

The Picaresque Novel and the Literary Taxonomy

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Abstract: *This article focuses on the analysis of the picaresque fiction from a taxonomic point of view, offering a helping hand to researchers who find themselves lost in the numberless picaresque novels which have been written in almost five centuries. The classification of the picaresque novel is made according to extensive and restrictive definitions, having in view the fact a picaresque novel may belong to more than one narrative strategy or to different genres at the same time.*

Keywords: *humanities, literature, linguistics, applied linguistics, literary taxonomy, picaresque novel.*

How to cite: Stoica, R. (2022). The picaresque novel and the literary taxonomy. *Anuarul Universității “Petre Andrei” din Iași, Fascicula: Drept, Științe Economice, Științe Politice, 30, 271-279.* <https://doi.org/10.18662/upalaw/106>

1. Introduction

In their attempts to find a definition of the picaresque novel, critics from all over the world tried to elucidate the confusion which *bovers* upon the definition of the picaresque novel; that is from a restrict Miller ive interpretation to a more extensive one, or from the historical to the psychological standpoint. It seems that the difficulties which are related with the attempt to provide an exact definition have their origin in the general problem of *literary taxonomy*.

In his book *Is Literary History Possible?*, David Perkins focuses on the role of taxonomy in the process of writing literary history and sheds light upon subjectivity, which is the guiding principle of any literary classification. In this context, Cristoph Ehland states that “subjectivity is the key principle of literary classification” (2003, p. 14) and “for any literary critic, taxonomy is as much defined by his ideological interests, his point of view, his antipathies and his affinities as it is derived from literary tradition” (Ehland, 2003, p. 14).

Thus, Perkins’ (1993, p. 67) conceptual considerations with a view to literary taxonomy, emphasizes the importance of classifications, in order not to lose ourselves in too many details without understanding them.

Indeed, this usage for classification has been adopted by many critics, but it was not so debated because of the tacit traditional models. This is why, literary critics draw attention on the literary methods of classification and conventions. In broad terms, these are two different methods for the definition of a trans-historical genre: “the first approach begins with the individual text and isolates its key characteristics; [...] the second method attempts to moderate between the existing conventions of a genre and the features of an individual text” (Ehland, 2003, p. 15). Considering the artificiality of the generic definitions, critics have to delimitate or balance between precision and flexibility when “providing a generic definition of essential characteristics, so that the classification reflects the individuality of the text as well as the need to structure the textual material in super-individual groups” (Ehland, 2003, p. 16).

2. The Picaresque Novel and the Extensive Approach

The numberless picaresque novels which have been written since its appearance in Spain in 1554 led to the need of categorizing them according to an extensive or a restrictive definition and having in view the fact that a

novel may belong to more than one narrative strategy or to different genres at the same time, things seem a little bit more complicated.

The willingness for classification was also felt by Richard Bjornson (1979) who considered that the picaresque novels do not apply the same rules, resulting that they are somehow different, even if they belong to the same genre. It means that, in a number of cases, the character is portrayed in a process, and during this process the picaresque main character's personality really develops. On the opposite, others illustrate the main picaresque character in connection with the protagonist's inherent nature. There are also cases when an entire fictional world is created just in order for the *pícaros* to reach both wealth and psychological well-being. And, at last, some picaresque characters are situated in environments with “impossible” situations, in which they are bound to choose between their own survival and honesty.

Hence, for obtaining a conceptually valid, historically accurate idea of the picaresque fiction and its crucial purpose for the birth of the European novel, “one must first determine its essential components and then examine the circumstances under which they recur” (Bjornson, 1979, p. 3).

Thus, in order to find pragmatic definitions (in a restrictive/extensive way as it is shown above), one needs to differentiate, as Guillén (1971, p. 71) highlights:

- 1) the picaresque genre;
- 2) a group of novels, that merit the picaresque name per se, in most of the cases, in connection with the genuine Spanish pattern;
- 3) novels regarded as picaresque in a larger sense;
- 4) the picaresque myth: “an essential situation [...] derived from the novels themselves”.

This definition in four steps tries to comprise all the characteristics of the literary phenomenon; in the first stage he describes the genre as being a conscious perception of a pattern which appeared and developed from the very beginning, together with the first Spanish picaresque novel. All the other three levels deal with the materialization of the picaresque in literature.

The novels are classified according to the extent of their correspondence with the picaresque, as it results from the first Spanish novels. In the critical anthology entitled “*Upstarts, Wanderers of Swindlers: Anatomy of the Pícaro*”, the same author, Claudio Guillén elaborated even a more complex definition, but in a restrictive way somehow; he named *picaresque novels* – sensu stricto – “a group of works that fluctuate around a norm with respect to each of certain characteristics” (Guillén, 1986, p. 83).

Here are the eight features of Guillén:

1. at the first one, the critic encourages us to simply ask and answer the following question: Is the attempt to find a definition for the picaresque character compulsory?
2. the second feature is that the picaresque novel is a pseudo-autobiography (where not only the main character and his actions are picaresque, but the whole is full of sensibility and colour.) At this level, Guillén stresses the first-person technique, since the picaro is a “half-outsider” and again, makes us aware of the existence of *homo interior* and *homo exterior*, the former being estranged from all his friends and the latter who acts and appears to conform;
3. the third characteristic is that the storyteller’s view is partial and distorted;
4. a fourth one, deals with a thorough approach of the picaresque character, being reflective, as well as philosophical and even critical on religious or moral grounds;
5. the fifth one is that there is a stress on the material level of existence;
6. the sixth one deals with the picaro who perceives several collective conditions, like the social classes, the professions, or the cities;
7. at the seventh one, the picaro moves horizontally through space and vertically through society;
8. the eight one which classifies the novel as being “loosely episodic”.

This is probably, one of the most effective definitions, even if he makes us aware of the fact that no work can feature thoroughly this complex genre (Guillén, 1986, p. 72). These eight characteristics constitute themselves in general guidelines, generating changes and adaptability within the genre. Another critic, specifies: “Guillén’s characteristics are not meant to be an elaborate litmus for testing the quality of various picaresque novels” (Scholes, 1974, p. 141); instead, it can be considered a structure for monitoring advances in the literary system. As we already know, there is not a stencil which may establish how many of these eight characteristics must contain a novel, but most of them should be present in order to qualify a novel as belonging to the picaresque genre.

One can easily notice the fact that Claudio Guillén is against mechanical or visual models because “our subject is a certain type of *mental*

order, characterized by the functional importance of the relationships obtaining between its various parts” (1971, p. 378).

For the beginning, the climate which characterizes the picaresque is very well described by Alexander Blackburn: A picaresque novel [...] emerges when a writer’s imagination is “threatened by catastrophe: the very idea of existence commingles with the world of illusion” (Blackburn, 1979, p. 14).

But, after a thorough investigation of these eight picaresque features, Ulrich Wicks considers that “some of these overlap a great deal (for example, 3 with 4, 4 with 6, and 6 with 7), but sharper demarcations or a reduced group of condensed features would blur useful distinctions in works that [...] demonstrate feature 6 but not 4, which would tell us something about its picaresqueness that combining 4 and 6 into one could not, because the latter would be more exclusive and much less discretionary”. (Wicks, 1989, p. 39) The same author found it tempting to try to draw these “concentric circles” (Guillén, 1971, p. 93) that schematize the concept of picaresque as below (Figure no. 1).

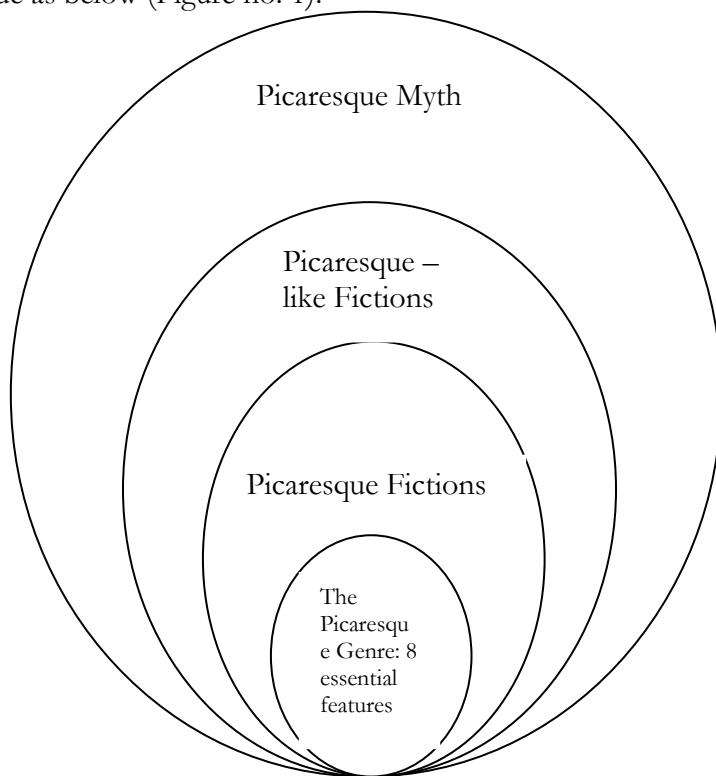


Figure no. 1 Ulrich Wicks’s concept of picaresque
Sursă: Concepție proprie a autoarei

And indeed, the milieu when *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), *Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599) or *Historia de la Vida del Buscón* (1626) were written, was full of contrasts: ascents and descents, wealthy people and swindlers, progress and decay; all of them led to a certain instability of a human being's reality.

3. The Picaresque Novel and the Restrictive Approach

Based on these assertions, Guillén (1971, p. 85) highlights that there is no doubt that picaresque novels offer a pattern of inner disagreements between “the individual and his environment, inwardness and experience” and thus picaro's environment merges with the psycho-sociological situation which seems to be the quintessence of the picaresque.

For offering a restrictive interpretation, we shall point out most of the characteristics that determine critics to consider a novel as belonging to the picaresque genre. Thus, for Claudio Guillén, it has to be a pseudo-biography, written in the first person.

Ehland remarks that “the writer finds himself in a situation in which he can – consciously or even unconsciously – either conform to the conventions of a particular genre or challenge and occasionally overcome them” (Ehland, 2003, p. 17). In this case, one can notice that the process of the creation of a new genre is the result of the interaction of sociological factors with many characteristics of the traditional literary models and Perkins adds: “it seems that very different works may belong to the same genre and that a work may belong to different genres” (Perkins, 1993, p. 80).

Having in view that literary taxonomy is subjective, we shall try to delimitate and define the picaresque genre, in a restricted and an extensive way. First, we have to state that the restricted view of the picaresque genre brings more clarity, the literary corpus being more homogenous; at the same time, a restricted definition constitutes itself in a sort of hindrance. The *picaresque genre* is associated with traditional models and conventional patterns in balance with the *picaresque myth* which is seen by Claudio Guillén (1971) as something vital “derived from the novels themselves”.

At a first glance, it seems to be very easy to state whether a novel is or is not picaresque, according to the genre and due to certain easily identifiable patterns like those related with content or technique. According to Blackburn, if the hero is an orphan and if he relates his travels “in a more or less sardonic manner”, if he “wanders into delinquency – we are orbiting in the picaresque galaxy” (Blackburn, 1979, p. 7). In order to sustain this

idea, Claudio Guillén fathered an approach which balances the picaresque genre, with the picaresque myth.

Examining carefully the origin and the types of the novelistic fiction, one may observe new *nuclear themes* which are capable of generating new forms and which need further analysis in order to understand them. Thus, Plato defines *mythologia* as nothing else but telling stories. And of course, for most of the people, the word *myth* means stories of Greek origin like *Odysseus and the Cyclopes, Oedipus and Iocasta,* etc. It results that a *myth* must not be about Moby Dicks or about people and gods and must not be related to superstition or rituals. A *myth* is much more than a mere folk tale; it is an “imaginative or introspective urge”, as the literary critic Kirk (1973) calls it.

And thus, *myth* becomes the governing principle in literature and implicitly in the picaresque one. In this respect, the restrictive view of the genre is balanced by the picaresque concept which is described by Guillén as a “spontaneous impulse” and thus, a psychological product which becomes the main source of inspiration.

Literary critics did not succeed to concur with a view to a standard definition which can be applied to any picaresque novel. The difficulty comes from the fact that this type of novel belongs to a “polymorphic genre” (Levin, 1968, p. 15), being subjected to a great variety of characteristics, styles, tone, and so on.

On the one hand, for most of the critics the following statements are irrefutable and widely available: 1. the picaresque novel appeared during the 16th century, in Spain; 2. it is an account of a picaro’s tumultuous and adventurous life; 3. it is usually a first-person narration; 4. it contains many realistic traits; 5. it has an episodic structure.

On the other hand, there is a propensity to see *the picaresque* as a historical category – like “comics”, “tragic”, “satiric”, or “bucolic” – which is applicable to different categories. Authors have different opinions and positions regarding the picaresque: some of them categorizes it as having a simple, structural description, meaning that any episodic novel-on-the-road should be considered as *picaresque*. In other cases, the term relates just to the character of the protagonist, so that any story about a quasi-criminal wanderer is considered as being picaresque (Sieber, 1977, p. IX).

Since its emergence, in the year 1554, the picaresque novel has a long history, being more and more complex and able to adapt to new milieus. Based on these assumptions, the picaresque novel was described by Robert Alter (Alter, 1964) as “a permanent addition to the storehouse of literacy resources, capable of regenerating and transforming itself in a surprising variety of new environments”.

In this attempt of finding a position for the picaresque novel within the literary taxonomy, another specialist argued that the targeted novel is grim; According to Miller, picaresque novels talk about “human degradation rather than human triumph” (1967, p. 72).

Gustavo Alfaro argued in *La estructura de la novela picaresca* that according to the general definition, “the picaresque novel is an autobiographical account of an anti-hero’s life in which the protagonist’s presence and the chronological succession of incidents are the most important elements” (Alfaro, 1977, p. 2).

4. Conclusions

By writing this paper, we wanted to reveal specific features of the picaresque novel by means of a dual approach. On the one hand, we based our research on the extensive definitions that rely on a contrastive study. On the other hand, since the picaresque novels have a similar thematic structure, we have also had in view a restrictive approach to them.

By the help of the literary taxonomy, we tried to delimitate and define the picaresque genre due to some easily identifiable patterns and also emphasizing some new patterns, capable of generating new forms, reaching thus to the conclusion that the picaresque novel belongs to a polymorphic genre, too.

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