UNIT 5: HENRY FIELDING: *TOM JONES* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE:

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 Henry Fielding: The Novelist

5.3.1 His Life

5.3.2 His Works

5.4 Story of the Novel

5.5 Critical Reception of Fielding

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- discuss the life and works of Henry Fielding
- read and understand the novel *Tom Jones* in its proper context
- trace the main storyline of the novel
- situate Fielding in the context of 18th century novels

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of Course 5. This unit introduces you to Henry Fielding (1707-1754), one of the greatest precursors of English novels, and his famous *Tom Jones* (1749). Henry Fielding was well known for his rich, earthy humour and satiric prowess. Along with Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), and Laurence Sterne (1713-1768), Fielding was the progenitor of the novel as a genre in the 18th century. Most of these writers wrote novels, which not only depicted the contemporary currents of events in the history of England but also provided covert yet incisive

insights into the follies and foibles of the middle class milieu of the time. The novel *Tom Jones* is historically contextualised halfway through the 18th century, and is closely enmeshed with the royal history of the Stuarts ruling England at that time. By the time you finish reading this unit, you will learn that in writing this novel, Fielding introduced a new concept of fiction, which he outlined in the prefatory chapters to the Books of the novel, and then proceeded to translate theory into practice. At the same time, in creating his hero Tom Jones in this novel, Fielding introduced a concept of a 'character' new to the English fiction at that time.

5.3 HENRY FIELDING: THE NOVELIST

In this section, we shall discuss the life and works of Henry Fielding, the novelist who wrote a number of novels including a literary masterpiece like *Tom Jones.*

5.3.1 His Life

Henry Fielding was both a novelist and a playwright. He was born on April 22, 1707 at Sharpham Park, Somerset, of parents who were of aristocratic lineage. He attended Eton College from 1719 to 1724. He studied law in London in the late 1720s and was a student of Leiden University at the Netherlands for some time. However, his main interest was in theatre, and composed around 25 plays in the period between 1728 and 1737. Some of his early successes in drama include *Tom Thumb: A Tragedy* (1730); revised as *The Tragedy of Tragedies*, (1731) and *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* (1737), the latter being a satire on the Whig administration of Sir Robert Walpole. The year 1737 saw the authorities imposing stage censorship through the passing of the Licensing Act.



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From 1737, he started to find new outlets for his witty inventiveness. Fielding married Charlotte Cradock in 1734, and resumed his bar studies after being debarred from producing plays. His wife provided the model for two of his fictional heroines. As he resumed legal studies, he began to associate himself with political journalism. He entered the Bar in 1740 and in 1748; he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Westminster and Middlesex. Together with his blind half-brother, John, Fielding was responsible for Britain's first organised detective police force, the *Bow Street Runners*. From 1739 to 1741, under the pseudonym of *Captain Hercules Vinegar*, he edited a thrice-weekly magazine *The Champion* and continued to oppose the views of the Walpole government.

After spending almost ten years by writing many of his novels, Fielding returned to journalism in 1752, and was appointed the editor of *The Covent Garden Journal.* He started with another pseudonym *Sir Alexander Drawcansir*. By that time, he was terribly down with asthma and gout. In 1754, with his wife and daughter, he set sail for Lisbon where he breathed his last. *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon,* published in 1755, is a depressing account of his final travels.

You will find that despite his rakish life style, Fielding was a man who had a well-deserved reputation for the generosity of spirit and a natural sympathy for the fellow men. As an Anglican, he believed in the 'good nature' of human beings. As a novelist, he was a committed citric of corruption and hypocrisy prevailing in his society. He brought to English novel a new degree of 'psychological realism' and a 'linear narrative style' besides drawing inspiration from multiple sources like classical epic, prose romances, the European picaresque and the Scriblerian satires. His own dramatic background introduced a new sophistication in the representation of the comic characters through dialogue. In 1906, George Bernard Shaw acclaimed him as "the greatest practising dramatist, with the single exception of Shakespeare,

produced by England between the Middle Ages and the 19th century."

5.3.2 His Works

It is interesting to note that Fielding began his career as a playwright with *Love in Several Masques* (1728) modelled on the Restoration Comedy of Manners. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the famous English letter writer and a poet, was Fielding's distant cousin, and she encouraged him to write this play. In the same year, he became a student of letters at Leiden, where he remained about 18 months, greatly enlarging his knowledge of classical literature. On his return to London, he continued his energetic but precarious life as a dramatist, and between 1729 and 1737, he wrote as many as 25 assorted dramas, largely in the form of farce and satire. In 1730, three of his important plays namely *The Author's Farce*; *Rape upon Rape*, a savage satire on the practices of the law; and Tom Thumb (published in a revised form as The Tragedy of Tragedies, or The Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great, the following year).

However, soon his skills in dramatic parody and the use of burlesque tempted him to parody Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* in *Shamela* (1741), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1742) in *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews, and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams.* You should note that Fielding was disappointed with Richardson's *Pamela,* as he thought that Richardson took virtue and prudence to be identical, and that Pamela appeared to be a calculating woman whose concern for virtue, masked intentness on material and social betterment. For Fielding, who took morals to be essentially positive based on generosity, Shamela was a hypocrite who resisted her master to force him into marriage so that she might become a respectable lady, and carry on freely with the local parson. The narrative of *Joseph Andrews*, on the other hand, follows the misfortunes of the innocent Joseph and worthless companion Parson Adams. This

novel shows through numerous comic episodes the perennial problem of rendering virtue as colourful. Fielding called *Joseph Andrews* 'A Comic Epic in Prose.'

Fielding's next major novel is *The History of Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743). It is a satire on human greatness interpreted in terms of power exerted over others. However, the novel is also topical in that man's lust for power is greater than their regards for human feelings. In this novel, Fielding however, took the life of a thief and receiver who had been hanged at Tyburn to demonstrate the division between a thief and a great soldier and a great political personality like Sir Robert Walpole.

The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling appeared in 1749. This great work is distinguished by his portrayal of un-idealised hero. This is yet another example of Fielding's "Comic Epic in Prose". In *Tom Jones,* Fielding emerges as a great innovator of the form of the novel in the 18th century. Fielding called for a panoramic view of the novel as he declared that a novelist must be well acquainted with all ranks and degrees of men and gain access to human nature by having conversation with people from both low and high classes. You should note that in this novel, Fielding provides a mature criticism of every aspect of general human interest– religion, sex, love, war, nature of men and women, social institution and so on. Fielding's last important novel is *Amelia* (1751). In this novel, he idealises a woman character for which the novel becomes a celebration of womanly virtues. It is also a novel about a credible and convincing representation of a positively good person. This novel is a reflection on his sad and gloomy experience of ensuring a tough life in the metropolis.

In 1748, there came an important opportunity in Fielding's life when he was appointed a Justice of the Peace for Westminster and for Middlesex. His serious concerns at the social abuses and judicial corruptions during his times are reflected in essays like "A Charge Delivered to the Great Jury" (1749), "An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of

Robbers" (1751), "Examples of the Interposition of Providence in the Detection and Punishment of Murder" (1752), and "A Proposal for Making an Effectual Provision for the Poor" (1753). As a magistrate, Fielding was very dedicated and effective, and he was responsible for Britain's first organised detective police force.

Thus, you will find that with Fielding, the English novel gained maturity as he came to establish one of the most notable fictional forms of writings with the help of middle class realism. Fielding appeared to be one of the most civic minded of the English writers, a leading example of Augustan ideal of a 'public man'. It is with the English society in general and not with the quality of the feelings of the individual characters, that Fielding was most concerned. His aim was to create an art form in the 18th century that resembled the epic of the ancient period. Both the realistic mirror and critical flavour contributed immensely to his development as a major exponent of the tradition of English fictional prose writing in its formative periods.



LET US KNOW

Although what constitutes a 'novel' caused much debate during Fielding's time, there was some consensus that a novel was a prose work charting the everyday lives and events of the people. Fielding is generally agreed to be an innovating master of the highest originality. He believed that he had been "the founder of a new province of writing", and even Sir Walter Scott, commended him for his "high notions of the dignity of an art which he may be considered as having founded." In breaking away from the epistolary method of his contemporary Samuel Richardson and others, he devised what he described as "comic epics in prose", which may be characterised as the first modern novels in English, leading straight to the works of Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Despite his rakish life style, why do you think, Fielding deserved applause?

Q 2: Name some of the major novels of Fielding. Briefly state, why they are important in the context of the 18th century England.

Q 3: In what ways, does the novel *Tom Jones* fulfil Fielding's purpose as a social writer?

Q 4: What was Fielding's new concept of the novel?

5.4 STORY OF THE NOVEL

In this section, we shall try to reflect on the story of the novel *Tom Jones* that is a huge novel. However, it needs mentioning that the introductory chapters that preface each of the 18 books of the novel, satisfy a contemporary reader's fondness for moral commentary. At the same time, they present before the readers the narrative strategy of Fielding while writing the novel. This novel is dedicated to George Lyttleton, an eminent statesman and orator who served as the modal of a typical 'good man' as exemplified by Mr. Allworthy in the novel *Tom Jones*. In the dedication, Fielding asserts that Lyttleton is largely responsible for *Tom Jones*, as he supported Fielding during the composition of the novel. The following is an attempt to discuss very briefly the storyline of the novel as well as the introductions to the various chapters that add to the wonderful experience of reading a bulky but largely engaging piece of fiction like *Tom Jones.*

"The rich and benevolent country gentleman Mr. Allworthy arrives home from a trip to London and discovers baby Tom in his bed. Allworthy tries to find the parents of this foundling and succeeds in discovering the fact that a local woman Jenny Jones and her tutor, Mr. Partridge, are guilty of having an illicit child. Allworthy sends Jenny away from the country, and poor Mr. Partridge too vanishes suddenly. Allworthy decides to bring up the boy. Soon after, Bridget, Mr. Allworthy's sister, marries

Captain Blifil, and becomes the mother of a son named Blifil. Captain Blifil regards Tom as a threat to the future of their own son as he is concerned more with making his own son the heir of Mr. Allworthy's huge properties."

The narrator of the story then takes the readers to twelve years earlier. Although Blifil and Tom Jones are brought up together, Allworthy is the only person to show consistent affection to Tom. The philosopher Square and the reverend Thwackum, the boys' tutors, despise Tom and loves Blifil, as it is believed that Tom is wild and Blifil pious. Tom frequently steals apples and ducks to support the family of Black George, Allworthy's servant, and tells all secrets to Blifil who informs Allworthy about the matter, thereby sending Tom into problems very frequently. However, interestingly enough, the people of the parish, hearing of Tom's generosity to Black George, begin to speak kindly of Tom while condemning Blifil for his cunning nature. Tom's sportsmanship helps him to befriend Squire Western—Allworthy's neighbour. His daughter Sophia Western falls deeply in love with Tom. However, Tom is already inclined towards Molly Seagrim, daughter of Black George, the servant. When Molly becomes pregnant, Tom prevents Allworthy from sending Molly to prison by admitting that he has fathered her child. Although later, Tom falls deeply in love with Sophia and begins to resent his ties to Molly, still he remains faithful to Molly. His relief comes with the knowledge that Molly has been having affairs with other men, and Tom is not the father of her child. He becomes free to confess his delicate feelings to Sophia.

In his death-bed, Allworthy reads out his will stating that Blifil will inherit most of his estate, although Tom too will get something. Both Thwackum and Square Western are upset after finding that each of them will receive only a thousand pounds. Tom experiences great emotional disturbance at Allworthy's illness and remains near his bed all the time. When the doctor announces that Allworthy will not die, Tom rejoices and gets heavily drunk. Blifil calls Tom a "bastard" and Tom retaliates by hitting him. Tom, who has sworn faithfulness to Sophia, encounters Molly by chance and makes love to her. Sophia's aunt Mrs. Western comes to stay at her brother's house. Both unite over a plan to marry Sophia to

Blifil. Mrs. Western promises not to reveal Sophia's love for Tom as long as Sophia submits to Blifil as a suitor. Sophia, however, strongly opposes the proposal, and Squire Western grows violent with her. Blifil tells Allworthy that Tom is a rascal who danced drunkenly about the house, and Allworthy banishes Tom from the country. Tom does not want to leave Sophia, but decides that he must follow the honourable path.

Tom then starts wandering about the countryside. In Bristol, he meets Partridge who becomes his loyal servant. Tom also rescues Mrs. Waters from being robbed, and they begin an affair at a local inn. Sophia, who has run away from Squire Western's estate to avoid marrying Blifil, stops at this inn and discovers that Tom is having an affair with Mrs. Waters. She leaves her muff in Tom's bed so that he knows she has been there. When Tom finds the muff, he frantically starts pursuing Sophia. In London, Sophia stays with her relative Lady Bellaston. Both Tom and Partridge arrive in London to stay in the house of Mrs. Miller and her daughter Nancy. A young gentleman called Nightingale, with whom Nancy is in love, also lives in the house. Nancy becomes pregnant and Tom convinces Nightingale to marry her. Then Lady Bellaston and Tom too begin an affair, although Tom privately, continues to pursue Sophia. When he and Sophia are reconciled, Tom breaks off the relationship with Lady Bellaston by sending her a marriage proposal that scares her away. Yet Lady Bellaston is still determined not to allow Sophia and Tom's love to flourish. She encourages another young man, Lord Fellamar, to rape Sophia.

Soon after, Squire Western, Mrs. Western, Blifil, and Allworthy arrive in London, and Squire Western locks Sophia in her bedroom. Mr. Fitzpatrick thinks Tom is his wife's lover and begins a duel with Tom. In defending himself, Tom stabs Fitzpatrick with the sword and gets imprisoned subsequently. Partridge visits Tom in jail with the ghastly news that Mrs. Waters is none other than Jenny Jones, Tom's mother. Mrs. Waters meets Allworthy and explains that Fitzpatrick is still alive, and has admitted to initiating the duel. She also tells Allworthy that a lawyer acting on behalf of an unnamed gentleman tried to persuade her to conspire against Tom. Allworthy realises that Blifil is this very

gentleman, and he decides never to speak to him again. Tom, however, takes pity on Blifil and provides him with a pension.

Mrs. Waters also reveals that Tom's mother was Bridget Allworthy. Square sends Allworthy a letter explaining that Tom's conduct during Allworthy's illness was honourable and compassionate. Tom is released from jail and he and Allworthy are reunited as nephew and uncle. Mrs. Miller explains to Sophia the reasons for Tom's marriage proposal to Lady Bellaston, and Sophia is satisfied. Now that Tom is Allworthy's heir, Squire Western eagerly encourages the marriage between Tom and Sophia. Sophia chastises Tom for his lack of chastity, but agrees to marry him. They live happily on Western's estate with two children, and shower everyone around them with kindness and generosity.



LET US KNOW

The Parallelism between Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* makes room for an interesting analysis of Fielding's narrative strategies while writing both the books. Both the novels follow a tripartite structural scheme: city, highway and country. The country has been shown as the storehouse of natural virtue, the city the quagmire of corruption, vices and artificialities, and the highway the connecting line between the two. Moreover, both the novels are picaresque in structure and form. Again, in *Joseph Andrews,* the identity of Joseph's true father is withheld until the end of the novel. Similar things happen in *Tom Jones* as the identity of Tom's guardian too is withheld until near the conclusion of the novel although Fielding gives sufficient hints about the real parentage of Tom during the course of events.

Therefore, you find two main threads to the action in the storyline of the novel: one, the mystery attached with the birth of Tom, and the other, the love story of Tom and Sophia. However, they are not necessarily interrelated. Because, Tom is a foundling who cannot make any claim to Mr. Allworthy's properties and this prevents him from being

an acceptable suitor for Sophia. The working out of these two main themes together through riddles and surprising solutions goes to the credit of the writer. I want to draw your attention to what Fielding himself says in the book. In the Dedication he claims that to "recommend goodness and innocence hath been my sincere endeavour in this history." Then again, in his Farewell to the readers he says: "no man detests and despises scurrility more than myself…" Such information should make you aware of the concerns of Fielding while writing this novel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: What is the similarity between *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*?

Q 6: How is Tom treated in the family of Allworthy?

Q 7: Tell the story of Tom Jones briefly.

5.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF FIELDING

It is however interesting to note the changes and shifts in Fielding criticism in the 20th century. F. R. Leavis, in the first chapter of his *The Great Tradition,* dismissed Fielding's work. Denying him any 'classical distinction', Leavis suggested, "There can't be subtlety of organisation without richer matter to organise, and subtler interests than Fielding has to offer." Such a verdict on Fielding was not surprising in an age when the most highly admired practitioners of the English novels were George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, D. H. Laurence and so on. Leavis' challenge has however been taken by many subsequent writers and critics like Arnold Kettle, J. Middleton Murray, Ian Watt, William Empson, A. E. Dyson etc.

Most of the early critical studies of Fielding took as their foundation the moral complexity of the fiction and its formal intricacy. For critics in the 1950s and 1960s, Fielding's interest in freedom and licence appealed strongly. More recently, critics have reclaimed the importance of the

dramatic works, while others have begun to investigate the fiction from feminist perspectives. For the contemporary student, a greater range of contextual information and biographical detail is available than ever before. In very recent times, however, Fielding's generous optimism, his delight in the senses and the plenitude of his fictional universe obviously commend him to the new 'modern' age. Subsequently, Fielding becomes more attractive a model for the new generation of novelists than George Eliot and Henry James.

Tom Jones was an immediate hit with the public, with recommendations quickly spreading through London's coffee houses. Fielding however did not achieve universal critical acclaim, with writers including Dr Johnson and Smollett objecting to the novel on moral and aesthetic grounds. In writing the novel, Fielding boldly asserted that he had employed all the wit and humour of which he is a master in an effort to laugh humankind out of their vices and follies. This prefatory remark on the purpose of the novel came as a shock to the contemporary readers, writers and critics. Samuel Richardson never forgave Fielding for his attack on *Pamela.* Even in his letter to two young women who had expressed their admiration for *Tom Jones*, Richardson wrote: "…he knows not how to draw a delicate woman. He has not been accustomed to such company…is too immoral, I will venture to say, to take any other bias than that a perverse and crooked nature has given him, or evil habits, at least, have confirmed in him…" He further reiterated "And I had reason to think that the Author intended…in writing it, to whiten a vicious Character and to make morality bend to his Practices." Samuel Johnson too said that *Tom Jones* was a "vicious" book, and that he "scarcely knew a more corrupt work than Tom Jones."

That *Tom Jones* is an immoral book became commonplace in literary criticism in subsequent periods too. The Victorian people too might have been offended by Fielding's honest and straightforward portrayal of men, women and manners. You will find it interesting to note that Victorian writers like Carlyle, Tennyson, Browning, Charlotte Bronte and Matthew Arnold never liked this book. Stevenson called *Tom Jones* "dirty, dull, and false." However, contrary to such an attitude towards the

book, 19th century critics spoke out in defence of Fielding and this book. Coleridge defended the novel by saying—"I think Tom Jones is one of the most perfect plots ever planned." Bulwer Lytton called Fielding a "deep, accurate, and scientific moralist''. Anthony Trollope hailed *Tom Jones* as "one of the greatest novels in the English language, for there he [Fielding] has shown how a noble and sanguine nature may fall away under temptation and he be again strengthened and made to stand upright." However, in the general perception of the 19th century, *Tom Jones* enjoyed a rather factitious reputation as an expression of frank and robust masculinity in contrast to the prudishness and sentimentality of much Victorian fiction.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: How did Leavis view Fielding in his *The Great Tradition*?

Q 9: What were some of the contemporary remarks on Fielding's *Tom Jones*?



5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have been introduced to Henry Fielding, one of the greatest precursors of the English novels and his famous novel *Tom Jones.* You have learnt that Fielding was the progenitor of the novel as a genre in the 18th century. Through the medium of the novel, he not only depicted the contemporary currents of events in the history of England but also provided incisive insights into the follies and foibles of the middle class milieu of the time. You have learnt that in writing this novel *Tom Jones*, Fielding introduced a new concept of fiction, which he outlined in the prefatory chapters to the Books of the novel, and then proceeded to translate theory into practice. At the same time, in creating his hero Tom Jones in this novel, Fielding introduced a concept of a 'character' new to the English fiction.



5.7 FURTHER READING

Dady, Mark Hawkins. (ed). (1996). *Reader's Guide to Literature in English*. Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers.

Drabble, Margaret. (ed). (2000) The Oxford Companion to English Literature (6th edition). OUP.

Ousby, Ian (1992). *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. Cambridge University Press.



5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: For the generosity of spirit and a natural sympathy for the fellow men… … he was a committed novelist who exposed corruption and hypocrisy of his society… …he introduced psychological realism and a linear narrative style to English fictions.

Ans to Q N 2: *Joseph Andrews* an episodic novel on the worth of virtue… …*The History of Jonathan Wild the Great* a satire on human greatness interpreted in terms of power exerted over others… …*The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* a criticism of the different human interests like religion, sex, love, nature of men and women… ... *Amelia* a celebration of womanly virtues.

Ans to Q No 3: In writing this novel Fielding introduced a new concept of fiction… …through Tom Jones Fielding introduced a character new to the English fiction…. …this new character shares typical human frailties, failings and vices but is finally redeemed by his natural and unfailing goodness in heart.

Ans to Q No 4: During Fielding's time, the novel was seen as a prose work charting the everyday lives and events… …Fielding was an innovator of the highest originality... …breaking away from the epistolary methods of novel writing… …he devised the novel as a "comic epics in prose".

Ans to Q. No 5: Both the novels are picaresque in structure… …both follow a tripartite structural scheme: city, highway and country—the country signifying natural virtue, the city exemplifying corruption and vices, and the highway the connecting line between the two…. ….in both the novels the identity of the true father is withheld.

Ans to Q No 6: Allworthy is the only person who shows fondness for Tom… …Blifil hates him most… … The philosopher Square and the reverend Thwackum, the boys' tutors, despise Tom and adore Blifil, since it was believed that Tom was wild and Blifil was pious.

Ans to Q No 7: For the answer reread the section 5.4.

Ans to Q No 8: F. R. Leavis, in his *The Great Tradition* dismissed Fielding's work… …Fielding was denied any 'classical distinction'… …Leavis suggested that "There can't be subtlety of organisation without richer matter to organise, and subtler interests than Fielding has to offer."

Ans to Q No 9: *Tom Jones* was an immediate hit with the public… …Samuel Johnson and Smollett objected to the novel on moral and aesthetic grounds… … his prefatory remark on the purpose of the novel—which was to laugh at the follies of human beings came as a shock to the contemporary readers, writers and critics… …Richardson objected that Fielding: "…he knows not how to draw a delicate woman"… …Samuel Johnson said that *Tom Jones* was a "vicious" book, and stated that he "scarcely knew a more corrupt work than Tom Jones."



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Fielding is often considered one of the most important and influential writers in the tradition of English novel? Do you agree? Justify your views.

Q 2: It is stated that Fielding wrote *Tom Jones* at a time when people were needed to be instructed in questions of morality. Justify your views with reference to Fielding's position in 18th century English Literature.

Q 3: Narrate the story of the novel *Tom Jones* in your own words. Do you think that Fielding is successful in representing both the city and country life with the help of this novel?

Q 4: Although what constitutes a 'novel' caused much debate during Fielding's time, there was some consensus that a novel was a prose work charting the everyday lives and events of the people. Elaborate.

Q 5: What, according to you, were Fielding's actual purpose in writing the Prefatory Chapters of his 18 Books in *Tom Jones*?

Q 6: What are the shifts and changes in the criticism of *Tom Jones*?

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