Henry Fielding (1707–1754)

Life and main works
Fielding was born into an aristocratic family in 1707; he went to Eton public school, and then to the University of Leyden in Holland, where he studied the classics and law. After returning to London he started writing comedies, in which he mocks the politicians of his day and satirises the degradation of society and morals. After the ‘Licensing Act’ of 1737 which censored his plays, he was compelled to leave the theatre and took up a career in law as a magistrate devoting himself to social reform. His social work largely proved his interest in the people; he was not sentimental but generous, warm-hearted, and not, like Richardson, fascinated by social status.

During the late 1730s and early 1740s he continued to write satirical articles for ‘The Champion’, the journal he edited three years, and for other newspapers. Almost by accident, Fielding started to write novels with An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews (1741), a parody of Richardson’s Pamela; the main character in this novel shows a calculating cynicism. From Shamela followed the comic romance about Pamela’s reputed brother, The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews (1742), a novel of contemporary life and manners. In 1743 The Life of and Death of Jonathan Wild the Great appeared. This novel, which has been considered one of the finest examples of irony in English fiction, celebrates the rise and fall of a ‘Great Man’, a man who succeeds completely at his chosen field thus achieving greatness. Fielding implies that by the rules of society, goodness is of no consequence to greatness. His contemporaries understood the parable as a political allegory on the recently ended career of Walpole as prime minister. In 1749 he published his best known novel Tom Jones, and in 1751 Amelia, a novel about social problems. He continued to write satirical novels until 1751. Fielding’s ardent commitment to the cause of justice in the early 1750s coincided with a rapid deterioration of his health. In 1754 he went to Portugal to improve his health, but died soon after his arrival.

1 READ Fielding’s biography and collect data in the table below.

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The comic epic novel
While Defoe and Richardson tried to hide the fictional nature of their work under the guise of ‘memoirs’, and ‘letters’ respectively, Fielding created the ‘comic epic novel’. With Fielding, the novel becomes ‘epic’, even if a mocking one: the characters, who belong to different social classes, have psychological qualities similar to the ones of epic heroes, but they are travelling to London and not to a mysterious Mediterranean island or across the battlefields of Troy like in Homer’s epic poems; moreover their actions are only frivolous and ridiculous. Fielding goes one step further: the story is a creation of the artist, not a record of reality. He appeals not to the reader’s heart and feelings as Richardson did but to his sense: he presents not feelings and emotions but actions and manners which reveal his characters’ nature. He owes much to Cervantes’ (1547–1616) comic romance Don Quixote and to the studies of contemporary morals and manners by the painter William Hogarth. His humorous use of the devices of the picaresque tale, mock epic and romance in a narrative with a wide social range paved the way for the 19th-century novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and William Makepeace Thackeray.

He addresses to a larger public, which includes the upper-classes. While Richardson had the story told in letters by the characters themselves, Fielding is present both as narrator and as interpreter not only of the events, but also of the method he is using and of the art form he is creating.

Characters
Fielding’s characters must behave consistently from beginning to end and their inner thoughts and anxieties, are not the main interest of the writer. His novels contain a wider variety of characters than those of Richardson: they belong to all classes, and his extensive social panorama constitutes a true, broad picture of the society of the 18th century.
Moral aim
Fielding condemns hypocrisy and rebels against the puritan code of the age that considered respectability synonymous with virtue. While for Richardson virtue and reputation went together, for Fielding, they rarely go together for virtue is a matter of innate disposition and intention rather than a matter of public demonstration; he believes that there are neither wholly good nor wholly bad characters and that man is naturally inclined to goodness.

Narrative technique
Fielding uses the third-person narrative technique; the narrator is obtrusive because he intervenes in the narration with warnings, ironic comments and moral reflections about what happens. The tone used is conversational and ironic, the humour and the sharp irony save his works from excessive sentimentality.

Tom Jones (1749)
The story Tom is a foundling and has been adopted by a virtuous gentleman, Mr Allworthy. The protagonist of this novel is a generous creature, full of vital energy and impulses; he grows up with Mr Allworthy’s nephew, Blifil, falls in love with Sophia, the daughter of a rich neighbour, and she returns his love, notwithstanding her father’s opposition. Unfortunately Blifil is jealous of Tom and ruins his reputation with his benefactor. Tom is turned out of the house and sets out for Bristol and then for London; during the journey he passes through various adventures. Finally by the discovery of the secret of his birth and the revelation of Blifil’s villainy, he obtains the favour of Mr Allworthy again and marries Sophia.

The plot of Tom Jones is rather ingenuous, but the story is told in a lively and entertaining way, never giving the impression of tragedy, not even when Tom is put into prison. Like most of the 18th-century novels, Tom Jones belongs to the picaresque tradition and its structure reveals the writer’s ability in handling plot. The novel is made up of six volumes with three books to a volume; six books are set in Somerset in the English countryside, six are devoted to Tom’s wanderings on the road across England, and the last six books have London as their main setting.

A moral essay Since the narrative and descriptive parts are fewer than the ideological ones, this novel can be considered a long moral essay. Its moral aim is also underlined by the numerous warnings of the narrator about the natural goodness of men; Tom stands for what is generous and spontaneous in the human race and he testifies Fielding’s positive beliefs in the good disposition of man.

Fielding avoids in this novel the autobiographical form typical of Defoe and chooses the third person; he introduces the new character of the story-teller, who is omniscient and obtrusive; he intervenes and expresses his opinion on everybody, he anticipates events, interrupting the narration of the central plot to pass to another episode with the intention of creating suspense.

Characters The characters are grouped and contrasted. Tom is contrasted with Blifil; Tom is kind-hearted, generous, honest and has common sense; Blifil on the contrary is a hypocrite, he teaches virtue and does evil. The motives of action are judged: Tom is excused while Blifil is condemned. There is a great coherence between what the characters are, what they do and what happens to them.

Major and minor characters offer a rich gallery of social types; apart from Allworthy, Tom and Sophia, the remaining figures express Fielding’s irony regarding the faults of mankind. Men of all professions are shown as impostors, ignorant and unskilled; but the most negative portraits concern women, since money is their only real interest. All the characters are directly introduced through lively dialogue: this technique gives the reader a dynamic view of the relations existing between the different characters.

Style In Tom Jones each of the eighteen books begins with a short chapter in which the narrator comments on his own novel and on general aspects of aesthetics and the craft of fiction. These digressions are an integral part of the novel. Thus Fielding exploited the comic possibilities of the self-conscious narrator device, and so paved the way for Sterne’s use of it in Tristram Shandy.

The writer is not interested in emotional, sentimental situations, he is concerned with the epic form and content: there are a great deal of scenes with large groups battling one against the other, represented in a realistic way and in a style that is witty, ironic, direct, linear and concrete.

2 TAKE notes under the following headings to organise your knowledge about the work of Henry Fielding:
1 what kind of novel he created;
2 his characters;
3 the moral aim of his novels;
4 the narrative technique he employed;
5 the main events of his masterpiece, Tom Jones;
6 what Tom stands for;
7 the main features of the style employed.
In this passage, Tom Jones is going to London and he is carrying a banknote for a lady. A guide and his servant Partridge are with him.

They were got about two miles beyond Barnet, and it was now the dusk\(^1\) of the evening, when a genteel looking\(^2\) man, but upon a very shabby\(^3\) horse, rode up to Jones, and asked him whether he was going to London, to which Jones answered in the affirmative. The gentleman replied, ‘I should be obliged to you, sir, if you will accept of my company; for it is very late, and I am a stranger to the road’. Jones readily complied with\(^4\) the request; and on they travelled together, holding that sort of discourse which is usual on such occasions.

Of this, indeed\(^5\), robbery was the principal topic\(^6\); upon which subject the stranger expressed great apprehensions; but Jones declared he had very little to lose, and consequently as little\(^7\) to fear. Here Partridge could not forbear\(^8\) putting in his word. ‘Your honour’, said he, ‘may think it a little, but I am sure, if I had a hundred pound bank note in my pocket, as you have, I should be very sorry to lose it; but, for my part, I never was less afraid in my life; for we are four of us, and if we all stand by\(^9\), one another, the best man in England can’t rob\(^10\) us. Suppose he should have a pistol, he can kill but\(^1\) one of us, and a man can die but once, that’s my comfort, a man can die but once’.

Besides the reliance\(^12\) on superior numbers, a kind of valour which hath raised a certain nation among the现代s to a high pitch of glory, there was another reason for the extraordinary courage which Partridge now discovered; for he had at present as much of that quality as was in the power of liquor to bestow\(^13\).

Our company were now arrived within\(^14\) a mile of Highgate, when the stranger turned short\(^15\) upon Jones, and pulling out a pistol, demanded that little bank note which Partridge had mentioned.

Jones was at first somewhat\(^16\) shocked at this unexpected demand; however, he presently\(^17\) recollected himself, and told the highwayman\(^18\), all the money he had in his pocket was entirely at his service; and so saying, he pulled out upwards of\(^19\) three guineas, and offered to deliver it; but the other answered with an oath\(^20\), that would not do\(^21\). Jones answered coolly, he was very sorry for it, and returned the money into his pocket.

The highwayman then threatened, if he did not deliver\(^22\) the bank note that moment he must shoot him; holding his pistol at the same time very near to his breast\(^23\). Jones instantly caught hold of the fellow’s hand, which trembled so that he could scarce\(^24\) hold the pistol in it, and turned the muzzle\(^25\) from him.

A struggle then ensued\(^26\), in which the former wrested\(^27\) the pistol from the hand of his antagonist, and both came from their horse on the ground together, the highwayman upon his back, and the victorious Jones upon him.

The poor fellow now began to implore mercy of the conqueror; for, to say the truth, he was in strength by no means a match for Jones\(^28\). ‘Indeed, sir’, says he, ‘I could have had no intention to shoot you, for you will find the pistol was not loaded\(^29\). This is the first robbery I ever attempted, and I have been driven by distress\(^30\) to this’.  

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1. dusk: Crepuscolo.
2. genteel looking: Dall’aria raffinata.
3. shabby: Malconcio.
4. complied with: Accodiscese.
5. indeed: In effetti.
6. topic: Argomento.
7. as little: Altrettanto poco.
8. forbear: Trattenersi dal.
9. stand by: Ci sosteniamo.
10. rob: Derubare.
11. but: Solo.
12. reliance: Fiducia.
13. to bestow: Conferire.
14. within: A meno di.
15. turned short: Si voltò di scatto.
16. somewhat: Alquanto.
17. presently: Subito.
18. highwayman: Bandito.
19. upwards of: Piti di.
20. an oath: Un’imprecazione.
21. that would not do: Che non bastava.
22. he did not deliver: Non consegnava.
23. breast: Petto.
25. muzzle: Canna (di arma da fuoco).
26. ensued: Seguì.
27. wrested: Strappò.
28. by no ... Jones: Assolutamente non in grado di competere con Jones.
29. loaded: Carica.
30. distress: Miseria.
At this instant, at about an hundred and fifty yards distance, lay another person on the ground, roaring for mercy in a much louder voice than the highwayman. This was no other than Partridge himself, who endeavouring to make his escape from the engagement, had been thrown from his horse, and lay flat on his face, not daring to look up, and expecting every minute to be shot. In this posture he lay, till the guide, who was no otherwise concerned than for his horses, having secured the stumbling beast, came up to him and told him, his master had got the better of the highwayman.

Partridge leapt up at this news, and ran back to the place, where Jones stood with his sword drawn in his hand to guard the poor fellow; which Partridge no sooner saw, than he cried out, ‘Kill the villain, sir, run him through the body, kill him this instant’. Luckily however for the poor wretch he had fallen into more merciful hands; for Jones having examined the pistol, and found it to be really unloaded, began to believe all the man had told him before Partridge came up; namely, that he was a novice in the trade, and that he had been driven to it by the distress he mentioned, the greatest indeed imaginable, that of five hungry children, and a wife lying in of a sixth, in the utmost want and misery. The truth of all which the highwayman most vehemently asserted, and offered to convince Mr Jones of, if he would take the trouble to go to his house, which was not above two miles off; saying, ‘That he desired no favour, but upon condition of proving all he had alleged’.

Jones at first pretended that he would take the fellow at his word, and return with him, declaring that his fate should depend entirely on the truth of his story. Upon this the poor fellow immediately expressed so much alacrity, that Jones was perfectly satisfied with his veracity, and began now to entertain sentiments of compassion for him. He returned the fellow his empty pistol, advised him to think of honester means of relieving his distress, and gave him a couple of guineas for the immediate support of his wife and his family; adding ‘he wished he had more for his sake, but the hundred pound that had been mentioned, was not his own’.

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**COMPREHENSION**

1 **AFTER READING** the passage note down:
   1 the setting in time and place;
   2 what the stranger asked Tom;
   3 what they spoke about during their travel;
   4 why Partridge was not afraid of robberies;
   5 how Tom and Partridge reacted to the stranger’s attack;
   6 what happened to Partridge;
   7 what had driven the stranger to rob Tom;
   8 what Tom did in the end.

**ANALYSIS**

2 **FOCUS** on the narrative technique.
   1 Is the narrator internal or external to the story?
   2 Is the reader given only one point of view of the incident?
3 **CONCENTRATE** on the main character, Tom Jones. Fielding does not describe his psychological qualities directly, but he suggests them indirectly through the character’s actions.

1 Define the traits suggested by the action in the following lines: 9–10, 25–33, 68–72.

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<tr>
<th>Actions</th>
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2 Another technique used by Fielding in portraying his characters is juxtaposition. In this extract Partridge, a minor character is juxtaposed to Tom Jones. Complete the sentences with details about Partridge which correspond to those about Tom Jones.

- Tom is brave because he shows no fear; Partridge
- Tom is generous because he gives the stranger two guineas; Partridge
- Tom is merciful because he does not kill the stranger; Partridge

A Have you noticed a reversal in Partridge’s psychological traits?
B Partridge is a negative character and the author makes fun of him. What makes him very ridiculous? What social type does he represent?

4 **SCAN** the passage. Fielding created the comic epic novel. State the epic and the comic features in this passage.