

WHAT IS THE PICARESQUE?

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The picaresque novel has been widely acknowledged as a distinct literary genre by virtue of its form and its particular vision of reality. However, it has been considered as belonging to a past time and a picaresque vision in this modern era has been possible with the potential of the traditional picaresque understanding.

The picaresque novel made its first appearance in Europe in 1554. That year three slightly different versions of a short anonymous novel appeared in close succession in Burgos, Alcalá de Henares, and Antwerp. The title of the novel was **La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades**(Chandler 1958:16).

As a literary genre the picaresque novel first attracted scholarly attention towards the middle of the nineteenth century; and by 1899, the first classification appeared in F. W. Chandler's **Romances of Roguery: An Episode in the History of the Novel** which was followed in 1907 by his two volume study *The Literature of Roguery*. These works, together with Fonger de Haan's **An Outline History of the Novella Picaresca in Spain** (1903) became the starting point of further investigation (Chandler 1958:25).

A common belief in the critical works dealing with the novel is the view that picaresque literature flourishes when a society is in a state of flux; the picaresque character is a reflection of a society in deep change (Hague 1986:217). Blackburn and Bjornson both discuss the creation of the Spanish picaresque tradition in the light of the situation of the picaros in the sixteenth century. Persecuted and denied certain rights and privileges in Spanish society such as the holding of Church or civil offices, the earliest picaros, "conversos" ¹, as they were then

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¹"Converso". is called a person who might have abandoned one faith without gaining another, a potentially lost soul skeptical of traditional dogma and morality. The category of conversos must be used cautiously, because the forcibly converted Jews were just as Spanish as were the Old Christians. Between 1485 and 1501 in Toledo alone over seven thousand converso artisans, professional men, merchants and city officials were dishonored by the Inquisition. For more information about "conversos" see, Alexander Blackburn, **The Myth of the Picaro** (University of North Carolina Press, 1979) pp. 8-11, and Robert Alter, **Rogue's Progress Studies in Picaresque Novel**. (Cambridge, MA, 1964), pp. 26-28.

called, were forced to hide their Jewish heritage. Bjornson defines the essential picaresque situation as the "paradigmatic confusion between an isolated individual and hostile society" as in the case of the "converso" whom he describes as individuals isolated from the Jewish culture but who also had abandoned the Christian world they had tried to enter (1977:4). According to Blackburn conversos are "marginal men" who lived in a world of tension and instability (1979:9).

From this perspective, Guillen describes the picaro as "an individual who is involved in a tangle, an economic and social predicament of the most immediate and pressing nature" (1971:77). According to Guillen, the picaresque novel represents a "confrontation between the individual and his environment which is also a conflict between inwardness and experience" (1971:78). In the older picaresque literature the picaro is an insular, an isolated being who is frequently an orphan who must function in an environment for which he is not prepared. He soon discovers that there is no refuge from society and that "social role playing is indispensable". He can neither join nor reject his fellowmen nor function as an "half outsider" (Guillen 1971:79). The material level of existence is also emphasized in these novels. In the same way, the picaro observes the world collectively in its social classes, professions, cities and nations.

The general state of confusion has always surrounded the concept of the picaresque. The variety and the diversity of works, which have been described as "picaresque", are easily recognizable as causes of the differences of opinion (Blanche 1956:10). As a result of the enormous popularity and influence of the eighteenth-century French and English works, which are better known among scholars, the significance of their Spanish models has unfortunately been obscured. In this manner, the titles **Gil Blass**, **Moll Flanders** and even **Tom Jones** remain for many synonymous with the term picaresque while the titles of their Spanish models are not remembered. Aside from a neglect of the genre's prototypes, the generalized focus on works by Le Sage, Defoe, Smollett and Fielding concludes in producing a limited image of what a picaresque is and can be. Critical attention limited to works such as **Gil Blas**, **Moll Flanders**, **Roderick Random** and **Tom Jones** has resulted in the common belief that picaresque narratives are somewhat disjointed, episodic, high-spirited and adventure stories (Alter 1964:26-8).

The popular assumption of the critics on the picaresque genre that every success story of a protagonist who climbs up the social ladder can be a picaro is a misconception founded on the eighteenth-century "picaresques". Even in the matter of the picaro's career, success

stories are hardly the norm. That is to say, not many picares "rise", but many end in the galleys and gallows. On the other hand, the critical eclecticism in relation to the picaresque novel inevitably led to a diffusion of the term picaresque (Lewis 1959:26-7).

So, as long as one did not regard the picaresque as a closed episode in the development of the western novel but as a still viable possibility, "anything episodic could be labeled picaresque" (Alter 1964:38-9).

Eventually, the picaro's life as an outsider was accurately identified with modern man's despair and existential anguish. There seemed to be something picaresque about many twentieth-century novels which were otherwise strikingly different from one another (Wicks 1971:73-4). As Frohock has said in his essay, "the disparities between the sensibilities and moral premises of various epoches did not seem to be taken into account" (1969:64). Consecutively, the term picaresque lost its meaning. That is to say, almost everything could be picaresque. For if adventure stories of rogues and vagabonds are all picaresque, one could certainly ask what, then, is not.

The solution to this problem has come from different quarters. For a number of decades Hispanics have focused their attention on the Spanish "novella picaresca" as Frohock has named it (1969:69). Much of the discussion has revolved around the novels such as the anonymous **Lazarillo de Tormes**, published in 1554; Mateo Aleman's **Guzman de Alfarache**, which appeared in two parts in 1559 and 1604, and Quevedo's **Buscon** in 1626²

As Guillen suggests, the establishment of a genre "depends on the recognition of the actual poetics of a given work and its imitation and transformation" (1953:73). Therefore, in the case of the picaresque, the appearance of **Lazarillo de Tormes** in 1554 and of the first part of **Guzman de Alfarache** in 1559 established a basic framework that would be tested later, developing in time, and undergoing various changes for better and for worse. It is with this perspective in mind that one should view later works, be it **Gil Blas** or **Moll Flanders**.

The limited perspective of various definitions of the genre must not exclude the fact that although a genre has constant features, its specific influence in a work changes, depending on the writer, the country and the period. In a general and theoretic discussion of

²For more information on Spanish Picaresque Tradition, see. Alexander Parker. **Literature and the Delinquent: The Picaresque Novel in Spain and Europe, 1599- 1753** (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press), pp. 47-59.

narrative forms, Robert Scholes describes "a system which divides all fiction into modes that are available to writers as possible forms of literary expression" (1966:27). Ulrick Wicks then applies Scholes's theory while examining the picaresque genre within the larger framework of a "picaresque myth" (1989:243).

Since the English picaresque developed in parallel with its European counterparts, it is important to examine the tradition within its context. Therefore, before turning one's attention to the specific peculiarities of contemporary English fiction, one should glance at the general history of the genre's transformations.

Lazarillo de Tormes, as the first picaresque novel in 1554, achieved great popularity both in Spain and other countries. The novel's popularity mostly rested on its entertaining nature. As a record of the jolly adventures of a social outcast, it certainly appealed to the wider reading public. At the same time, *Lazarillo de Tormes*³ echoed chords familiar from an oral tradition of longer standing. Being on the surface, the story of an ingenious trickster in unrelenting combat against the odds of fortune and rigid social structure, it contained motifs and incidents reminiscent to its contemporaries of certain elements common to their folk tales.

Lazarillo's life story is told in seven chapters of different lengths which he calls "treaties". They take the reader from Lazarillo's birth to a poor miller on the banks of the river Tormes, through his childhood to his youth when he served seven different masters, and later on he became independent gaining a position as town crier in Toledo. Each episode is a link in the chain leading to the narrative core which is both the source and aim of the tale.

Miller indicates the choice of the epistolary form, long considered suited for a confession and extraordinarily popular as a genre in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, gives the author significant advantages (1967:38). The carefully placed remarks to the addressee also serve to link a given episode from the past with the narrative present. For example, in the first chapter, a very funny story about Lazarillo stealing a sausage from the blind man is told in great detail (3-4). Lazarillo immediately gives an account of how the prophecy of success was fulfilled later in his life. In this connection, the beggar's words come true in the last chapter. According to the prophecy, not only does Lazarillo derive part of his income from

³J. Gerald Markley, Trans., *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* (New York: Bobs-Meril, 1954). This will be cited in the text merely by its page number

advertising wines, but from his friendship with the archpriest of San Salvador.

His integrity and individuality as a narrator are established by the use of the most natural, nearly colloquial language, totally unaffected and free from any literariness. In this way, the reader is allowed to read other people's correspondence, to observe the inner workings of another's psyche and another's life, free from an interfering third person narrator.

Another important feature of the genre is its singleness of view point. The picaresque singleness of view-point consists in distinguishing appearance from reality and fiction from fact with exaggeration. This also explains the dilemma of the picaro. That is to say, the contradictions in his behavior and the changes of the individual-environment relationship do not seem to affect the basic unity of the picaresque novel, because all elements are presented from a common view point. It is common that the narrative of the picaresque novel is told by the picaro himself who is a rogue or a former rogue. And whatever happens in the story the narrator is always involved, never an impartial observer. The most trivial detail or insignificant action is integrated into this overall perspective, sometimes seeming to be more important than the narrative itself. This effect requires a consistency of style. Moreover, truthfulness in the picaresque novel is achieved through doubt, insecurity and cynicism of the picaro, the narrator. With the help of its unique style, the picaro is able to look upwards and laugh quietly, simply indicating the hypocrisy and the false pretences. This critical attitude seemed to several modern writers harmful and unconstructed. But, the picaresque novel is most original, as we have seen, when it is most limited. The singleness of approach is very effective. More clearly, it brings together many loose ends and blends the different sections of the narrative. And by doing so, it heightens the effect of the reading experience.

Lazarillo's wanderings from master to master are suited to the presentation of corruption and moral decay. Lazarillo's contact with all social classes, particularly with the three major levels of sixteenth century Spanish society - the nobility, the clergy, and the underworld - broadens the scope of the panorama. However, the fact that Lazarillo himself is not spared, that he is shown to be a willing participant to the daily existence indicates that the ultimate purpose of *Lazarillo de Tormes* lies beyond the boundaries of social criticism. Rather, its purpose is a moral history, the chronicle of the gradual corruption of an innocent and his spiritual death. That is, Lazarillo feels lonely in the world, and every experience serves his egoistic self-reliance. As a

mature person, he is an outsider and ready to conform to society. But the world he aspires to is corrupt, thus, false appearances can only lead to false ideals.

The picaro's loneliness is not due to his poor ability for friendship. The basic situation of the picaresque novel is the solitude in the world, of its principal character. This is not the retreat of the hermit or exclusion from society. The picaro is lonely in the world, totally isolated from society, and cut off from any foundation of "security", such as family, money, friends or social position. Similarly, he is unattached, boundless, at loss in a hostile, social position. The extent of his isolation includes solitude, insecurity and restlessness. In addition, life appears to him primarily as a long wandering without end. Therefore, solitude, confusion, shipwreck and misery are some of the most widely used terms used to describe the situation of the picaro. The picaro, unlike the jester, the criminal, or the ruffian, is in no way outstanding, neither in heroism nor in vice. He is simply faced with the immediate problems of existence such as food, shelter and heating. He needs to subsist, to keep himself afloat in the confusion.

The picaro has no past nor any trust in the future. His living must be fought for and extorted from a corrupt society. He is obliged to come to terms with an environment that is cruel and unrewarding toward all. For this contest he is equipped with both offensive and defensive weapons. His greatest defensive weapons are his resiliency or capacity for adaptation as well as his stoical good humor. He is willing to learn and make concessions, but, in case of failure, he will not whine and brood, but forget and be merry.

Guile and wile are offensive methods for the picaro's material survival (Blanch 1956:16). Honest effort, servitude, sacrifice do not appeal to him very long, as he shirks responsibility or permanence and laughs at honor or reputation (Heilman 1959:137). He needs two things: comfort and ease; yet, by temperament he is willing to obtain them by deceitful and improvised means only.

The reader would notice in the central situation in the novel-the precariousness and the rootless odyssey of the hero from danger to danger, the sense of materiality of existence, the persistent theme of hunger and the sufferings of the individual persecuted by fortune. Each master becomes an enemy and each colleague a new rival and the cruelty of the world is progressively shown by each situation. He achieves through his suffering a measure of wisdom as well as a final liberation from the strokes of fortune. In short, the development of Lazarillo is a true progress.

One of the dominant devices of the picaresque novel is the highly episodic plot. As a work of literature the picaresque novel was simply a series of episodes whose sole link was their occurrence in the life of the picaro, the agile anti-hero who joins together all the events by sole reason of the fact that he is the important actor in them all (Miller 1967:12).

The episodes in the picaresque novel are rarely linked by rationally comprehended cause and effect. Strict chronology is generally its ordering factor being the only link between episodes. And since there is only evolvment, not development, of the picaro's character, this potentially unifying factor is missing as well. As Claudio Guillen puts forward, the most episodic events of the picaresque novels do not even provide for the reintroduction of supporting characters to further action and develop plot. They may appear in one episode, never to be seen again as the picaro travels on (1971:84). Like chronological sequencing and a swiftly changing cast, the travel element represents one more characteristic of the episodic picaresque plot.

"Dame fortune" also plays a special role in the picaresque novel. She spins the wheel and calls the stops. This is not chance; because the word "chance" refers to the unpredictable nature of events in the physical world. "Fortune", on the other hand, refers to the "force" behind chance events. As to fortune, Miller puts:

In the picaresque novel the classical and Renaissance motif of fortune dominates the entire action. The whole picaresque tradition is full of statements, laments, and complaints about fortune (1967:9).

For the picaro there is no grand Providence, no logical cause and effect, no obvious author hovering about to shape the plot of life. Only fortune dominates, and fortune holds continuation. The picaro can not be reconciled to it in a dynamic, organic relationship. The picaro can only wend his way as best as he can through the obstacle course which fortune has set up for him. In the picaro's experience, fortune is either decadent or absent. Miller says: "Lazaro's fate is in the lap of gods, but the gods are continually dropping it" (1967:28).

Closely related to fortune are the themes of accident and rhythm. Fortune refers to the unpredictable nature of events in the physical world. Accident seems to lie at the heart of all occurrences. In fact the picaro's actions are frequently separated from the very events that accompany or parallel them. Thus his initiatives in given occasions

are often met by wholly unrelated and unpredictable happenings and absurd accidents.

Talking of the accident theme, the life of the picaresque hero is never static but progressively developing. His life is of cycles, events following events with many characters jostling him without establishing any meaningful relationship. Although some characters reappear in the tale, the total effect is one of a relentless cycle of mechanical encounters. Therefore, the picaresque hero's world is inherently chaotic. There appears to be no cause and effect relationship in the nature of the universe and society where he lives. Numerous devices and themes in the picaresque mode combine to build the overpowering sense of chaos. The episodic plot serves as metaphor for a world in essential chaos. As Miller points out; "it is a world fully beyond the creative scope of human action and relationships" (1967:36-7).

The picaresque hero dramatizes chaos; he is the offspring of a chaotic world and has a fundamental will to survive. Alter points out that his origin is never anchored in tradition, for tradition is the core of human creativity proving continuity. Since the stable world does not exist for him, he is never seen in the continuity of a family. And also his origins are obscure, accidental and dislocated. For example, in Spanish literature, the picaresque hero is an orphan (1964:4-5).

The picaresque genre involves the education of the picaresque hero in the ways of the world. In a sense, the picaresque novel in general is a "literature of learning and experience" (Alter 1964:7). Because his world is chaotic, the picaresque hero must quickly learn to survive. Though well-known picaresque heroes begin as neophytes, they are hard pressed to assimilate lessons quickly in protean agility, masking and wit. Protean agility may be regarded as the picaresque hero's main trait. With agility, flexibility, and pragmatic adaptation, he meets the world's flux.

One of the things a picaresque hero learns in the process of becoming educated is that society allows no survival to those who have no sense of belonging to any section of society in which he lives. Since he has no right of place by birth or by achievement, and because he lacks sufficient direction to reach goals, he must assume the disguises which will allow him access to society by appearance only for the picaresque hero finds that society is easily tricked.

The picaresque hero also displays some inner characteristics which enable him to survive in his disjointed world. For instance, his wit is one of his traits. The word "wit" has double duty; it means both humor and mental quickness. Luckily, the picaresque hero usually has both. His wit in terms of acuteness of observation, correctness of conclusion, and swiftness of action provides a key to his inner being.

The picaro is a good observer in addition to his narrative power and exactness. When he tells his story, he finds pleasure in the process of telling his story. It helps him to relieve what he has lived, and his narration brings us vivid reproductions of his experiences.

As one would infer from his show of wit, the picaro is a creature of imagination. He is not a social reformer. He should not be likened to the desperate existential hero who knows that his fate is the absurd. The picaro has neither the time, nor the temperament for reflections. So, events only produce in him an immediacy of despair.

Insecurity is also another dominant motif in the picaro's life. He is forced to live loosely, to keep himself detached. He travels and struggles alone for he finds that he can rely only on himself (Alter 1964:10).

His loneliness is brought into sharp focus by his inability and unwillingness to love. In a sense, his apartness prevents love. But the most basic ingredient of a lover is trust. And this, as the picaro has learned from his rogue education, always brings some kind of hurt. So, love is a very difficult emotion to attain in the picaro's life.

To say that the picaro can not love does not mean that he has no feelings whatsoever for his fellows. He has a capacity for empathy born of his struggles and, in this way, he gains the knowledge of the ways of the world. He is capable of limited companionship without obligations. For the picaro feels he must always retain his freedom if he has to win in his fight for survival. On this point, McCullough argues that the picaresque hero should not be scrutinized too closely. He states:

The interest of the author is in the shifts of his hero to maintain himself rather than in the man himself, and more particularly, the attention is centered upon the world in which the adventurer moves (1968:508).

Serious consideration of the picaresque elements in the English novel begins with Daniel Defoe. In both **Moll Flanders** (1722) and **Colonel Jack** (1722), there is a picaresque quality in the depiction of low life. The source of these novels is to be found in Defoe's concern for the moral and religious problems of the rising middle class, rather than in the picaresque tradition.

Among the eighteenth-century English novelists, Tobias Smollett and Fielding stood close to the picaresque tradition. Smollett helped popularize the Spanish picaresque with his translation of **Gil Blas** (1749) and openly modelled his own **Roderick Random** (1748) on Le Sage's novel (Chandler 1958:21).

For Smollett, the picaresque form offered the opportunity to expose a noble hero to the corrupt influences of the world. The hero's ability to resist temptation proved him worthy. It also illustrated the aristocratic idea that one's nature is determined at birth and secures one's place in a rigid social structure. Smollett was successful in transforming the picaresque sequence of events to the extent that "it acquired a meaning that was just the opposite of what it was in the earlier Spanish novels" (Hartveit 1987:55). That is to say, the Spanish novels questioned the aristocratic assumptions as in **Lazarillo de Tormes** and **Guzman de Alfarache**.

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