CONTRAST AS A MAIN OPERATIVE COMIC DEVICE IN HENRY FIELDING'S 'TOM JONES'

Procopie CLONȚEA
University of Pitești

Abstract: *Apart from a rich variety of comic devices such as the mock-heroic style, satire, parody, the comic high-low and low-high inversion, the parodic character, comic plot, comic situation, the secret closet comic device, the comic trio, the comic speech of characters, Fielding masterfully resorted to the operative comic device of contrast in order to expose to ridicule a wide variety of characters in action within the framework of his comic Bildungsroman* ***Tom Jones****.*
Keywords: *comic devices, the mock-heroic style, satire, parody, the parodic character, comic plot, comic situation, the secret closet comic device, the comic trio, the comic speech of characters, the operative comic device of contrast*

After making full use of contrast as a comic device to delineate his characters in *Joseph Andrews* – see Joseph's portrait versus Fanny's, Fanny's versus Mrs. Slipslop's, etc. – Fielding, in the introductory essay to Chapter 1 Book IV of *Tom Jones*, again stresses the manifold possibilities of this "new vein of knowledge" as an operative force in describing comic scene and character:

> "This vein is no other than that of contrast, which runs through all the works of the creation, and may probably have a large share in constituting in us the idea of all beauty, as well natural as artificial: for what demonstrates the beauty and excellence of any thing but its reverse? … But to avoid too serious an air; can it be doubted, but that the finest woman in the world would lose all benefit of her charms in the eye of a man who had never seen one of another cast? The ladies themselves seem so sensible of this, that they are all industrious to procure foils: nay, they will become foils to themselves; for I have observed (at Bath particularly) that they endeavour to appear as ugly as possible in the morning, in order to set off that beauty which they intend to show you in the morning."

One should remark Fielding's comic genius which enables him to give the very example of what he is talking about while he is actually writing about it. Thus, instead of supporting his learned theoretical approach in the first part of the quotation with suitable examples of the same learned origin, he chooses the rather prosaic example of women applying make up on their cheeks in order to cheat in the evening on their early morning premeditated ugliness.

In Chapter 4 of Book I, Fielding continues to exploit the comic possibilities of contrast whenever he announces some dramatic change in the course of events or the appearance of the comic protagonist, resorting, for example, to the usual mock-heroic simile to introduce Mrs. Deborah's redeeming meeting with Jenny Jones, the supposed mother of the abandoned infant on Mrs. Allworthy's threshold. It is to be remarked from the very beginning that although the device is always the same, Fielding uses gradation in the use of language itself varying from high – the scene of Sophia's entrance – to middle – Joseph's entrance to Lady Booby's chamber – and to low as is the case in Mrs. Deborah's "swooping" on the frightened-to-death villagers:

BDD-A5471 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:17:56 UTC)

Enter Sophia: “Hushed be every ruder breath. May the heathen ruler of the winds confine in iron chains the boisterous limbs of noisy Boreas (1), and the sharp-pointed nose of bitter-biting Eurus. (2). Do Thou, sweet Zephyrus (3), rising the charms from the fragant bed, mount the western sky, and lead on those delicious gales, the charms of which call forth the lovely Flora (4) from her chamber, perfumed with pearly dews, when on the 1st of June, her birth day, the blooming maid, in loose attire, gently trips o’er the verdant mead, where every flower rises to do her homage, till the whole field becomes enamelled, and colours contend with sweets which shall ravish her most.

So charming may she now appear! and you the feathered choristers of nature, whose sweetest notes not even Handel can excel, tune your melodious throats to celebrate her appearance. From love proceeds your music, and to love it returns. Awaken therefore that gentle passion in every swain: for lo! adorned with all the charms in which nature can array her; bedecked with sweetness from her rosy lips, and darting brightness from her sparkling eyes, the lovely Sophia comes!”

Enter Joseph: “Now the rake Hesperus had called for his *breeches*, and having well rubbed his drowsy eyes, prepared to dress himself for all night; by whose example his brothers *rakes* on earth likewise leave those beds in which they had slept away the day. Now Thetis (5), *the good housewife*, began *to put on the pot*, in order to regale *the good man* Phoebus (6) after his daily labours were over. In vulgar language, it was in the evening when Joseph attended his lady'' orders.” (our italics)

Enter Mrs. Deborah: “Not otherwise than when a kite, tremendous bird, as beheld by the feathered generation soaring aloft, and hovering over their heads, the amorous dove, and every innocent little bird, spread wide the alarm, and fly trembling into their hiding-places. He proudly beats the air, conscious of his dignity, and meditates mischief.

So when the approach of Mrs. Deborah was proclaimed through the street, all the inhabitants ran trembling into their houses, each matron dreading lest the visit should fall to her lot. She with stately steps proudly advances over the field: aloft she bears her towering head, filled with conceit of her own pre-eminence, and schemes to effect her intended discovery.”

One can readily notice the high-to-low gradation in the above three quotations, with elevation of language and style in the first, a comic mixture of high-flown rhetoric with highly colloquial language in the second and the vernacular employed in the third which introduces a character of similarly low moral traits and intentions. V.S. Pritchett (7) comments on Fielding’s extensive employment of contrast as a result of his previous playwriting career. He notices that the reader’s strong impression is that of dramatic handling of scene and act, with the chapters being thought of as “scenes”, and a single book as an “act”; the sharp silhouetting of characters and their grouping in such a manner as to avoid any confusions even in so populous a drama; the bright lighting of the individual episode; the swift pacing of scenes so that they flash past for the eye and ear at the same time that they maintain *a clear system of witty contrast* (our italics); and above all, the strict conceptualizing of the function of each scene, in relation to the larger unit of the “act” (or book) and to the over-all unit of the drama (the novel), as well as the objectifying of the individual scene as a subject in itself, a subject clear and significant in its own right.

BDD-A5471 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:17:56 UTC)

Van Ghent (8) analyses Fielding's contrasting of scenes and characters in Book I of *Tom Jones* and points out three definite shifts of scene (and time and place), which are correlated with three definite groups of characters. Fielding prefaces each shift with a brief sharp delineation of the new character, or characters, who are to contribute a new direction to the action. In the first scene, the finding of Tom in Mrs. Allworthy's bed is ironically contrasted with a short description of Squire Allworthy, and a fuller account of Miss Bridget Allworthy, in the second scene Mrs. Deborah's self-righteous descent as investigator of morals is accompanied by Jenny Jones's ironic presentation and in the third, the Blifils group is introduced to the Squire and his sister, with a corresponding "short sketch of the characters of the two brothers."

Van Ghent also notices "the multiple ironic significance" of "Mr. Allworthy's compassionate and honest-hearted reaction to the discovery of the foundling" which "is set in almost instant contrast with Mrs. Deborah's furious descent upon the village and upon the supposed erring mother". Indeed, Mr. Allworthy's genuinely humane attitude of compassion for just a foundling is set into contrast with Mrs. Deborah's servile accepting of the child against her convictions and with Miss Bridget's self-accusatory, comic vituperation on "the poor unknown mother, whom she called an impudent slut, a woman hussy, an audacious harlot, a wicket jade, a vile strumpet, with every other appellation with which the tongue of virtue never fails to lash those who bring a disgrace on the sex." "Thus from scene to scene, and in the interplay of scenes, contrast is effected, character is exposed, masks slip, wholly under the impetus of social interaction – or, in aesthetic terms, "plot"; and we see the Squire, in whom "nature" (again as instinctive feeling, but particularly as biological drive) has been suffocated under the mask of appearance and therefore dwarfed and distorted." (9)

Next Van Ghent returns to Chapter 3 of Book I to analyse "the internal contrasts within the scene itself and their function in realizing the subject matter of the novel ("human nature"), in defining the theme (the contest between instinctive feeling and formulary appearances), and in illustrating the theme in style." It is the scene of the discovery of the baby in his bed by Mr. Allworthy who has conveniently been missing for a "full quarter of a year", a sly innuendo by the author which allows the more attentive reader to raise a questioning brow at Miss Bridget's odd display of feelings.

> "Mr. Allworthy had been absent a full quarter of a year in London, on some very particular business, though I know not what it was; but judge of its importance by its having detained him so long from home, whence he had not been absent a month at a time during the space of many years. He came to his house very late in the evening, and after a short supper with his sister, retired much fatigued to his chamber. Here, having spent some minutes on his knees – a custom which he never broke through on any account – he was preparing to step into bed, when upon opening the clothes, to his great surprise he beheld an infant, wrapt up in some coarse linen, in a sweet and profound sleep, between his sheets. He stood some time lost in astonishment at this sight; but, as good nature had always the ascendant in his mind, he soon began to be touched with sentiments of compassion for the little wretch before him. He then rang his bell, and ordered an elderly woman-servant to rise immediately, and come to him; and in the meantime was so eager in contemplating the beauty of innocence, appearing in those lively colours with which infancy and sleep always display it, that his thoughts were too much engaged to reflect that he was in his shirt when the matron came in. She had indeed given her master sufficient time to dress himself, for out of respect to him, and regard to

BDD-A5471 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:17:56 UTC)

decency, she had spent many minutes in adjusting her hair at the looking-glass, notwithstanding all the hurry in which she had been summoned by the servant, and though her master, for aught she knew, lay expiring in an apoplexy, or in some other fit.

It will not be wondered at that a creature who had so strict a regard to decency in her own person should be shocked at the least deviation from it in another. She therefore no sooner opened the door, and saw her master standing by the bedside in his shirt, with a candle in his hand, than she started back in a most terrible fright, and might perhaps have swooned away, had he not now recollected his being undressed, and put an end to her terrors by desiring her to stay without the door till he had thrown some clothes over his back, and was become incapable of shocking the pure eyes of Mrs. Deborah Wilkins, who, though in the fifty-second year of her age, vowed she had never beheld a man without his coat. Sneerers and profane wits may perhaps laugh at her first fright; yet my grave reader, when he considers the time of night, the summons from her bed, and the situation in which she found her master, will highly justify and applaud her conduct, unless the prudence which must be supposed to attend maidens at that period of life at which Mrs. Deborah had arrived, should a little lessen his admiration."

The contrast in the above scene is in character which is revealed by the quite opposite reactions of the two people involved in the scene. On the one hand it is Mr. Allworthy's good nature as exemplary of Fielding's understanding of "human nature" that prevails upon his unquestionable impecable sense of decorum and he remains lost in "contemplating the beauty of innocence" and "those lively colours with which infancy and sleep always display it", while forgetting he is in his shirt when "the matron" comes in. Perplexity at the sight of such perfection of nature, total ignoring of the extraordinary presence of the infant in his own "chaste" bed and of possible connections to his own whereabouts and an Adamsean touch of absent-mindedness are simultaneously displayed by the good squire, while the effect on the reader is still comic caused by his surprising behaviour when confronted with what appeared to be the result of some degrading whoring than of a mythical love affair between a mortal and an immortal. Mrs. Deborah, on the other hand, a calculating, ill-meaning hypocrite, takes her time in adjusting her hair at the looking-glass "out of respect for him, and regard to decency" although "for aught she knew" on account of the hurry in which she had been summoned, her master "lay expiring in an apoplexy, or in some other fit".

To the end of Chapter I of Book V Fielding gives the reader a final argument for the necessity "of the serious in writing and for what purpose it is introduced" by comparing his theory of contrast with the English Pantomime, "that exquisite entertainment", which "consisted of two parts, which the inventor distinguished by the names of the serious and the comic", where the tricks of harlequin were more easily displayed to advantage by the dull (serious) presence of a certain number of heathen gods and heroes in the first part.

Notes

1. the ancient Greek personification of the north wind.
2. the ancient Greek personification of the east and southeast wind.
3. the ancient Greek personification of the west wind.
4. the Roman Godess of flowers.

BDD-A5471 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:17:56 UTC)

5. The daughter of Nereus, the old man of the sea, and of Doris, the daughter of Oceanus, who was forced by Zeus to marry a mortal, Peleus with whom she conceived Achilles.
6. Appollo as the sun god.
7. V.S. Pritchett, *The Living Novel*, New York, Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947, quoted in Van Ghent, Dorothy, *The English Novel – form and function*, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1961, p. 72.
8. in op. cit., p. 73.
9. ibid., p. 74.

Bibliography

Baderook, M. C., *Themes and Conventions of Elisabethan Tragedy*, Cambridge University Press, 1964.

Bernbaum, Ernest, *The Drama of Sensibility a Sketch of the History of English Sentimental Comedy and Domestic Tragedy, 1696-1780*, by Ernest Bernbaum, Glocester, Mass, Russell Press, 1958.

Bergson, Henri, *The Comic in General; the Comic Element in Forms and Movements* in *The Norton Reader*, Shorter Edition with Questions, An Anthology of Expository Prose, with Rhetorical Materials, edited by Eastman, M. A., et al., W. W. Norton and Co, Inc., New York, 1965.

Butt, John, *Fielding*, Longmans, London, 1965.

Clearly, Thomas R., Thomas Raymond, *Henry Fielding – Political Writer*, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984.

Collins, Anthony, *A Discourse Concerning Ridicule and Irony in Writing (1729)*, Los Angeles William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, 1970.

Daix, Pierre, *Fielding şi romanul comic*, în *Şapte secole de roman*, Bucureşti, EPLU, 1966.

Donaldson, Jan, *The World Upside-Down, Comedy from Jonson to Fielding*, Oxford University Press, 1974.

Ellis, Frank, *Sentimental Comedy Theory and Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Hatfield, Glenn W., *Henry Fielding and the Language of Irony*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1968.

Krutch, Joseph Wood, *Comedy and Conscience after the Restoration*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1961.

Loftis, John, *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding*, Stanford University Press, 1960.

Nemoianu, Virgil, *Aspecte ale raportului tragic-comic în dramaturgia engleză a secolului XVIII*, în *Analele Universităţii Bucureşti*, Seria Ştiinţe Sociale, Filologie, Anul XIV, 1965.

Panaitescu, Val, *Avatarurile Umorului*, Cronica, nr. 45, Iaşi, 1967.

Priestley, J. B. John Boynton, *The English Comic Characters*, London, John Lane, 1937.

Rodway, Allan Edwin, *English Comedy – Its Role and Nature from Chaucer to the Present Day*, London Chatto and Windus, 1975.

Tave, Stuart, *The Amiable Humorist – A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1960.

Taylor, William Duncan, *Eighteenth Century Comedy Selected and Introduced by W.D. Taylor*, London New York, Oxford U. P., 1969.

Thornbury, E. M., *Fielding and the Comic Prose Epic*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A., 1931.

Van Ghent, Dorothy, *The English Novel – form and function*, Harper and Row, Publishers, New York, 1961,

Wright, Andrew, *Tom Jones: Life as Art*, in Twentieth Century Interpretations, Englewood Cliffs, New York, 1968.

BDD-A5471 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 05:17:56 UTC)