense

The whole of *Tom Jones* is full of suspense. The way the secret of Tom's parentage is preserved until the moment ordained by the author for its revelation shows how Fielding is a master of suspense. All that is related to the early part of the novel concerning Partridge, and Jenny Jones, and the prudish Miss Bridget Allworthy, is admirably calculated to mystify the reader and those who are willing to have suspense find a great deal of it in these events.

10. Winding up the Story Artistically

The story of *Tom Jones* is winded up artistically by the writer. All the problems here are solved. All the actions are consummated. All the chief characters, good and bad, received appropriate rewards or punishments. Nothing is left unaccounted for or undermined. There are no loose ends. The drama is played out, and the curtain at last falls on a perfectly finished performance.

11. Dramatic Element

There is something theatrical about this comedy in the form of a novel. Fielding as a dramatist handles his novel, and a dramatist he uses such devices which conform to its technique. The

assembly of the characters in London is such a device. The reversal of fortune for Tom Jones can be attributed to a dramatic device. The change of this kind is not alone in the case of Fielding. In his dialogues and suspense give an impression of drama. There is a lot of theatricality in the novel.

12. Some Blemishes

Admirably constructed though it is, the novel has its blemishes from the point of view of construction. In the matter of form, the book is open to some objections. "Fielding, as has been said, aimed at keeping his narrative within the bounds not merely of possibility but also of probability. But the death-bed scene where Allworthy suffering from a feverish cold is in the grand philosophic style, a solemn farewell is definitely improbable.

Conclusion

To sum up, the plot of *Tom Jones* is closely knit with a unity of design, it has an architectonic quality. Fielding lays down several keels in succession and binds them together with a rare skill. There is compactness in spite of digressions, there is a logical order in the progression of the events, there is regrouping done by him, his classical temperament makes the plot look solid and well woven. There is no split in the plot. No other novel of Fielding has been constructed with so much consummate skill as *Tom Jones*. In reading, one is delighted with the swiftness of the narration, the economy, the nimble and inexhaustible invention. Fielding had learnt much from his experience in the theatre, especially how to break up the narrative, set his scene in a minimum of words, and carry on the action in short and swift passages of dialogue. But it is only after reading that we realize how every detail has its place in the action, is a preparation for what is to come, the full significance of which cannot be apparent until the novel has reached its end; then, what seemed at first glance a happy stroke of invention reveals itself as part of the essential structure of the book, without which the whole could not exist.