



S P O I L E R

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*

One last thing worthy of mention is the excellence of the plot. Not only does Fielding surpass many other great authors in his understanding of the workings of the human mind and will, but he is able to arrange events in such a way to make many of these workings come to fruition, and mostly (excepting possibly the chance meetings that fill the book) with a strong degree of believability. Rarely if ever have I seen such successful twists as appear in the last couple of books of this history: the topmost being Mrs. Waters coming out to be Jenny Jones, which indicts Tom with incest; and then her relieving insistence that she was not his mother, but that in fact Allworthy's sister was, and that Partridge was not (as I am sure everyone assumed he was) Tom's father. In this most ingenious double twist of events, Tom escapes what had been the most impossibly hopeless of situations: in jail for murder, his foster father hating him, his beloved rejecting him and her father wishing him dead. Somehow, and believably, the author in a fast-paced conclusion to the history raises Tom to the position where he is Allworthy's pride and joy, beloved by Sophia and her father, acquitted of any violent crime, and respected by the community.

I must say that the middle section of the book, where Tom is meandering around the countryside trying to find Sophia, is somewhat protracted, and I began to wonder when all of this senseless peregrination and the meetings with inconsequential characters would end. However, once the reader emerges from this, and arrives in London, the plot begins to build up steam. I hesitate to impugn Fielding for the slower section of the book, however, because of the fact that Tom did need time (and perhaps precisely as much time as Fielding gave him) to see the error of his ways and slowly, arduously, to make the journey towards virtue. We would not believe in his promise of faithfulness and love to Sophia at the end of the book (if we even believe it now), were he to have leapt there from his escapades at Upton in a mere two or three chapters. I say "if we even believe it now", because this is not primarily a tale of the improvement of a character, although it seems that this does happen. Primarily it is a tale of human nature, and of how this nature relates to the different situations and temptations that beset one in this trying life. Whether Tom has changed is secondary. More central is the fact that Tom has paid a price, and knows he has paid a price, for his earlier sins, and will live to realize what he came very close to losing. This certainly should, and we have some reason to think it will, lead him to become a better and more virtuous man.

