

Tom Jones by Henry Fielding (Summary)

Tom Jones is a Picaresque story that chronicles the humorous escapades, romances and redemption of its roguish protagonist. Like most of Henry Fielding's writing, the novel is both comedic and satirical. What particularly distinguishes Tom Jones is its adaptation of the conventions of the picaresque, a genre whose early modern origins are usually traced back to Spanish works such as *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), in which a series of interconnected episodes and a parade of different social types reveal the foibles and hypocrisies of society. Fielding was admired for his intricate plots and his knowing, satiric narrators, but in Tom Jones he also scandalised some readers with the moral elasticity of his memorable main character.

Tom Jones is a child of uncertain birth. The good Squire Allworthy returns to his estate one day to find a baby abandoned in his bed. He and his sister Bridget suspect that the baby belongs to Jenny Jones, a servant of the local schoolmaster, Mr Partridge. Jenny admits that she placed the baby in the Allworthys' home, but refuses to name Tom's father. Soon thereafter, Bridget is wooed and wed by the suspect Captain Blifil, with whom she has a child who is referred to throughout the novel as Master Blifil. The unlikeable Captain Blifil dies an untimely death, but his son inherits his ungenerous character and anxiety about social status. Master Blifil finds equally unlikeable sidekicks in Mr Thwackum and Mr Square.

Tom, by contrast, is a high-spirited and exuberant youth, friendly with people of the lower classes and especially with the gamekeeper Black George. Tom grows up to love Sophia, the daughter of the neighbouring Squire Western, but he also carries on an affair with Mollie Seagrem, Black George's daughter. Squire Western does not look kindly on the illegitimate Tom as a potential son-in-law, and, though she returns his feelings, Sophia is sceptical that Tom is a reliable lover. Throughout the novel, Sophia weathers significant pressure from her family to marry Blifil, whom she despises. Eventually, Sophia takes her freedom into her own hands and escapes with her maid to a relative's house in London. Sophia's adventures on the road parallel Tom's.

Tom's fortunes change suddenly when Squire Allworthy falls seriously ill and then suddenly recovers, only to have Bridget unexpectedly die. Tom expresses his relief at the Squire's recovery with an ill-fated bout of drunken celebration, which culminates in being provoked into a fist fight by Blifil and Thwackam. Blifil tells Allworthy that Tom's rowdy behaviour and sexual escapades are evidence of his heartlessness, and Allworthy kicks Tom out of the house.

Taking to the road, Tom meets Mr Partridge, who swears he is not Tom's father but becomes Tom's travelling companion. Tom rescues a woman named Mrs Waters and then sleeps with

her, but unfortunately, Sophia has stopped at the same inn and learns about the affair. She rushes off to London and the protection of her relative, Lady Bellaston. Tom follows and decides to seduce Lady Bellaston in the hope of getting close to Sophia. Lady Bellaston decides though that she would rather keep Tom for herself and tries to get rid of Sophia by suggesting to Lord Fellamar that he assault her young relative and then marry her afterwards. Squire Western arrives in time to thwart Fellamar and Bellaston's schemes, but Sophia is nevertheless pressured to marry either Fellamar or Blifil. Fellamar's lackeys connive to get Tom arrested and thrown in jail. There, Tom re-encounters Mrs Waters, whom Partridge informs him is actually Jenny Jones. Tom is horrified to learn that his licentiousness has led him to accidentally sleep with his own mother.

Just when Tom's redemption and romantic success seem impossible, Fielding deftly brings the intricate plot to a tidy conclusion. Mrs Waters reveals that Tom is in fact the older child of Bridget Allworthy. She also reports that Blifil had intercepted a letter from Bridget to Squire Allworthy that explained Tom's parentage. Squire Allworthy disinherits Blifil and adopts Tom as his legal heir, while Tom convinces the long-suffering Sophia to forgive and marry him.

CHARACTERS

Tom Jones-Tom Jones is a handsome young man with a good heart who is born as a bastard and ends up getting into a lot of trouble because he lacks good judgment.

Sophia-Western is a beautiful, good, and sensible country heiress who falls in love with Tom Jones when they are teenagers.

Mr. Allworthy is a rich, upright, and moral philanthropist and benefactor to many people who informally adopts Tom Jones when he is an infant.

Mr. Blifil is the child of Bridget Allworthy and Captain Blifil who grows up to be a spiteful and unscrupulous young man.

Squire Western is a rich country gentleman, a drunkard, and a sportsman, who loves his daughter but treats her like property.

Mrs. Western is the vain and silly sister of Squire Western who gets involved in trying to force Sophia to marry a man she despises.

Mr. Partridge is a schoolteacher who is falsely accused of being the father of the founding Tom Jones.

Mr. Anderson is a poor man who tries to rob Tom Jones when he is on the road so that he can feed his family. He is a relative of Mrs. Miller.

Mrs. Anderson is the loving wife of Mr. Anderson and the mother of his children.

Will Barnes is the former lover of Molly and Betty Seagrim and may be the father of Molly's child.

Lady Bellaston is an evil aristocrat who seduces Tom. She will stop at nothing to satisfy her desires.

Betsy Miller is the 10-year-old daughter of Mrs. Miller.

Betty is Sophia's maid after she is forced to give up Mrs. Honour.

Captain Blifil is a fortune hunter who marries Bridget for her brother's estate, which he hopes to inherit.

Dr. Blifil is a hanger-on at Mr. Allworthy's house and arranges for his brother to meet Bridget Allworthy.

Miss Bridget Allworthy, also called Miss Bridget, is Mr. Allworthy's sister and Tom's mother who has him out of wedlock before she marries Captain Blifil. She later becomes Mrs. Blifil.

Mr. Dowling is a lawyer, becomes Mr. Allworthy's steward and Mr. Blifil's right-hand man.

Tom Edwards is one of the liars in Mrs. Bellaston's club who tells Sophia a fib about Tom.

Captain Egglane is hired by Lord Fellamar to advance his marriage proposal to Sophia and later to have Tom Jones abducted for naval service.

Mrs. Etoff is Lady Bellaston's lady's maid.

Lord Fellamar is a rich suitor and friend of Lady Bellaston who falls in love with Sophia.

Mr. Brian Fitzpatrick is a fortune hunter who marries his wife, Harriet, for her money.

Mrs. Harriet Fitzpatrick is Sophia's cousin; they live together at their Aunt Western's for a period of time. Harriet elopes with Mr. Fitzpatrick.

Black George is a poor man with a big family; he is a poacher, a gamekeeper, and disloyal friend to Tom Jones. He is also called George Seagrim.

Mrs. Honour Blackmore is Sophia's maid. She is a single woman of an older age.

Mrs. Arabella Hunt is a widow of fortune who falls in love with Tom Jones.

King of the Gypsies is the title for the man who rules over the gypsies; Tom Jones and Mr. Partridge meet him during their journey.

Lieutenant is an upright man who befriends Tom when he volunteers to go to war.

Mr. Maclachlan is an Irish friend of Mr. Fitzpatrick whom he meets at the inn at Upton when Fitzpatrick is pursuing his wife.

The Man of the Hill is the misanthrope that Tom Jones meets on his journeys. The Man has withdrawn from the world.

Mrs. Miller is a good friend of Mr. Allworthy's and a keeper of a boardinghouse where Tom Jones stays when he gets to London.

Molly Seagrim is Tom Jones's first lover; she is pregnant with a child that belongs to either Tom or Will Barnes.

Nancy Miller is the 17-year-old daughter of Mrs. Miller who gets pregnant by Mr. Jack Nightingale.

Narrator-Often speaking directly to the reader in the first person, the narrator can be assumed to be Fielding himself, since he reflects on the creation of the story and refers to his wife, Charlotte.

Mr. Jack Nightingale is a boarder at Mrs. Miller's who begins having an affair with Nancy and later marries her.

Old Nightingale or Mr. Nightingale Sr. is Jack Nightingale's father; he wants him to marry an heiress.

Uncle Nightingale is a beloved uncle of Jack Nightingale who says children should make their own decisions about marriage but doesn't really believe that.

Ensign Northerton is a scoundrel who knocks Tom Jones on the head and almost kills Mrs. Waters.

Mrs. Partridge is the nagging wife of Mr. Partridge who dies early in the story.

Peer-The peer is a rich Irish lord who helps Mrs. Fitzpatrick escape from her husband and later becomes her lover.

Betty Seagrim is Molly's sister; she hates her sister because she stole her lover.

Mr. Thomas Square is one of the tutors of Tom Jones and Mr. Blifil; he calls himself a philosopher.

Mr. Parson Supple is a good friend of Squire Western's who tries to rein him in when his behavior gets too passionate.

Susan is a maid at the inn at Upton who provides Sophia with information about Tom.

Rev. Roger Thwackum is the hypocritical clergyman who is the tutor of Tom Jones and Mr. Blifil. He constantly beats Tom when he is a child.

Mrs. Waters is the woman in distress whom Tom rescues from Northerton. Later she becomes the common-law wife of an army captain and is instrumental in shedding light on the identity of Tom's mother. She is also known as Jenny Jones, Tom's supposed mother.

Watson is a thief and gambler that the Man of the Hill meets after he leaves school.

Mr. Whitefield is the innkeeper at Gloucester where Tom Jones and Mr. Partridge stop.

Mrs. Whitefield is the wife of the innkeeper at Gloucester where Tom Jones and Mr. Partridge stop.

Mrs. Deborah Wilkins, also known as Mrs. Deborah, is a maid in Mr. Allworthy's household. She is a single woman of an older age.