



Henry Fielding

(1707-1754)

Life and works

Henry Fielding was born into an **aristocratic family** in 1707 and educated at the famous public school, Eton. He started writing **comedies**, in which he mocked the politicians of his day. After the Licensing Act of 1737 which censored his plays, he was compelled to leave the theatre and took up a career in law as a magistrate devoting himself to social reform.

During the late 1730s and early 1740s he continued to write **satirical articles** for *The Champion*, the journal he edited for three years, and for other newspapers. Almost by accident, Fielding started to write **novels** with *An Apology for the Life of Mrs Shamela Andrews* (1741). In 1743 *The History of the Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wild the Great* appeared and in 1749 he published his best known novel *Tom Jones*. In 1751 he wrote *Amelia*, a novel about social problems. He died soon after in 1754.

The comic epic novel

While Defoe and Richardson (→ 3.10, Text Bank 21) tried to hide the fictional nature of their work under the guise of 'memoirs', and 'letters' respectively, Fielding created the **comic epic novel**. With Fielding, **the novel becomes an 'epic', even if a mocking one**: the characters, who belong to different social classes, have psychological qualities similar to those of epic heroes, but they are travelling to London and not to a mysterious Mediterranean island or across the battlefields of Troy, like in Homer's epic poems; moreover their actions are only frivolous and ridiculous. Fielding goes one step further: the story is a creation of the artist, not a record of reality. He does not appeal to the reader's heart and feelings as Richardson did, but to his sense. He presents not feelings and emotions, but actions and manners which reveal his characters' nature. He owes much to Cervantes's (1547-1616) comic romance *Don Quixote* and to the studies of contemporary morals and manners by the painter William Hogarth (→ CLIL Art, p. 207). His humorous use of the devices of the picaresque

tale, mock epic and romance in a narrative with a wide social range paved the way for the 19th-century novels of Charles Dickens, George Eliot and William Makepeace Thackeray.

He addresses a larger public, which includes the upper classes. While Richardson had the story told in letters by the characters themselves, Fielding is present both as narrator and as interpreter not only of the events, but also of the method he is using and of the art form he is creating.

Characters

Fielding's characters behave consistently from the beginning to the end and their inner thoughts and anxieties are not the main interest of the writer. His novels contain a wider **variety of characters** than those of Richardson: they **belong to all classes**, and his extensive social panorama constitutes a true, broad picture of 18th-century society.

Moral aim

Fielding **condemns hypocrisy and rebels against the Puritan code** of the age that considered respectability synonymous with virtue. While for Richardson virtue and reputation went together, for Fielding, virtue is a matter of innate disposition and intention rather than a matter of public demonstration; he believes that there are neither wholly good nor wholly bad characters and that man is naturally inclined to goodness.

Style

Fielding avoids the autobiographical form typical of Defoe in his novels and chooses the **third person**. The **narrator** is **obtrusive** because he intervenes in the narration with warnings, ironic comments and moral reflections about what happens. The tone used is conversational and ironic, while his use of humour and sharp irony save his works from excessive sentimentality.



The History of the Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wild the Great

(1743)

PLOT AND SETTING

This novel is **the mock-heroic biography of the criminal Jonathan Wild**, who lived between 1682 and 1725. He first worked as a buckle-maker's apprentice in London. He was arrested for theft in 1710, released in 1712, and then set up as a brothel-keeper with his wife Mary Milliner, a prostitute and a pickpocket. By 1715 Wild had organised a procedure for obtaining the return of stolen goods that was so successful that he ran a 'lost property' office between the Old Bailey, the court where most criminals were brought to justice, and the Newgate prison, where most of them were held. He became so famous that the government passed an Act in 1717 which made it unlawful for anyone to take a reward for giving back stolen goods. But Wild used agents to inform the victims of crime that by leaving a sum in a

certain place, they could assure the return of the goods; so he was able to bypass the law. Wild was eventually arrested in 1725 for helping a highwayman escape. Once he was in Newgate awaiting trial, witnesses came forward to give accounts of his criminal activities. He was convicted and hanged.

ORIGINS

Wild was the subject of a posthumous journalistic profile by Defoe, the *True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild* (1725) which Defoe claimed was based upon an interview in Newgate prison. He was also the source for Fielding's satirical novel *The History of the Life of the Late Mr Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743), which is considered one of the finest examples of irony in English fiction.

Key idea

The ambiguous nature of 'greatness'

In Fielding's *Jonathan Wild* the **biographical formula** imposes shape and development; the story has, in fact, a beginning, a middle and an end. But equally relevant to this coherence is the fact that the underlying ironic attitude, which equates 'greatness' with 'villainy', includes a number of moral views. **Ambition, selfishness, hypocrisy, cruelty, cunning** are all included in the term 'greatness' and summed up in the character

of Jonathan Wild, so that Fielding can afford to be single-minded and pursue his aim to show that goodness is of no consequence to greatness according to the rules of society. His contemporaries understood the parable as a political allegory on the recently ended career of the Prime Minister Robert Walpole, who was said to divert public revenues to his own enrichment.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 READ the text and answer the following questions.

- 1 What kind of novel did Fielding create?
- 2 What are his characters like?
- 3 What is the moral aim of his novels?
- 4 What narrative technique did he use?
- 5 What is the novel *Jonathan Wild* about?
- 6 What is the moral aim of this novel?



The birth of our hero

This extract deals with Jonathan Wild's infancy, when he discovered his particular skills at stealing.

Henry Fielding
*The History of the Life
of the Late Mr Jonathan
Wild the Great*
(1743)

Book One, Chapter III

To omit other stories, some of which may be perhaps the growth of superstition, we proceed to the birth of our hero, who made his first appearance on this great theatre the very day when the plague first broke out in 1665. Some say his mother was delivered of him¹ in a house of an orbicular² or round form in Covent Garden; but of this we are not certain. He was some years afterwards baptized by the famous Mr Titus Oates³.

Nothing very remarkable passed in his years of infancy, save that, as the letters *th* are the most difficult of pronunciation, and the last which a child attains to the utterance of⁴, so they were the first that came with any readiness⁵ from young Master Wild. Nor must we omit the early indications which he gave of the sweetness of his temper; for though he was by no means to be terrified into compliance⁶, yet might he, by a sugar-plum, be brought to your purpose⁷; indeed, to say the truth, he was to be bribed⁸ to anything, which made many say he was certainly born to be a great man.

He was scarce settled at school before he gave marks of his lofty and aspiring⁹ temper; and was regarded by all his schoolfellows with that deference which men generally pay to those superior geniuses who will exact it of them. If an orchard¹⁰ was to be robbed Wild was consulted, and, though he was himself seldom concerned in the execution of the design, yet was he always concerter¹¹ of it, and treasurer of the booty¹², some little part of which he would now and then, with wonderful generosity, bestow¹³ on those who took it. He was generally very secret on these occasions; but if any offered to plunder of his own head¹⁴, without acquainting¹⁵ Master Wild, and making a deposit of the booty, he was sure to have an information against him lodged with¹⁶ the schoolmaster, and to be severely punished for his pains.

He discovered so little attention to school-learning that his master, who was a very wise and worthy man, soon gave over¹⁷ all care and trouble on that account¹⁸, and, acquainting his parents that their son proceeded extremely well in his studies, he permitted his pupil to follow his own inclinations, perceiving they led him to nobler pursuits¹⁹ than the sciences, which are generally acknowledged to be a very unprofitable study, and indeed greatly to hinder²⁰ the advancement of men in the world. But though Master Wild was not esteemed the readiest at making his exercise, he was universally allowed to be the most dexterous²¹ at stealing it of all his schoolfellows, being never detected in such furtive compositions, nor indeed in any other exertations of his great talents, which all inclined the same way, but once, when he had laid violent hands on a book called *Gradus ad Parnassum*²², i.e. A step towards Parnassus; on which account his master, who was a man of most wonderful wit and sagacity, is said to have told him he wished it might not prove in the event *Gradus ad patibulum*, i.e. A step towards the gallows²³.

- 1 was delivered of him. Lo partori.
- 2 orbicular. Sferica.
- 3 Titus Oates. (1649-1705) Figura centrale del complotto papista del 1678 per assassinare re Carlo II e ristabilire la religione cattolica in Inghilterra.
- 4 attains to the utterance of. Riesce a pronunciare.
- 5 readiness. Prontezza.
- 6 terrified into compliance. Indotto all'obbedienza dalla paura.
- 7 by a sugar-plum ... purpose. Assecondare le richieste altrui se riceveva in cambio una prugna caramellata.
- 8 bribed. Corrotto.
- 9 lofty and aspiring. Nobile e ambizioso.
- 10 orchard. Frutteto.
- 11 concerter. Ideatore.
- 12 treasurer of the booty. Custode del bottino.
- 13 bestow. Donare.
- 14 plunder of his own head. Impossessarsi dei suoi averi.
- 15 acquainting. Informare.
- 16 lodged with. Presso.
- 17 gave over. Lasciava perdere.
- 18 on that account. A quel proposito.
- 19 pursuits. Obiettivi.
- 20 hinder. Frenare.
- 21 dexterous. Abile, veloce.
- 22 *Gradus ad Parnassum*. Raccolta di citazioni e sinonimi latini.
- 23 gallows. Patibolo.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

1 **READ** the text and divide it into three parts. Then write a heading to each section.

2 **LOOK** at the visual analysis of the text. Write down what each highlight represents.

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<div style="background-color: #00b0f0; width: 20px; height: 10px; display: inline-block;"></div>	<div style="background-color: #90ee90; width: 20px; height: 10px; display: inline-block;"></div>
<div style="background-color: #ff0000; width: 20px; height: 10px; display: inline-block;"></div>	<div style="background-color: #add8e6; width: 20px; height: 10px; display: inline-block;"></div>
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**3 DISCUSS** the following questions in pairs.

- 1 What kind of man was Jonathan Wild?
- 2 How would you define Fielding's tone?
- 3 Can you perceive the writer's aim in this text?

4 COMPLETE the summary with the words from the box.

we	deeds	childhood	skilled	Covent Garden
realistic	third-person	Master	heroic	plague



The text is told by a **(1)** narrator who intrudes in the narration through the pronoun '**(2)** ' (lines 2, 5, 10). **(3)** references to time and place tell us that Wild was born in a circular house in **(4)**, London, at the time of the **(5)** in 1665. Wild was baptised by a Papist and he was called '**(6)** Wild' because it was difficult to pronounce his first name. Nothing remarkable happened during his **(7)** The narrator points out that he was not very good at school but very **(8)** at stealing. Even his teacher encouraged his particular abilities because he thought they might lead him to noble **(9)** Jonathan Wild is given a **(10)** stature by the narrator because of expressions such as 'concerter', 'treasurer', 'wonderful generosity', 'bestow', 'universally' (lines 18-30), which exalt his negative skill as a noble virtue.