Basic Themes in the Picaresque Novel

[Teme de bază în romanul picaresc]

Raluca STOICA¹

¹ Lecturer, „Petre Andrei”
University of Iasi, Romania, E-mail: rlcstoica@yahoo.com

Abstract: The focus of our paper is to reveal the most important and specific features of the picaresque novel since its birth, in Spain, until the eighteenth's century England. The picaresque novel offers us a wide range of paths to be explored, its variety and richness making it an almost inexhaustible field of literary investigation.

Keywords: *picaresque novel; basic themes; episodic structure; character development; Spanish picaresque.*

How to cite: Stoica, R. (2017). Basic Themes in the Picaresque Novel. *Anuarul Universitatii “Petre Andrei” din Iasi, Fascicula: Asistentă Socială, Sociologie, Psihologie, 19*, 136-140.
<https://doi.org/10.18662/upasw/09>

“Picaresque narrative tends to be discursively philosophical and meditated and fictionally anti-philosophical. What it asserts on the level of discourse it often contradicts or cancels out on the level of the story. There is a constant tension between what is narrated and the narrating attitude of the narrator, making us suspect the sincerity of conversions for example (the most notorious example being *Moll Flanders*). The conceptual discursive intent conflicts with the obvious relish with which the narrator launches into the hurly-burly of his sordid life; he works against his ostensible purpose by dwelling on the very things that his narration is supposed to prove worthless.” (Wicks, 1989). This is how Ulrich Wicks began his thesis regarding the basic themes on the picaresque novel. According to the same author, there are only a few themes which we have to consider as basic: *desengaño*, or disillusionment (or vanity of vanities), the theme of freedom, the theme of hunger, of solitude and of gullibility.

- *The theme of disillusionment.* The above mentioned author considers the first theme - that of disillusionment - as being problematic as soon as we examine the narrative distance in any depth.

- *The theme of freedom.* The second major picaresque theme (in Ulrich Wicks’ acception) is the theme of freedom which the picaresque explores partly as the paradoxical entrapment in freedom. “The picaro is freed not of his own will from the confines of ordinary social life, and he roams the landscape (which is paralleled on the narrative level by his desire to free himself from his life by turning it into art, which, paradoxically, entraps him in his life once more). Although the freedom is imposed on him, the picaro learns to relish it” (Davidson, 1986).

- *Theme of travel.* The theme of travel is one of the most basic themes in literature, being identified with the beginnings of novel writing. Its importance rests in the fact that it offers more than a background and a setting; travel also offers the picaresque protagonist, a wide range of possibilities and opportunities, contributing to the episodic structure: escape from the past, freedom of action, but also with all source of difficulties.

There is a general belief among literary critics according to which the episodic structure of a picaresque novel and character development work together and set up a type of character who does not have enough time for a reflective introspection. This is the case of the most Spanish picaresque novels of the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. In what concerns the eighteenth century, we notice that this tendency is continued in novels with a male rogue, while the movement of picaras is scarcely noticed. Cathy Davidson states that “the republican picaros regularly take themselves and their text ‘elsewhere’- as if America were too lonely and too new to

accommodate adventure. [...] Even though those few picaresque novels set in America usually manage to work in an ocean voyage or two” (Davidson, 1986). The same author exemplifies this global episodism by the help of a triad: “*The history of Constantius and Pulchra*” (if we consider it picaresque) which contains numerous transatlantic crossings, “*The Algerine Captive*” – where the authors interweaves Updike Underhill’s picaresque adventures in America with his captivity in Northern Africa to have each setting provide a mirror for the other; “*Modern Chivalry*” – where Teague Origan goes to France.

It seems that the picaresque offered a “glimpse into a world inaccessible to the typical early American reader“, who “gained all sorts of esoteric information about life in Europe, about life aboard ship”, about life at every level of the society.

- *Theme of hunger.* The theme of hunger is another major picaresque theme being found in the majority of the Spanish novels from the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. For instance, in “*Lazarillo de Tormes*” or “*Guzman de Alfarache*”, having food is everything. A representative passage is when after Lazarillo has been with the impoverished squire for several days and got nothing to eat, he is sent out with money to buy some food. Along the way, he encounters a funeral procession, with a woman wailing: Oh my darling husband, where are they taking you? To the sad and accursed place, to the gloomy and dark dwelling, to the domain where there is no food or drink!” (*Lazarillo de Tormes*, quoted in Wicks, Ulrich – *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions: A Theory and Research Guide*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1989). Lazarillo interprets this woman’s words in terms of “his own experiential situation and he tells the squire that they are bringing a body to his house”. (Wicks, Ulrich, 1989) Guzman de Alfarache said in one occasion, when he was desperately hungry, that “It is good to have a father, it is good to have a mother, but to have meat to put in a man’s mouth is better than them both.” *Theme of solitude.* The theme of solitude “arises from the picaro’s essential condition in the world and his fundamental aloneness in the midst of the teeming life”. The basic situation of the picaresque novel is, as Ulrich Wicks stated, the main characters’ solitude in the world. The picaro is totally isolated from society: he does not have a social position, money, friends or family (in most of the cases). Moreover, life is for him a long wandering with no end in which existential problems (such as food, shelter and warm) are the most important.

- *Theme of gullibility.* The theme of gullibility results from “what picaro learns in his relationship with the landscape when he tries to trick his way of life”.

Theme of money. In Moll Flanders, nothing else matters, but money. The reader can easily identify this theme from the very beginning of the novel. Moll's worries about money began since she was a child. For instance, she told a nurse that she "will work harder, says I, and you shall have it all" (Defoe, 1994).

- In the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries' Spain the theme of money was to be found in any picaresque novel being a primary and dominant theme; but the picaresque novel evolved in time and each country came with its own national characteristics. In England, the theme of money was important together with the Spanish picaresque novel, but in the United States, this was no longer a necessity. To exemplify this, we shall bring into discussion "Female Quixotism", where Dorcasina Sheldon is "the reputed heiress of a thousand pounds a year, which at that time was considered, in America, as a great fortune". (Tenney, 1992)

Conclusions

Our main objective with present study was to demonstrate and to epitomize in a few words that the picaresque novel is not easy to decode. We drew a parallel between the Spanish, British and American picaresque novel and we reached the conclusion that picaresque novels had a deep-rooted Spanish tradition and that almost all the above mentioned themes have its origins in the original picaresque novel.

References

- Alfaro, G. (1977). *La estructura de la novela picaresca*, Instituto Caro y Cuervo, Bogotá
- Alter, R. (1964). *Rogue's Progress (Studies in the Picaresque Novel)*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge
- Bataillon, M. (1982). *Picaros y picaresca*, Madrid: Taurus Ediciones S.A.
- Bjornson, R. (1979). *The Picaresque Hero in the European Fiction*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Blackburn, A. (1979). *The Myth of the Picaro*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cañedo, J. (1968). *La picaresca (Antología)*. Doncel, Madrid.
- Cohen, S. (2012). "La picaresca y la manifestación del picaro, anti héroe y super anti-héroe". *Neophilologus*, 96(4), 553–563.
- Davidson, C. (1986). *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. Oxford New York and London: University Press.

- Defoe, D. (1994). *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*. London: Penguin Books
- Tenney, G.T. (1992). *Female Quixotism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Wicks, U. (1989). *Picaresque Narrative, Picaresque Fictions: A Theory and Research*. California: Greenwood.