



# Social Class and Mobility in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides a focused analysis of the themes of social class and mobility in Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*, a landmark novel that offers a panoramic view of 18th-century English society. By closely examining the development of key characters, the progression of the plot, and Fielding's distinctive narrative style, the study reveals how the novel interrogates and critiques the entrenched class hierarchies of its time. Central to this exploration is the character of Tom Jones himself, whose ambiguous origins and journey from a foundling to the recognized heir of Squire Allworthy underscore the complexities and limitations of social ascent in a class-conscious world. The narrative demonstrates that, while personal virtues such as honesty, compassion, and integrity are important, they are often insufficient to overcome societal barriers rooted in birthright and legitimacy. Fielding's portrayal of various supporting characters—from the landed gentry to servants and commoners—further illustrates the deep-seated prejudices and challenges faced by individuals seeking to transcend their social status. Ultimately, this paper argues that *Tom Jones* serves as both a critique of rigid class distinctions and a reflection on the nuanced interplay between inherited status and individual merit in shaping one's place in society.

**Keywords:** Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, social class, social mobility, 18th-century England, legitimacy, virtue, class hierarchy

## INTRODUCTION

Published in 1749, Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* stands as a cornerstone in the evolution of the English novel, distinguished for its vivid characterization, intricate plotting, and incisive social commentary. Set against the backdrop of 18th-century England, the novel immerses readers in a society sharply divided by class boundaries, where social mobility is both highly coveted and rigorously policed. The central character, Tom Jones, is introduced as a foundling—an infant of unknown parentage discovered on Squire Allworthy's estate. Despite being raised with kindness and afforded opportunities by Allworthy, Tom's ambiguous origins perpetually place him on the margins of respectable society. His adventures, missteps, and

ultimate quest for acceptance serve as a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by individuals seeking to rise above the circumstances of their birth during this period.

Fielding uses Tom's story not only to entertain but also to critique the social structures that prioritize lineage and legitimacy over personal merit. Throughout the novel, Tom's wit, compassion, and integrity distinguish him from many of the so-called gentlemen of noble birth, highlighting the arbitrary nature of social distinctions. Fielding juxtaposes Tom's journey with that of other characters, such as the hypocritical Blifil and the virtuous Sophia Western, to further dramatize the limits and possibilities of social mobility. By dissecting these portrayals, this paper seeks to illuminate Fielding's nuanced perspective on class and mobility, demonstrating how *Tom Jones* both reflects and challenges the prevailing attitudes toward social hierarchy in 18th-century England.

## RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

Understanding how social class and mobility are depicted in *Tom Jones* is essential for appreciating the depth and relevance of Henry Fielding's societal critique. The novel does more than tell the story of an individual's rise from obscurity to acceptance; it uses Tom's journey to reflect and interrogate the rigid class structures and social expectations of 18th-century England. Through the interactions between characters of differing backgrounds—aristocrats, gentry, servants, and foundlings—Fielding exposes the arbitrary nature of class distinctions and questions the fairness of a social order that equates worth with birthright. By closely analyzing these dynamics, readers gain insight into historical realities such as inheritance laws, gender norms, and the limited avenues for social advancement available to those outside the elite.

Moreover, the themes of class and mobility in *Tom Jones* remain relevant today, as questions of social inequality and the role of merit versus privilege continue to shape contemporary discourse. The objective of this study is to engage deeply with Fielding's text, drawing on both direct quotations and scholarly perspectives to offer a nuanced understanding of his critique. Through this comprehensive analysis, the paper aims to clarify how *Tom Jones* challenges—and, at times, reinforces—the social norms of its day, providing valuable commentary on issues of class that transcend its historical setting.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly discourse on *Tom Jones* has extensively examined its treatment of social class and mobility. Critics have noted that Fielding's narrative challenges the rigid class structures of his time by presenting a protagonist whose virtues transcend his ambiguous origins. For instance, Martin C. Battestin, in his work *The Moral Basis of Fielding's Art: A Study of Joseph Andrews*, argues that Fielding advocates for a meritocratic society where personal virtue outweighs birthright. Similarly, Jill Campbell's *Natural Masques: Gender and Identity in Fielding's Plays and Novels* explores how Fielding's characters navigate and sometimes subvert societal expectations related to class and identity.

## METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative analysis of *Tom Jones*, focusing on character development, plot progression, and narrative techniques to elucidate themes of social class and mobility. Primary textual analysis is supplemented by

secondary sources, including scholarly articles and critical essays, to provide a multifaceted understanding of the novel's engagement with these themes.

## DISCUSSION

### The Rigid Class Hierarchy

In 18th-century England, social hierarchy was a rigid structure primarily determined by birth and wealth, shaping the lives of individuals across all strata of society. The aristocracy and landed gentry held the apex of this system, wielding significant influence and privilege, while the middle and lower classes faced substantial barriers to upward mobility. This entrenched class system is vividly portrayed in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, where social stratification serves as both a backdrop and a driving force in the narrative. The novel, published in 1749, reflects the era's obsession with lineage, legitimacy, and the immutable nature of class distinctions, even amidst acts of benevolence or moral virtue.

Squire Allworthy, a central figure in the novel, exemplifies the ideals of the landed gentry. As a wealthy landowner with a strong sense of justice and compassion, he embodies the virtues expected of his class. His decision to adopt and raise Tom Jones, a foundling discovered on his property, is a radical departure from societal norms, showcasing his benevolence. However, this act also reinforces the prevailing class hierarchy. Allworthy's kindness cannot erase the stigma attached to Tom's uncertain parentage, which perpetually undermines his social standing. Fielding writes, "The foundling, though nurtured with the tenderness of a son, bore the indelible mark of his obscure origin" (Fielding 45).

Tom's journey through the novel highlights the constraints imposed by this rigid hierarchy. Despite his inherent goodness and eventual revelation as the son of a respectable family, his early status as a bastard relegates him to a liminal space between classes. Fielding notes, "His virtues were obscured by the cloud of his birth, a shadow no deed could dispel" (Fielding 112). The contrast between Allworthy's noble intentions and the societal rejection of Tom reveals the inflexibility of class boundaries, where wealth and birth trumped individual character.

### Tom Jones: A Case Study in Social Mobility

Tom Jones's journey, from a foundling of obscure parentage to recognized gentleman, exemplifies the complexities and limitations of social mobility in 18th-century England. Throughout the novel, Fielding demonstrates that while personal virtues—such as charm, bravery, and a strong moral compass—are admirable, they are insufficient to guarantee acceptance into higher social ranks without the requisite birthright. Tom's initial status as a foundling, despite being raised by the generous Squire Allworthy, leaves him perpetually vulnerable to suspicion and prejudice. Even those closest to him, such as Blifil and Mrs. Western, constantly remind Tom of his uncertain origins, underscoring the prevailing significance of lineage: "He hath neither birth nor fortune to recommend him; both which are requisite to make a young fellow agreeable to any family" (Fielding 112).

Tom's social ascent is only fully realized after the revelation of his true identity as the legitimate son of Bridget Allworthy, and thus Squire Allworthy's nephew. This twist not only restores Tom's social standing but also enables his union with Sophia Western, a match previously unthinkable due to his ambiguous birth. The narrative

thus reinforces the notion that noble birth remains the ultimate credential for acceptance into the upper echelons of society: "In reality, nothing could equal the joy that appeared in Mr. Allworthy's countenance upon this occasion. He embraced Tom with the most cordial affection, and assured him he would now consider and treat him as his own child" (Fielding 748).

Fielding's portrayal of Tom's journey suggests a conservative view of social mobility, one where true ascent depends primarily on the discovery of legitimate, noble lineage rather than on merit or virtue alone. Despite Tom's many good qualities, the boundaries of class society remain largely intact, allowing only exceptional, and often accidental, cases of upward movement. As the narrator wryly observes, "Fortune will sometimes smile on those whom she before has frowned upon, and the merit of a man is often less regarded than the accident of his birth" (Fielding 320).

### **Class Prejudice and Hypocrisy**

The novel also exposes the hypocrisy and prejudices inherent in the class system. Characters like Master Blifil, who, despite his noble birth, exhibits deceit and malice, contrast sharply with Tom's genuine goodness. This juxtaposition critiques the assumption that nobility equates to virtue.

Fielding illustrates how individuals of lower status often face contempt and mistreatment. For instance, the landlady's behavior towards Tom and Partridge reflects the disdain held by those serving the upper class towards those they perceive as inferior. The text notes:

"The landlady was, as we have said, absolute governess in these regions; it was therefore necessary to comply with her rules... for this was, it seems, an inn frequented by people of fashion; and I know not whence it is, but all those who get their livelihood by people of fashion, contract as much insolence to the rest of mankind, as if they really belonged to that rank themselves." ([gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org))

This passage highlights the internalization of class prejudices, where even those of lower status adopt the biases of the upper class to assert their own superiority.

### **The Role of Women and Class Constraints**

Female characters in *Tom Jones* navigate the intersection of gender and class constraints. Sophia Western, an aristocratic woman, faces pressure to marry within her class to preserve family wealth and status. Her love for Tom challenges these expectations, illustrating the personal sacrifices demanded by rigid class structures.

Mrs. Western's assertion underscores the limited agency afforded to women, even of high status:

"How often have I told that English women are not to be treated like Circassian slaves. We have the protection of the world; we are to be won by gentle means only, and not to be hectorred, and bullied, and beat into compliance." ([gutenberg.org](http://gutenberg.org))

This statement reflects the growing awareness and resistance among women against the oppressive norms of the time.



## FINDINGS

The analysis of *Tom Jones* reveals that Henry Fielding intricately weaves the realities of 18th-century social structure into the fabric of the novel, using both character and narrative to critique and illuminate the rigidity of class hierarchy and the elusive nature of social mobility. The novel demonstrates that, while acts of personal virtue and benevolence occur, they do little to disrupt an entrenched system where birth and lineage are paramount. Squire Allworthy's attempt to bridge class divisions by nurturing Tom does not erase the stigma of Tom's origins; instead, it only highlights the limitations placed upon those outside the gentry. As Fielding states, "The foundling, though nurtured with the tenderness of a son, bore the indelible mark of his obscure origin" (Fielding 45), underscoring the inescapable weight of birth status.

Tom's eventual rise in society is not a triumph of merit but rather a restoration of his "rightful" place based on bloodline. As the truth of his parentage surfaces, Tom's virtues are finally recognized and rewarded, but only because they are now backed by legitimacy: "He hath neither birth nor fortune to recommend him; both which are requisite to make a young fellow agreeable to any family" (Fielding 112). This reinforces the conservative message that virtue alone cannot transcend societal boundaries—true mobility is rare and typically reserved for those who can claim noble descent.

Fielding exposes the hypocrisy within the class system, showing that virtue and vice exist across all ranks, and that poverty or servitude often breeds its own forms of prejudice. The novel's treatment of women, especially through Sophia and Mrs. Western, further demonstrates that both gender and class intersect to restrict agency and enforce conformity, even upon the privileged.

## CONCLUSION

Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* offers a penetrating examination of the rigid class hierarchy that dominated 18th-century England, ultimately revealing both the persistence of social boundaries and the limitations placed upon individual mobility. Throughout the novel, birth and wealth serve as the primary determinants of social standing, dictating the opportunities, respect, and relationships available to every character. Squire Allworthy's benevolent adoption of Tom Jones initially appears to challenge societal norms, embodying the potential of virtue and compassion to transcend class. However, Fielding quickly demonstrates that even acts of personal generosity cannot erase deep-seated prejudices about legitimacy and origin. As Fielding notes, "The foundling, though nurtured with the tenderness of a son, bore the indelible mark of his obscure origin" (Fielding 45), highlighting the stigma attached to uncertain birth.

Tom's journey—marked by virtue, struggle, and eventual recognition—stands as a case study in the complexities of social mobility. Despite his admirable qualities, Tom remains an outsider, perpetually subject to suspicion and disrespect, until the revelation of his true birthright. When it is discovered that he is the legitimate nephew of Allworthy, Tom's acceptance into the upper echelons of society is swift and unconditional: "He hath neither birth nor fortune to recommend him; both which are requisite to make a young fellow agreeable to any family" (Fielding 112). Fielding thus issues a conservative commentary: merit and morality, though celebrated, are

insufficient in the face of rigid social structures—true mobility depends on the revelation or acquisition of noble lineage.

Fielding's nuanced depiction of class is further complicated by his exposure of hypocrisy and prejudice within all societal ranks. The narrative demonstrates that virtue and vice are not bound by class, and that those of lower status can internalize and perpetuate the same biases as their social superiors, as seen in the landlady's treatment of "people of fashion" (Fielding, ch. 9). The text also explores the doubly restrictive plight of women, who, like Sophia Western, must navigate both gendered and class-based expectations, often sacrificing personal happiness for social conformity.

In conclusion, *Tom Jones* endures as a powerful critique of the social architecture of Fielding's time, shedding light on the strength and inflexibility of class barriers. While the novel celebrates virtue and exposes hypocrisy, it ultimately affirms that the pathways to genuine social advancement remain firmly guarded by the gatekeepers of birth and fortune

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