

The Picaresque Revisited?

Modern Picaresque Uses in Joyce Cary's *Herself Surprised*

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Abstract:

Herself Surprised by Joyce Cary exhibits a number of formal characteristics of the picaresque novel. Firstly, it is an autobiographical account of Sara Monday's experiences, with many men as well as women, in several classes of society. In compliance with traditional "picara," she undergoes an everlasting remodeling of her character, which is equal to the "education" in picaro's adaptation. The novel is also episodic, Sara relating her actions, feelings and her private thoughts in the living. With this emerges another picaresque trait; the depiction and exposure of the society in which the picaro has his experiences. Manner, religion and character traits are treated openly. In *Herself Surprised* the reader is given a cross - section view of classes, families, religious aspects, culture, views on art and the motives of individuals in experiences of crises.

Keywords: Picaro, trickster, allowances, surprises, heroine, unpredictable world

1. Introduction

The picaresque novel, as a genre, first attracted scholarly attention towards the middle of the nineteenth century (Chandler, 1958). A common belief in the critical works dealing with the novel is the view that picaresque literature flourishes when a society is in a state of flux and the picaresque character is a reflection of a society in deep change (Hague, 1986). Blackburn (1977) and Bjornson (1979) both discuss the creation of the Spanish picaresque tradition in the light of the situation of the picaras in the sixteenth century. Bjornson (1979) defines the essential picaresque situation as the "paradigmatic confusion between an isolated individual

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and hostile society” (4). According to Blackburn (1967), picares are “marginal men” who lived in a world of tension and instability (9).

From this perspective, Guillen (1971) describes the picaro / picara as “an individual who is involved in a tangle, an economic and social predicament of the most immediate and passing nature” (77). According to him, the picaresque novel represents a “confrontation between the individual and his environment which is also a conflict between inwardness and experience” (78). In the older picaresque literature the picaro is an insular, an isolated being who is frequently an orphan who must function in an environment for which he is not prepared. He soon discovers that there is no refuge from society and that “social role playing is “indispensable.” He can neither join nor reject his fellowmen nor function as a “half outsider” (Guillen, 78).

The general state of confusion has always surrounded the concept of the picaresque. The variety and diversity of works described as “picaresque” are easily recognizable as the causes of the differences of opinion (Blanch, 1956). As a result of the enormous popularity and influence of the eighteenth century French and English works, the significance of their Spanish models has been obscured. Thus, the titles *Gil Blass*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Tom Jones* remain for many identical with the term picaresque while the titles of their Spanish models are not remembered (Alter, 1964).

One of the dominant devices of the picaresque novel is the episodic plot. Miller (1967) states that as a work of literature the picaresque novel was a series of episodes whose sole link was their occurrence in the life of the picaro, the anti-hero who joins together all the events by the sole reason that he is the important actor in them all.

2. Picaresque elements in *Herself Surprised*

Herself Surprised (1941) carries many of the picaresque elements of the traditional sense. Commenting on the philosophical aspects of *Herself Surprised*, Walter Allen (1953) states that Joyce Cary’s novel is “... a metaphorical statement expressed through images of human beings in action, characters, along with the technical men as he uses in order to render them in

action, all originate in his beliefs about the nature of man" (8).

Cary's view on the nature of the twentieth century man's world is similar to the vision expressed in many picaresque novels. The world is in chaos and meaninglessness. Joyce Cary, in the introductory section of the novel, states that life is indeed a chaos: "The turmoil of actual events is deeper than that. It is true chaos; it includes an immense element of luck, of pure chance" (Cary iii).

Sara Monday, the heroine of the novel, responds to the events in the traditional picaresque framework. Cary, in fact, celebrates the theme of "ongoing creation." In each instance Cary plays the counterpoint themes of freedom and creation. Thus, *Herself Surprised* presents an allegory based on the idea of the Creation, the Fall and the Redemption. As Golden Larsen suggests in his book, "[Cary] celebrates the Fall because it has brought man freedom and Redemption as well as creative imagination" (99-100). Throughout the novel the "seeming picaras are condemned to freedom" (Larsen 102), and so they depict a great potential to pass onto the strictly picaresque: Sara is qualified as a "picara" in terms of origin and education.

The picara is usually a character of low or unknown origins. Sara assumes different roles in the novel but we have no information as to her origin or her family name. The novel starts with reference to her roguish qualifications: "The judge, when he sent me to prison, said that I had behaved like a woman without any moral sense" (1). Sara informs us that her upbringing took place in a "good home" and adds that her mother "wanted [her] to be first-class cook fit for the best services; and so did I" (4). Nevertheless, her family name is not given and the novel ends with Sara's imprisonment.

It is the picara's education what makes it a picaresque novel: from a state of helplessness the picara is trained and tries to cope with them, he learns and adapts to use the world's patterns. As a result of such education the picara becomes a product of corrupt and hypocritical society. Yet, Sara Monday differs in this regard, for the novel does not reveal a progression from a state of innocence to a state of efficient roguishness adopted as a means of survival in a chaotic world.

The style and technique of this novel are quite similar to the picaresque tradition. The

traditional episodic plot is easily observed in *Herself Surprised*. There are eighty-six chapters, few being longer than three pages in length, which relate in quick, conversational style a long series of encounters and impressions. Sentences are short. The narrator gives us the facts, but delivers them with picaresque detachment although Cary uses first-person narration. The rhythm of the novel also adds to its picaresque trait.

Fate is commonly applied in traditional picaresque fiction. In a similar way, Sara's references to her God and religion fall beneath the categories of fate and fortune. In Sara's case fortune is not even the "hand-maiden" of a kindly and personal God. At best Sara's God is a moralist. As in picaresque style, accident, fate or fortune abounds in Sara's life. She enjoys life with Matt who soon asserts his masculinity, but she feels guilty. She says:

I'll admit that I was too careless and too easy ... so things that would have shocked me as a bride were so little to me now that I did not even notice them at all. But then, my boy Matthew was born and died of croup in the first month ... So, I thought, God strikes when you least expect.
(33)

Gulley Jimson is seen as an instrument of Fate, "To punish my prosperity ...," Sara says (41). When Matt rages at Sara for her assistance to Jimson and accuses her falsely of adultery, which results in her displacement and ejection like a picara, Sara declines to clarify because she sees the hand of fate. She remarks, "I was horrified at his thinking such things, but I could not say anything. It was not that I was frightened but I felt all this had been prepared and that nothing I could say would be any good. So I sat like a fool" (71-2). Sara concludes, "if I was appointed to have a fall it was not more than I deserved ... It was no good my speaking ..." (73). When Sara consents to begin her life with Gulley, she is sure of fate but she cannot determine its cause and effect. On this point Sara thinks:

Now whether I knew that I was going to my fate at Rose Cottage, or I had brought it on myself, I cannot tell now ... I seemed not like a woman but a truck, which goes nowhere it is pushed and knows not why ... And yet at the end of a week we were engaged. And yet I could not say I

wanted it, but that it had come upon me. (107)

At the end of her narration, in jail, she notes the accident of luck:

Neither had my luck left me, for just when I was fretting for our quarter day at Gulley's and Tommy's bills on top of that, this kind gentleman came from the news agency and offered me a hundred pounds in advance for my story in the newspapers, when I came out. (274)

Living in a world of disorder and chance, the pícara is frequently surprised by the turn of events and unexpected effect of his actions (Dueck, 95). In connection with this, Sara's life has also an element of recurring surprise. However, Sara's surprise is one of discovery, of insight into the nature of human existence, of a view to the difference between appearance and reality. It is not primarily a shock of surprise over the random nature of events, and the quality of Sara's spiritual equilibrium is not modified by the disorder of external events.

As Dueck states, Sara's spiritual side differs greatly from that of pícara in that she is not as intent upon survival as she is upon the sense of community to which she commits herself (96). She is surprised, however, at herself and over the outcome of her involvements. When Sara finally consents to marry Matt she reflects in surprise over her decision. Her surprise is started by the lack of rationale. She comments,

You will say that was just what a flighty girl would do, marrying for a whim, but I was not flighty then. I was sober-sided. If I had been flighty, I would not have been so surprised at myself, as I was for many a day until I had not time to think of anything (10).

The pícara's external world is full of chaos. In the same manner, Sara's world has people who individually and collectively lack the necessary insight into the real issues in human events. As Larsen suggests, the strange thing is that such people make an attempt at order (104). In fact Sara makes allowances for the impossibility of truth in certain endeavors. When Miss Maul blackmails Sara to her husband, Matt, Sara characteristically gives an appraisal of the

dichotomy in human affairs. She says, "For though I was not truly guilty in my soul, yet in the world's eye, which does not look at the mind, but only the flesh, I had gone far to break my vows" (26).

Sara's double vision gets her into various difficulties. In a similar manner, the picara also shares the double vision. The vision of society forces the picara to master, to use and to gull society by its own machinery to her purposes. Unlike the picara, Sara does not apply trickery, with or roguery to continue her survival in this chaotic world. Sara is the one who suffers instead. This is because people make surface assessments of her leading to her harm. It was the in her relationship with Jimson. Sara complains, "My daughters would tell me that Jimson took me for my money and robbed me of it and then left me on the streets without a penny, but it is not so. It only seemed so" (119).

If Sara sees deeper, like the picara, into the real issues of how the world is, her vision differs qualitatively. And where Sara sees the inherent problem of truth she turns this not to own her advantage, like the picara, but to the others' advantage. In other words, Sara gives her love and loyalty and seldom fails to gain a response to it. Her gift is the insight into the problem of being human and she makes allowances. Sara's daughter, even the affectionate Nancy, almost ignores her but the mother makes allowance:

Even Nancy, though far away, had never found it easy to see me, because her husband and his family had been so upset by my going off with Jimson, and being up for writing bad checks. I do not mean she did not have a proper feeling for her mother, but only that my visits would have been a nuisance to her. So we wrote and sometimes met in London for shopping and news.
(244)

These allowances shape all Sara's relations with men and women. She sees the real Matt and his affliction with the "creeper's mentality;" she helps him to affirm his manhood. Sara sees the real as well as the masked Hitchson and manages to keep a distance from him. She also sees the values in the martyr Nina, as well as the real motivating abilities of Jimson. Sara helps Jimson's mistress Lizzie keep house and do the mending and appreciates Lizzie's uselessness.

Sara supports Jimson over the years, “the best patron he ever had,” and it is Sara who takes Jimson’s son Tom into her interest, and when he shows ability, pays for his schooling. Her last thought in jail is on her luck, and even this luck is also “other-directed.” The one hundred pounds for her story will pay for Tom’s school expenses. Tom may have only “cupboard” love and be “a demon for noise, dirt, and wickedness ... But I’ll say this for Tommy, pest as he could be ... he had a sweet heart at bottom, and never bore malice” (205). Sara goes to court for Tom and “mothers” him as she did Wilcher’s nephew, Bobby, until her departure for Canada.

Related to Sara’s insight and her generous allowances toward human limitation is the question of the picaresque’s protean roles. Sara’s adaptability is astounding. On this issue, Wright in his book comments,

Within a month of her going to Tolbrook, she is so well settled that she is unwilling to go to London to join Gulley. When she is moved, she is heartbroken, at first ... without turning a hair, Sara becomes a part of London life; she is even glad of “the peace and quiet of the town without hens and calves waking you up at four in the morning”. (117)

As one who lives in a picaresque world and through chaos and disorder, the innocent human is educated to become a picaresque in order to survive. Therefore, the picaresque’s life-style is shaped by an internal instability (Guillen 34). This instability is not a personality disease, but a mode of adaptability to the turn of events. For this reason, the picaresque lives loosely and is able to face a new and opposed situation with efficiency. Sara Monday, similarly, lives on the whirl of events and manages to survive in the various roles of life. Her roles range from that of fashionable lady of Bradnell to the common-law wife of Jimson, with jail sentences among. On this point Bloom comments,

Sara regards herself as a tenderhearted creature whose troubles are due to her good nature. This estimate is true. Wilcher sees in her an easygoing mistress who will cherish him in his decrepitude. He is quite right. Gulley calls her a man grabber, and he is also right. All the ideas about each other are right from their own point of view. (84)

In comedy the will of the protagonist is obstructed until, by a resolution, such as the father consenting to the marriage. The protagonists are free to give their will to the roles of love in keeping with the affirmation of their identity. The comic ending consists of regaining the will. Tragedy is a disharmony of role and will. It thrives on a strong will facing an ambiguous role, or even a bad role. But in the picaresque genre, the picara loses her identity never to gain or even to seek it and she is only focused on playing the necessary role for the occasion. Her role is her identity: she is first and last a picara. But, it is a role assumed in order to survive (Guillen, 89).

In view of the above paragraphs, it is possible to apply the views to Sara. In spite of the numerous roles – wife, mother, model, and mistress – and these in relation with a number of widely differing characters, Sara Monday maintains and develops her personality. Her will is consistently forced to accept the integration of her identity. To do this, she shows some external marks of the picara. Sara herself calls it “my rolling way” (184); she manages to leave daughters, friends, and favorite surroundings for her success in the task at hand.

But in the final analysis, Sara’s internal sense of community sets her in contrast with a protean world; in picaresque literature it is the picara who becomes protean. We have already traced her development over the series of her experience. However, it is important to note that Sara’s loyalty is the main factor which attracts Matt, Robert, Wilcher and Jimson. Her loyalty to them is never in question. The world saw the act, but she always loved Matt; he was worth more than fifteen Jimsons. And when with Wilcher, she gave him a decade of joy and service. Gullley’s concern for Sara became so intense that he even attacked her. She knew Wilcher was worth three Gulleys. In each circumstance, she sought to build relationship and she emerged from each crisis with sanity in an attitude of “it would do no one any good if I went out my head” (133).

Sara is a materialist without falling prey to materialism. The picara, too, is intent upon goods; at first, they are necessary for survival, but in the course of time, the picara is so much absorbed in this life style that she is overtaken and, as a result, she gets, thieves and gulls for

their own sake. Very similarly, Sara likes things and uses them. She loves her kitchens and she soon has the oven shining, the food fit for Jimson's royalty' and the necessary tradesmen repairing the house. Even Matt's old house becomes a place of envied parties under Sara's management. And "creeper" Matt becomes a gentleman entertainer. She loves fine clothes. She also loves color and physical landscape. She loves, above all, the spirit all these connote and the part they play in her people's lives.

3. Conclusion

As already observed, *Herself Surprised* involves the uses of various picaresque characteristics. It is an autobiographical account of a series of episodes concerning a heroine who is rogue enough to steal, to break the law by writing bad cheques and to break society's law on adultery. She is unconventional. Her three main sexual relationships include only one lawful marriage. The heroine also exhibits agility of adjustment like that of the picara. She "rolls" with the events. She is involved in events with a good variety of characters, who disappear and reappear. Her life is spent in an unpredictable world: fate, fortune and accident play a strong part. And the element of surprise, a dominant aspect in picaresque literature, is a key theme of this novel. Finally, the novel ends open-ended like traditional picaresque tales.

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