

Portrayal of the Picaresque in *The Unfortunate Traveller* by Thomas Nashe

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Abstract

The picaresque novel, an English literature genre, is a 16th-century development. Centering on the figure of a dashing hero or rogue, picaresque novels depict frolicking misadventures usually conceptualized as a means of survival in an amoral society. The rogue and his courageous acts of misadventure form the bulk of amusement that picaresque novels engender. Thomas Nashe, one of the earliest practitioners of the novel form in English, left a lasting impression in the history of English literature with his picaresque novel *The Unfortunate Traveller*. The novel satisfies all the criteria to be called a picaresque novel. The excellence of Nashe as a storyteller has been exemplified by his literary creation, the notorious Jack Wilton, the novel's hero. The sense of picaresque is palpable throughout the novel in the acts of satirizing the social corruption with the use of dark humor or ribaldry and unflinching or unfabricated illustration of criminal acts. This paper seeks to reflect upon the presence of adventurous elements in Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*.

Keywords: picaresque novel, misadventures, ribaldry

Introduction

The picaresque novel is a genre of prose fiction. The adventurous stories focus on the adventures of a lovable roguish protagonist, usually of low social class, who lives by his wits in an immoral society. This novel style originated in Spain in 1554 and flourished throughout Europe for more than two hundred years. The term 'picaresque' comes from the Spanish word 'pícaro,' referring to a rogue or a rascal. The central character of a picaresque novel wanders from place to place and meets with people from different socio-economic strata. The picaresque novel is usually satirical, and it also contains comic elements. Although picaresque details can be noticed in the works of influential writers like Chaucer and Boccaccio, the modern picaresque is said to begin with the Spanish novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*, published anonymously in 1554. The book tells the life story of a pícaro boy. *History of the Life of Boston* is another Spanish picaresque novel describing the life of a pícaro. Miguel de

Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) is an example of an adventurous story. Cervantes popularized the genre, which flourished all over Europe for the next two centuries. *Don Quixote* is a strong satire of medieval chivalric romances. M.H. Abrams has described it as a quasi-picaresque narrative. The hero of *Don Quixote* is a foolish knight who wants to earn eternal fame by imitating the deeds of famous knights.

Picaresque fiction usually incorporates some distinguishable characteristics, all or some of which an author may employ for effect. A picaresque narrative is generally written in the first person as an autobiographical account of the protagonist. The picaresque novel is episodic. It usually lacks a healthy -constructed plot, and the story is narrated in a series of loosely connected adventures or episodes. Despite undergoing different experiences and problematic situations, the main character remains unaffected by them and does not abide by prevailing social codes. They overcome all the hardships using wit and bravery. The character development is very minimal in the case of the main character. Once a picaro always remains a picaro. Their circumstances may change, but these rarely result in a change in his character. The language of the picaresque novel is witty and satirical. The picaresque elements are narrated in a language of realism. It provides an ironic or satirical insight into the hypocrisy and corruption of society.

The central character of a picaresque novel is a rogue, and although he may do some pretty nasty stuff, he physically doesn't hurt or abuse people and is lovable. Carefree nature and rascality positions the picaresque hero as a sympathetic outsider untouched by the rules and regulations of society. *The Unfortunate Traveller or the Life of Jack Wilton* (1594) can be considered an early experiment by Thomas Nashe with this particular genre in English literature. This type of novel was quite popular in England during the 18th century. Some of the most well-known adventurous stories of this time are *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751), both by Tobias Smollett. *Tom Jones* (1749) by Henry Fielding and *Moll Flanders* (1722) by Daniel Defoe are also important examples of picaresque novels. The English picaresque stories usually depict an episodic recounting of the adventurous experiences of an anti-hero on the road.

Discussion

The picaresque novel portrays the experiences of a rogue who is dependent on his wits to survive in a corrupt society. The novel's plot generally displays a series of realistic and exciting events during the adventurous journey of the roguish protagonist or the picaro. The protagonist of the book *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Jack Wilton, is the perfect embodiment of an adventurous hero. Jack Wilton is a page in the English army at the time of Henry VIII of England. He drifts from one place to another and comes across various virtuous and corrupt people and witnesses many kinds of societies. Jack is a dashing hero who exhibits different moods and goes through many colorful experiences in the story. At the novel's beginning, Jack introduces himself as a rogue and an 'appendix or page' of the English court living by his wits in Henry VIII's military camp in France at the siege of Tournai and Twin. Jack Wilton is a

character with a keen sense of humor which is typical of a picaresque hero. During the Elizabethan period, wit referred to both verbal and written ingenuity. The way he introduces himself displays his clear awareness of his roguishness and a high sense of individuality which takes pleasure in its inventory wit “..What strategical acts and monuments do you think an egregious infant of my years might enact?.” (Steane, 198) Jack uses his wit to deceive other people and to come out of every problematic situation. While the English troops are kept near Turwin in France, Jack pretends that he has overheard the king and his council planning to do away with a particular cider merchant. He terrifies the ale housekeeper known as 'the lord of misrule' into distributing his stores. He seduces Diamante, accused of adultery by her husband, by playing with her pride, namely the vengeful wish to give her husband a genuine cause for complaint. Jack takes utmost pride in declaring the fact that he lives by his wit “..Amongst this chaff was I winnowing my wits to live merrily, and by my troth, so I did; the prince could but command men spend their blood in his service; I could make them spend all the money they had for my pleasure..”(Steane, 198)

Although Jack's actions exhibit immorality and rascality, readers feel sympathetic towards him. This is a specific aspect of the picaresque novel in which the central character appears to be lovable despite his immoral tendencies. His unique way of exploitation and rascality presents him as a notorious but not cruel character. Nashe's Jack is also a charming rogue who is falsely accused of different crimes on multiple occasions. For example, in Italy, Heraclide's husband accuses him of raping Heraclide, but in reality, Jack is innocent. The picaresque novels are set in a low society filled with evil characters. Different episodes of *The Unfortunate Traveller* are filled with vivid descriptions of violence, murder, betrayal, and corruption. Nashe's novel is set in a low and corrupt society where moral degradation and instability are the norms. Almost all characters of the story are imbued with a tint of wickedness. Throughout the journey, Jack encounters catastrophes, one after another. In the novel's first episode, the narrator describes the terrible fate of the Munster Anabaptists and the process of their execution. He also comments on the grotesque sweating sickness, a deadly contagious disease that made him run away from England. “..let me quietly descend to the waning of my youthful days, and tell a little of the sweating sickness, that made me in a cold sweat take my heels and run out of England..” (212). In Italy, the narrative takes a darker turn which Wilton describes as the ‘sodom of Italy .’In Rome, Jack witnesses the rape of Heraclide by Esdras and the subsequent suicide of the distraught Heraclide. The character known as the "banished earl," who saves Jack from execution, warns him of the dangers of travel and rattles off a dozen reasons to avoid travel. According to the earl, in Italy, "one only learns the art of atheism, the art of epicurizing, the art of whoring, the art of poisoning, the art of sodomitry”(266).

On the other hand, in France, one only gains knowledge of wine and the "French disease" syphilis. In Spain, one only learns the style of strange clothing, and the Dutch excel only in their drinking. These types of accounts display the typical picaresque image of a

corrupt society. Brutality and religious hypocrisy are present in the episode in which Jack Wilton is saved by the pope's mistress Juliana from the hands of Jewish Zadok and the pope's physician Zachary. They were planning to use Jack for laboratory experiments at the anatomical college. However, Jack escapes the investigation and reunites with Diamante while Zachary flees, and Zadok faces horrible torture and execution. Towards the novel's end, Jack and Diamante witness the performance and death of Cutwolf, the brother of Bartol, Esdras's servant. Cutwolf also publicly admits that he has forced Esdras to blaspheme and shot him by discharging a pistol into his mouth, dooming his soul for eternity. The depiction of violence in the book and Jack's way of narrating it can be analyzed in the light of Jack's desire for revenge and rebellion against a repressive society.

Character development is very minimal in a picaresque novel. The hero characteristically remains the same throughout the story. An adventurous book incorporates situations ranging from tragic to comic, but the main character usually remains unaffected and heroically comes out of every situation. Jack Wilton does not improve as a character in the novel *The Unfortunate Traveler*. He fails to learn anything significant from his adventures. The title itself refers to such kind of an unfortunate hero who fails to gain anything from his journey. Moreover, Jack's emotional dissociation from the serious actions and events establishes him as an adventurous hero with unintelligible characteristics. We cannot clearly say whether his emotional detachment from the tragic incidents is his wisdom or foolishness. Satire is another primary element of a picaresque novel. The genre can be considered a parody of medieval chivalric romances, where a seemingly heroic rogue embarks on a journey and presents audacious and ridiculous descriptions of his thrilling experiences. In *The Unfortunate Traveller*, the narrator-protagonist satirizes the Anabaptists, led by John of Leiden, for their attempt to fight with soldiers with inadequate accouterments. The narrator describes the brutality done to the Anabaptists and shows no concern towards them because they expect God to punish their enemies. Their prayer represents nothing but revenge and violence. " ..These Anabaptists had not yet forsaken all and followed Christ, they had not forsaken their desires of revenge and innovation, they had not abandoned their expectation of the spoil of their enemies." (220). Satire can also be noticed in the witty language the narrator uses to describe different people and events. We can see the wit in how the narrator describes famous satirist Pietro Aretino. According to the narrator, Aretino's pen was "sharp-pointed like a poniard; no leaf he wrote on but was like a burning glass to set on fire all his readers" (239). Jack is a keen observer whose vision is unconsciously satirical. He is an unsympathetic speculator of the concluding scene of Cutwolf's execution. His lackadaisical nature allows him to maintain a satiric attitude towards experiences and look at a tragic world through a comic lens.

The novel employs the first-person narrative technique, and the story's narrative is episodic. The entire book is narrated in some loosely interconnected episodes. The novel has an unconventional narrative structure. Nashe described the novel as being in a cleanly different vein from the other works that he has written. The various episodes of the story describe

different places and experiences of the narrator and the narrative shifts from one place to another along with the traveling narrator. The first episode tells the grotesque sweating sickness of England. The second episode comments on the massacre of the Anabaptist faction led by John of Leiden by the emperor and the Duke of Saxony. The final episode describes the execution of Cutwolf, the blasphemy of Esdras, and the narrator's final return to the English encampment in France, where the story first began. Jack Wilton's narrative can be called an effective ironic or satirical survey of the hypocrisies and corruptions of Elizabethan society.

Conclusion

Thomas Nashe's work *The Unfortunate Traveller, Or The Life of Jack Wilton*, is considered by many critics as one of the earliest picaresque novels in English. The novel, set during the reign of King Henry VIII of England, satisfies all the requirements to be adventurous. The book tells the story of its protagonist, a cunning rogue Jack Wilton, as he gallivants through Europe. With its episodic narrative structure, low-life setting, and roguish hero, the page-boy and cunning Jack Wilton, it is often representative of picaresque fiction. The work contains clever pastiche, harsh satire, and sharp observations of its contemporary society. The novel's narrative shifts suddenly from country to country and political situation to political situation. It describes adventurous events that revolve around Jack Wilton and shows his ability to escape every problematic situation due to his wit and trickery. The novel's adventurous element persistently reminds us of an episodic narrative that focuses on the adventures of a notorious protagonist who is up to all sorts of tricks and often gets himself and others into various challenging situations. The picturesque element is a signifying characteristic of Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, although the work resists categorization of any sort. It also resists the attempts to find a kind of depth and structural unity, which critics would like it to have. However, it does have a unique place of its own in the world of literature. It remains an essential example of picaresque fiction and a forerunner of the English novel.

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