



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

A Confederacy of Dunces
and the Picaresque:
Generic Considerations

Ritgerð til BA-prófs í Ensku

Friðrik Sólmes Jónsson

Maí 2012

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Abstract

The main purpose of this essay is to situate the novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole within the genre of picaresque fiction. Although the title of the book is taken from an essay by Jonathan Swift and its structure supposedly based on Boethius' *Consolations of Philosophy*, its style and its content are generally recognized as being picaresque. However, while a great deal has been written about that genre, there are conflicting and often confusing ideas about what precisely is meant by the term picaresque and how accurately it may be applied to novels to a wide range of novels from Thomas Nashe *Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). This essay contextualises *A Confederacy of Dunces* within this generic discussion, first by examining the origins and etymology of the terms *picaro* and picaresque and then by looking at the social circumstances which gave rise to it. One of the central questions dealt with here is whether *A Confederacy of Dunces* can really be said to fit any definition of the genre. For readers who are not familiar with the novel, I have included two appendixes for reference. Appendix I is a list of the novel's characters along with a short description for each. Appendix II contains a brief outline of the plot.

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1. Introduction

Although John Kennedy Toole's novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* takes place in New Orleans in the early 1960s, it bears a strong formal resemblance to novels in the picaresque tradition, complete with a *picaro* as its central figure. Roughly translated, *picaro* means a rogue, a rascal or a knave. The *picaro* in literature is often thought to be antithetical to the traditional hero and a precursor to the antihero, a later term coined for a protagonist who is lacking in conventional heroic traits while retaining the reader's sympathy. The history of the picaresque novel spans over 450 years, moving literature's field of reference away from romanticism and chivalric ideals and towards the more pressing problems of ordinary, common people. The picaresque's longevity stems from it being a fluid tradition, which can be easily assimilated into any time and place. Its adaptable form and shifting emphases in turn make precise definition difficult. Having gathered a large number of descriptions of the picaresque I assert that it is best understood as a cluster of common factors. In this essay I will define those two aforementioned literary terms, picaresque and *picaro*, and compare them to *A Confederacy of Dunces*. This essay aims to point out where the novel's structure as well as the persona and behavior of its protagonist correspond or clash with these ideas.

2. Origins and etymology

According to Harry Sieber, “[t]he English word picaresque is borrowed from the Spanish *picaresco* or from *picaresca*”, two adjectival forms of the noun *picaro*, “whose etymology is uncertain and whose semantic history is complex” (Sieber).¹ The term *picaro* is “usually translated into English as ‘rogue, knave, sharper,’ into French as ‘gueux, voleur’ (‘beggar, thief’), into German as ‘Schelm, Abenteuerer’ (‘rogue, adventurer’) and into Italian as ‘pitocco, furbone’ (‘vagrant, rogue’).” Sieber reports that Joan Corominas “concludes that it must come from some form of the verb *picar* (‘to prick, puncture; nibble, bite’) which then came into contact with of thieves’ cant [an archaic cryptolect of the lower orders] to give it the general meaning we ascribe to it today.” The word first appeared in 1525 as part of the term ‘*pícaro de cozina*’ (‘a scullion or kitchen servant’) but then “it seemed to have nothing to do with the notion of delinquency or immorality” (*ibid.*) In 1545 the term had acquired its derogatory meaning in Eugenio de Salazar’s *Carta del Bachiller de Arcadia*, where it “contrasts the vile ‘*pícaros de corte*’ (‘*picaros* of the court’) with the worthy ‘*cortezanos*’ (‘courtiers’)” the former being considered vile and the latter worthy. A semantic shift in emphasis occurs “from the *picaro*’s social situation to his immoral and delinquent behavior.” When considered within the wider historical and social contexts of sixteenth century Europe, the term may have mixed with the term ‘*piquero seco*’ (‘pike-man of the Spanish army’), which is also derived from the aforementioned verb *picar*. At the time the Habsburg kings waged war on a large

¹ All the references to Sieber in this section can be found on pages 5-7 in his *The Picaresque* (1977).

scale and vast armies of these pike-men were utilised to defend far-flung territories of empirical Spain. The Spanish army faced increasing difficulty during its eighty-year stint of skirmishes in Flanders and elsewhere; their numbers dwindled and they began recruiting from the criminal classes. Sieber quotes Geoffrey Parker who claims these pike-men began to display behaviour in accordance to “picaresque values [such as] idleness, brutality, and bravado, the thirst for gambling, the urge for falsification” while living in overcrowded lodging houses far from their superiors . The vagrant/beggar connotations of the term may originate in the many deserting *piqueros* who were forced to beg and steal on their way home to civilian life. A young lieutenant and survivor of a military expedition to Flanders, Alfonso de Pimentel, wrote an epic poem about his experiences where the *picaros* are identified as “evil-doers, mischief-makers and robbers” and most importantly “real as well as false beggars.” Pimentel’s observation is of interest when it is considered “that most ‘literary’ *picaros* become at one time or another beggars and vagrants during their careers.”

Another theory places the origin of the term *picaro* in Picardy, a region not far from Flanders in northern France. Its Spanish form *Picardía* was “synonymous with roguery” and “at least phonetically” *picaro* could have evolved from *picard* (a native of Picardy) following the pattern *Hungría/húngaro* (‘Hungary/Hungarian’) therefore *Picardía/picaro* . However exactly the concept evolved one can at least observe “a strong and persistent semantic connection between beggars and *picaros* . For the purpose of this essay it is also worth noting that the English word *picaroon* can refer to a pirate or a pirate ship as well as a rogue or a scoundrel (“*picaroon*, n.1 and adj.”).

2. The picaresque novel: some definitions

Sieber warns that the word picaresque has “shared the same fate as other literary, critical and descriptive terms such as conceit, irony, satire, naturalism, classicism and romanticism in the sense that attempts at precise definition have produced more confusion than understanding” (Sieber, 1). He goes on to quote the Oxford English Dictionary (OED from here on), which (then) catalogued three distinguishing characteristics of the picaresque novel: Firstly, it is a literary phenomenon concerning the habits and lives of rogues. Secondly, it is a style or type of fiction discernible from other styles of fiction. Thirdly, that its spatio-temporal origins are found in Spain. The OED’s scant definition was not improved upon until the emergence of Fonger De Haan’s *An Outline History of the Novela Picaresca*, published in 1903. There, two other elements were introduced into the definition, namely that “the [picaresque novel] is the autobiography of a picaro, a rogue, and in that form a satire upon the conditions and persons of the time that gives it birth” (XII). Frank Wadleigh Chandler, once considered to be the non-Hispanic authority on the subject, provides a detailed description of the picaresque novel that might be summarised as follows: A picaro relates his adventures. He is born of poor and dishonest parents who are not pleased at his advent. He is innocent and learns that he must take care of himself or go to the wall. In order to live he must serve somebody and he augments the gains of service by roguery. He flits from one master to another, outwits them in his career and satirises them in his narrative. Finally having run through a variety of strange vicissitudes, measuring by his rule of roguery the vanity of human

estates, he concludes his story (*Romances*, 44-5). Whether an actual conclusion to the story is needed is a matter of debate since the story can sometimes be of an 'open-ended' nature, ending only where the narrator himself dies (Sieber, 10). Chandler's description defines an ideal type of rogue rather than anyone in particular with the aim of distinguishing the picaresque form from a larger body of fiction, the literature of roguery, which contains among others criminal biographies. The picaresque novel mainly differs from the rest of rogue literature by being shaped in an 'artistic' form, having a plot and a single narrator – usually the rogue himself. Narrower as well as wider definitions abide and Sieber suggests that one must simply try to obtain a cluster of conventions in order to gain understanding of the picaresque (3). Furthermore, another common factor would be the genre's uneasy blend of humour and seriousness (4).

In *The Glossary of Literary Terms*, Harpham and Abrams describe the picaresque style of fiction as “realistic in manner, episodic in structure (that is, composed of a sequence of events held together largely because they happened to one person), and often satirical in aim” (253). Stories of this kind would typically follow the “escapades of an insouciant rascal who lives by his wits and shows little if any alteration of character through a long succession of adventures” (253). According to *The Glossary*, the genre developed alongside other works of prose written to “deflate romantic and idealized fictional forms” (253).

Edwin Muir adds another picaresque attribute to the 'cluster of conventions' by pointing out that “[t]he object of the picaresque novel is [...] to take a central figure through a succession of scenes, introduce a great number of characters, thus build up a picture of society” (32). This method is then used to “provide information such as a social student, or a moralist, or an intelligent

newspaper would give” (33). Muir also sees ‘rags-to-riches’ stories as the latter day equivalent to picaresque novels; where a young man’s vertical climb through the social classes is used to create a panoramic view. Success, it notes, is the modern counterpart of travel in the picaresque tradition as upward mobility may have replaced travel as a phenomenon only obtainable to the masses through fiction (33).

2.2. The social and historical context

According to *A New History of Spanish Literature* the picaresque novel emerged as “a realistic reaction against the absurd unrealities of the books of chivalry” as well as against “the excessive idealism of pastoral, sentimental or chivalric novels” and “represents the beginning of modern realism” (179). It contrasted the idyllic life of knights and shepherds to “the basic drives of hunger, cruelty and mistrust” (179). The quest for food had become more urgent than the quest for love or glory. From early on “picaresque novels were both idealistic and realistic, tragic and comic” and contained attacks on “political, religious and military matters” (179). They reflected both the poverty and the unsound economic conditions of an outwardly glorious but inwardly ruinous late sixteenth century Spain. According to Sieber the roads to the major towns were cluttered with vagrants, students, adventurers, beggars and cutpurses who eventually led to a hardening attitude towards criminals (7-8). The picaresque genre’s historic context is perhaps best seen reflected in its themes of “poverty, delinquency, ‘upward mobility’, travel as an escape from despair, [and] social satire of a system unresponsive to the needs of a growing community of ‘have-nots” (9).

According to Sieber the anonymously written *Lazarillo de Tormes* is widely considered to be the prototypical picaresque novel, originally printed in 1554. A censored version was printed in 1573 with two chapters and a number of passages deleted for containing what was considered “anticlerical satire” by its contemporary inquisitorial standards (11). No reprints were then made for a quarter of a century until it “found a new lease of literary life” with the emergence of another picaresque novel, *Guzmán de Alfarache* by Alemán; which is considered to be the first authentic bestseller in the history of print (11). Just nine weeks after the initial publishing of *Guzmán de Alfarache*, a third edition of *Lazarillo de Tormes* was made available to the public and sold alongside it as a similar book. However *Lazarillo* can only be viewed as belonging to the picaresque narrative in confluence with *Guzmán de Alfarache*. *Lazarillo de Tormes* digresses from some important picaresque conventions as its narrator claims to be telling his story for the purpose of clearing his name, a practise totally unthinkable to most other picaros to whom a degree of shamelessness is the most prominent common trait. On the other hand it fills the criteria for several other picaresque conventions including a first person narration satirical against society, a seemingly unstructured episodic plot and it’s central figure an ultimately blameless servant of many masters (Sieber, 11-12). As the author of *Lazarillo* is unknown, the question also remains whether it is an autobiographical novel or simply somebody’s satirical autobiography (De Haan, 7). Alemán’s *Guzman* more resembles an archetypical picaro; he steals, begs, lies and swindles his way through life while exulting in an existence free from both honour and physical labour (Sieber, 12). As for social satire, Sieber quotes Maurice Molho, who went so far as to describe the book a “violent capitalist

indictment, without doubt the most violent that sixteenth- and seventeenth century Europe produced against money, banking and commerce" (23).

Essentially the only crimes Lazarillo and Guzman themselves ever committed "were having been born into the world as 'losers', doomed to failure from the beginning in their attempts to create and sustain that myth of 'honour' for which they sacrificed their spiritual lives" (23). Troubles arose when the picaresque style of novel crossed the Spanish border and made its exodus into European literature. A. A. Parker makes the polemic claim that outside of Spain the term picaresque becomes a misnomer. He feels that even though a myriad of books can be said to contain picaresque elements they are not necessarily a continuation of the picaresque trend as a historically definable genre begun by Alemán's *Guzman* (v-vi). The Spanish picaresque is a genre that has its own national, historical, formal, thematic and stylistic implications but a wholesale exportation of the picaresque as a 'cluster of conventions' can hardly be denied (Sieber, 37). The genre's rigorous set of rules was early on surpassed and most prominent picaresque novels are in some capacity variations on the theme, embracing some elements while eschewing others (Chandler, *The Literature*, 5-6). Well before the year 1600, while the genre was still in its infancy, foreign language 'versions' (very loose translations) of *Lazarillo de Tormes* had been made in England and France initially and later in Italy (Sieber, 37). Most European countries already had their own traditions of single hero stories of knaves or vagabonds. Some of the translations of early picaresque novels took the liberty of omitting the picaros' moral digressions and forging into them happy endings and in doing so totally destroying their meaning (Sieber, 37). A. A. Parker's concerns are somewhat justified as these loose translations mixed

together Spanish elements with their own national characteristics, whichever their nationality (Sieber, 47). This trend in turn can be viewed as a part of the picaresque genre; that the narration assimilates to the society it aims to satirise, be it Spanish or of any other nationality. A social satire following a roguish central figure through a succession of scenes involving many distinct social classes would surely go amiss were it to strictly follow the values, conventions and the historical context of a single nation at a specific period in time.

3. *A Confederacy of Dunces* as a picaresque novel

When one views the definitions and the ‘cluster of conventions’ pertaining to picaresque literature and compares them to John Kennedy Toole’s *A Confederacy of Dunces* one discovers that it conforms to many picaresque conventions while it digresses from the tradition in others. Its central figure, Ignatius J. Reilly, has many roguish attributes, which will be catalogued later in this essay. For now I will assume that he qualifies as the story’s picaro and compare its structure to the definitions here above.

Skipping lightly through the vague terms provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary* I argue that *A Confederacy* agrees with them as it concerns the life and habits of a rogue and is written in a style of fiction, discernible from other styles, with its origins in found in 16th century Spain. When it is measured against Fonger De Haan’s description problems arise. He simply describes the picaresque novel as a (fictional) autobiography of a picaro who satirises the conditions of the time that gives birth to it. *A Confederacy* is only partly a picaro’s autobiography. The book has a third person omniscient narrative style although the story does fill the criteria of a rogue relating his adventures at intervals

through the book in Ignatius' autobiographical *Journal of a Working Boy*. Those segments of the book could also be said to be autobiographical in some measure from the viewpoint of the book's author as it is an established fact that he held the exact same jobs in his lifetime as *A Confederacy's* Ignatius does, that is, a clerk in a pants factory and a fast-food street vendor (Heilman). Those entries invariably carry a distinct matter-of-factly satirical tone towards those Ignatius associates with; his superiors, coworkers, his mother and her friends. He for instance describes his boss, Mr. Gonzales, as "rather a cretin" (88), and a "buffoon of an office manager" (139) but concedes that he is "appealingly democratic in his retarded way" (88). The book is also satirical about other aspects of society, for example the status of African-Americans and homosexuals. Burma Jones, an African-American, must choose between working well under the minimum wage or being jailed for vagrancy (37-40) while the homosexual Dorian Greene gets large checks sent from his family every month simply for staying out of the state of Nebraska where they all live (364).

The third person omniscient style does provide the reader with a more detailed view of events than would an autobiographer and a potentially untruthful one at that. This is most apparent when Mr. Clyde tells Ignatius about a health complaint he has received concerning Ignatius pulling a cat out of the gutter and playing with it while pushing about his hot dog cart, thereby seriously violating the health code (242-4). We, the readers, are then told by the omniscient narrator that it had been Ignatius' plan to trap the animal in the hot dog wagon's bun compartment and keep it as a pet (248). When his mother asks him about scratches on Ignatius' arms from the struggle with the cat he lies to her that he "had a rather apocalyptic battle with a starving prostitute" who was

trying to sack his wagon (249). Ignatius himself omits any mention of the cat in his *Journal of a Working Boy*. From this example one can see how a third person omniscient narration can be useful in relating the habits of a picaro; at first he is found out to have been shirking his duties by playing with a cat while at work, the reader then gains sympathy with Ignatius as he discovers that the huge man was in a pathetic and childlike manner trying to acquire a pet. A little later one is allowed to witness as he tells an extraordinary lie to his mother about the incident, seemingly only to cause her confusion and worry. This cat-episode is short, but involves many picaresque tokens and one wonders how, if at all, this sequence of events could ever be done justice in an autobiographical account.

As mentioned above, the picaresque genre sets itself aside from the larger body of rogue literature by being artistic in form and by having a plot. *A Confederacy* is undoubtedly artistic in form, deliberately arranging a multitude of references, allusions and subtle nods to other works of literature. Among the authors whose names or works are mentioned in *A Confederacy* are John Milton, Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot, William Langland and Joseph Conrad. It has also been proposed that parts of the book mimic or allude to works by John Keats, his namesake Lyly, as well as Henry David Thoreau (Leighton). In his foreword, novelist Walker Percy adds Shakespeare's reoccurring comic relief character Falstaff and Cervantes' Don Quixote to the mix (viii). Moreover one scholar has made an excellent case for some of the rhetoric and plot twists of *A Confederacy* originating in or being inspired by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (Leighton).

The book has an episodic plot, which follows Ignatius from scene to scene until the troubles he has caused have escalated to the point that he must flee the city (see Appendix II). It also contains a number of subplots as everyone's lives

who come into contact with Ignatius are drastically changed. Elizabeth S. Bell, however, feels that while the picaresque description covers much of the action of the novel it also has an “underlying philosophical structure” (15). She notes that *A Confederacy*, aside from its various allusions to medieval works, has links to other medieval motifs like the quest, the pilgrimage and especially the allegory. With Ignatius cast as an allegorical questor/crusader, his persona in *The Journal of a Working Boy*; the story within the story becomes an allegory within an allegory (15-16). This style of double allegory also exists at a different level as Ignatius feels he is stuck to Fortuna’s wheel in a Boethius-like manner²:

The universe, of course, is based upon the principle of the circle within the circle. At the moment, I am in an inner circle. Of course, smaller circles within this circle are also possible. (Toole, 90)

As Ignatius seems to look at it, his expulsion from an inactive life inside his room and into the job market (see Appendix II) was the beginning of a bad cycle but Fortuna can still do him some good turns within that cycle.

Although the story corresponds with these two prerequisites of a picaresque novel, that is, being artistic in form and containing a plot, some argue that the style of the plot is out of tune with the picaresque trend (Leighton). Moreover, in his thesis on the subject, Greg Giddings concludes that the plot’s resolution is too orderly for a picaresque novel and more closely resembles the plot of a traditional comedic novel (84). In the last chapter of *A Confederacy* the plot as well as all the subplots are soundly resolved and just deserts dished out

² Although it has been argued that *A Confederacy of Dunces* is based on Boethius’ *Consolations of Philosophy* and despite the fact that the book plays a role in the plot, there is no concrete evidence to support this or even, indeed, that Toole had even read the book.

to all. One can however appreciate how this type of ending would seem out of place in a book belonging to a genre that generated as a move from naïve ideals and towards realism.

Another common element of the picaresque is an uneasy blend of humour and seriousness. In the foreword *A Confederacy* is described as a great rumbling farce but with tragedy at the heart of it, both attending to its author who committed suicide before the book was published as well as the tragedy at the heart of Ignatius' adventures (ix). Elizabeth S. Bell explains that the book's abundant humour stems from the incongruities of two mutually exclusive worldviews; on one hand Ignatius' medieval stance and on the other the reader's modern outlook (16). She also notes that Ignatius is an embodiment of the conflict between pragmatic contemporary reality and the mystic ideal of medieval times (19). Ignatius' inability to function in modern society is the story's largest source of humour but it is also tragic as Ignatius is unemployable, intolerable to his peers and completely unable to take care of himself. At the end of the book he is rescued from being sent to a mental hospital by a woman he hates enough to want dead and is last observed stuffed in a car with her on his way out of town about where he has commented: "Outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins" (12). The book's conclusion also sees his mother on her way to enter into a second loveless marriage, seemingly only to save herself from debt.

Harpham and Abrams' assertion that the picaresque style was a culmination of a development in prose written to counter romantic and idealistic styles is an interesting one with regards to *A Confederacy*. Claims have been made that this theme is at the heart of the story, and Elizabeth S. Bell mentions

that Ignatius regards the people he meets as types who represent a social group on one hand and an allegorical issue on the other (17). The stereotypical 'factory folk' have for instance no meaning to Ignatius outside of their assigned role but the plot is driven by these one-dimensional types stepping out of their roles and behaving like individuals (18). Another obvious resemblance is that of Don Quixote, mentioned by Walker Percy in *A Confederacy's* foreword, who tried to tackle (his) contemporary reality with a medieval mindset and chivalric ideals (viii).

The object of taking a central figure through a succession of scenes has been described as an effort to create a panoramic view of society. This has been a common trait of picaresque fiction since the genre's inception. The subtitle to the early picaresque novel *Guzman de Alfarache* was *Atalaya de Vida Humana*, which roughly translates as A Watchtower to View Human Life. When one looks at the social standing and sheer number of the characters in *A Confederacy* one notices that it includes specimens who economically and socially represent all walks of life, from the near destitute Jones to the loaded Levys. Its fauna also involves many social subgroups; homosexual men and women, Catholics, Jews, activists, business owners, African-Americans, the aged as well as the criminal element (see appendix I). The book's plot and subplots all have financial implications at different levels and it provides a realistic socio-economic panorama. Every character is economically pressured from some direction, either by debt, greed, poverty or the threat of a ruinous lawsuit (McCluskey). Yet another theme of *A Confederacy* is the age-old claim that money is the root of all evil (McCluskey). That theme could be classified as picaresque seeing as the aforementioned *Guzman de Alfarache* was described as an indictment against the capitalist

system, banking and commerce. The hopelessness of the poor and the inability of capitalist society to alleviate their distress is certainly a unifying motif linking the proto-picaresque *Guzman* and *A Confederacy*.

In Section 2.2, hunger is mentioned an early picaresque theme. In *A Confederacy* the basic need for food is turned on its head as Ignatius' hunger has less to do with survival than gluttony. This may be seen as a modernisation of the hunger theme as contemporary Western poverty does not necessarily entail a total lack of food but rather a forced diet of junk food. Through the course of story Ignatius gorges himself on jelly donuts (49), popcorn (65), bakery cakes and Dr. Nut (309). He feels his health begin to deteriorate due to a "too strenuous consuming of Paradise products" (284) and towards the book's conclusion has gained so much weight he has trouble buttoning his trousers (451).

When viewing the evidence one concludes that *A Confederacy of Dunces* is a picaresque novel as it resembles other works written in the style by most definitions given in section 2.2. The -esque suffix of the word picaresque in fact does just that; it implies a resemblance rather than a mirror image ("-esque").

3.1 Ignatius J. Reilly as a picaro

While various definitions with varying emphases abide concerning what constitutes a picaresque novel they are all very clear on one thing; the story must have a picaro at its centre. We have heard the picaro described as a rogue and a knave but those words have, just as the word picaro, complex meanings and subtle connotations. The best course of action is then to measure *A Confederacy's* central figure, Ignatius J. Reilly, against the definitions at hand and see if he fits the part.

3.2 Frank Wadleigh Chandler's version of picaresque

Frank Wadleigh Chandler provides a detailed description of what typically constitutes a picaro in the original Spanish tradition. A picaro, according to Chandler, is usually born to poor and dishonest parents who are none too pleased at his advent. The Reillys are poor but not dishonest people who seem to have had mixed emotions concerning the advent of Ignatius. When the story takes place Mr. Reilly has been dead for twenty years, but Ignatius' conception is mentioned to have taken place after the Reilly's had been out to see a movie (107). Although little is revealed about the event we are told that Mr. Reilly never went to see another movie as long as he lived (107). Moreover, Irene Reilly bursts into tears when reminded of the incident by an amorous advance of Mr. Robichaux in a movie theater coupled with a comment from Santa Battaglia about babies (315) so one gathers that conflicting sentiments regarding Ignatius' conception abide.

Chandler's picaro is initially innocent but learns that he must take care of himself or go to the wall. Whether Ignatius ever learns to take care of himself through the course of the novel is a point of debate. There is however an occurrence mentioned that marks a loss of innocence and a point from whence Ignatius feels irrevocably at odds with modern society. Through the Reilly's next-door neighbour, Annie, we learn that Ignatius was 'ok' until his dog died (422). Ignatius, then in high school, arranged a funeral for the animal under loud protest from his mother and was denied assistance from his local priest (423). From there on relations between Ignatius and his mother, along with the rest of

his contemporary society, turned sour (423). In this sense Ignatius' background is roughly consistent with Chandler's ideal.

Chandler's typical picaro must serve somebody in order to survive. At the beginning of the story Ignatius, aside from dusting a bit (7), is living a life of idleness, completely dependent on his mother's small pension and the departed Mr. Reilly's social security (48). Despite having a master's degree from college he is slothful and feels work is a perversion (34). When the story begins he has spent the previous five years in his room writing an indictment against his century, completing on average six paragraphs per month (34). His career up to that point spans two jobs; teaching a class at college (61) and pasting slips into books at a library (60). He has failed at both positions on account of his laziness and peculiar mannerisms. In one case he does not grade students' papers handed in to him due to them being "misconceptions burbling from [...] dark minds" (61), while at the library he is unable to paste more than three or four slips per day without feeling he has compromised his own pasting aesthetic (60). After his mother's car accident he is forced to find work and from then on to the story's conclusion he serves two masters: first Mr. Gonzales, office manager at Levy pants; then Mr. Clyde, owner of Paradise Vendors. In this sense Ignatius is also consonant with Chandler's description.

In the service of both these 'masters' Ignatius can be seen 'augmenting his gains of service by roguery' as Chandler description details. At his job at Levy pants he not only shirks his filing duties by dumping all files he can find into the wastebasket (106, 134), he also has another employee, Gloria, fired by lying that she was planning to quit without giving proper notice (89). He then demands a raise for having spared the company Gloria's salary but settles for daily carfare

(90). While working for his second master, Mr. Clyde, he finds numerous ways to dishonestly increase his earnings. Before Ignatius even begins working for Mr. Clyde he eats four of his hot dogs without having money to pay for them (181). When Mr. Clyde offers that Ignatius pay for the hot dogs by pushing a hot dog vending cart around for an hour, Ignatius returns with only four hot dogs left of a dozen, having eaten the rest himself (188-191). He explains the hot dogs' disappearance by fabricating to Mr. Clyde that he was subject to armed robbery in broad daylight by a hungry hoodlum (192-193). Furthermore, in his capacity as hot dog vendor he also augments his gains by renting out his wagon's bun compartment to store pornographic pictures for George (337-339). Ignatius gains further dividends from George by simple blackmail, threatening to report him to the police (337-339, 359). As these examples show, Ignatius more or less corresponds with Chandler's definition by dodging his duties and supplementing his salary through dishonesty and trickery.

Chandler notes that the ideal picaro outwits his master in his career before satirising him in his narrative. Examples of successful attempts on behalf of Ignatius to outwit his master can be found in chapters 7 and 9 of *A Confederacy*. To secure his position at Paradise Vendors, Ignatius manipulates Mr. Clyde's sympathies by lying that his mother is a heavy drinker (194) and that he may be "beaten senseless with a wine bottle" (245) were he to return home without some kind of a job. I have already alluded to Ignatius' satirical tone towards his first master, Mr. Gonzales, as proof of the book's general satirical tone, but his second master also gets his share of ridicule. In *The Journal of a Working Boy* Ignatius offers the adjectives perverted, dangerous, fiendish and senile to

describe Mr. Clyde (265) and goes on to label his mind literal and sausage-like (267).

When measured against Frank Wadleigh Chandler's catalogue of common traits Ignatius fits the bill, both as a fictional person and as a functioning literary instrument. One must bear in mind that the picaresque's primary purpose is to make society's "every nook and cranny [...] open to his exploration" (Chandler, *Romances*, 43). His secondary purpose would be to serve as an agent of social critique and satire; superficially "a product of decadence" but in literature a vehicle of "vigorous protest against it" (Chandler, *Romances*, 42).

3.3 Ignatius measured against other descriptions

As I discussed in section 2 the picaresque concept has many different meanings and connotations. Among those we have seen are vagrant, beggar, thief and adventurer as well as mischief-maker and evildoer. I could not find any instance of Ignatius simply begging or stealing in *A Confederacy* but he does allude to himself as a pauper on one occasion (293). As for stealing he more closely follows the trend of "obliterating distinctions of *meum* and *tuum*" as Frank Wadleigh Chandler pronounced to be the rogue's main business (*The Literature*, 4). Examples of this behaviour can be seen once he begins selling hot dogs and eats from his wagon as if it were his own. Ignatius is hardly a vagrant as he has a home to go to for the most part but evidence of the connotations of the term that suggest wandering can be observed through the book's latter half as he must amble through the French Quarter with his wagon. The words used to describe his movements do suggest somewhat aimless travel; he either waddles slowly (179), drifts (187), staggers (69) or billows (340). Ignatius scarcely fits

the bill for adventurer as he is slothful and would ideally be left alone to the confines of his room during the day while going to the movies in the evening. This facet of his being he explains as a “Proustian element” (55). However, Ignatius is prone to mischief and the reader quickly learns that he is a troublemaker. In *A Confederacy*’s first chapter Ignatius makes a scene outside the D.H. Holmes department store after being asked for identification by patrolman Mancuso. His mother’s first reaction is to ask: “Ignatius! [...] What you done now?” (6). Even towards the book’s conclusion she reinforces the reader’s image of Ignatius as a mischief-maker by asserting: “Whatever went wrong, Ignatius done it. He makes trouble everyplace he goes” (429). These proclamations from Irene suggest that Ignatius’ propensity for making mischief are not limited to the book’s scope of events and the reader is given to understand that Ignatius’ troublemaking is neither incidental nor circumstantial.

The troublemaking is on two occasions aimed at Patrolman Mancuso who Ignatius insists is the Reillys’ nemesis (58, 396, 399). First he lets all the air out of one of the tires on Mancuso’s car (121), he later hurls an empty inkbottle into the car’s roof (139). Another notable example of Ignatius’ mischievous nature is when he goes to see a ladies art guild’s show of paintings while sporting a sexually ambiguous sign on his hot dog cart (285). He belches violently before verbally abusing the women for daring to “present such abortions to the public” (286) and decries their works for not being realistic (287). Although he successfully ruins the ladies’ outing the reader has had some insight into Ignatius’ actions and understands that this is a misguided act of kindness rather than random rabbleroising. Earlier in *The Journal of a Working Boy* Ignatius notes that “any connection between American art and American nature is purely

coincidental" (141) and this can be seen as a symptom of society's diminishing contact with reality. He goes on to cite his place among "those who do know reality when they see it" (141) as the reason he must live on the fringes of society. A few pages later he drives this point home by simply stating: "[...] I mingle with my peers or no one, and since I have no peers, I mingle with no one"(144).

So, while Ignatius is neither a beggar nor a thief, and not a vagrant in the strictest sense of the word he certainly is an outcast of sorts, at the very least in his own view. In this respect he feels a certain "kinship with the colored race" (144) who also exist outside of the inner realm of society. The main difference being that his exile is voluntary (144).

The simplest translation of *picaro* and the one most often used is 'rogue'. That term is similar to the literary term *picaro* as it not only suggests dishonesty and delinquency but also embodies its innate endearing and familiar nuances ("Rogue" 2126). Much as the picaresque novel involves an 'uneasy blend of humour and seriousness', the rogue or *picaro* similarly has an unsteady command of the reader's sympathy. In *A Confederacy* Ignatius' roguishness and nonchalance are continually a source of humour and even admiration, but there are moments where the reader's sympathy is overwhelmed. This becomes most apparent in Ignatius' dealings with his mother whom he constantly harrows in some way. While he waits for her to return from a doctor's appointment, Ignatius bides his time "polishing a few carefully worded accusations designed to reduce his mother to repentance or, at least, confusion" (2). Moreover, after her car accident she is faced with paying a large amount in damages. Ignatius urges his mother to take the case to court before adding calmly: "Drunken driving, [...] you

haven't a chance"(49). In his medieval mindset, Ignatius views people as one dimensional types, metaphors or representatives of allegorical topics. To the modern reader on the other hand, this train of thought sometimes more closely resembles racial and educational bigotry, sexism or elitism (Bell,19). Ignatius insists, even though she heartily protests, that his mother's role is to be miserable (70) and later when she expresses her desire to be "treated nice" before she dies he answers that it's not her fate to be well treated (427). At these moments the reader may feel his already precarious sympathy for Ignatius begin to waver.

The sympathetic rogue, by one definition, is only a step removed from the unsympathetic villain in the fact that he is non-violent; "he may swagger and talk of killings, but he never kills" (Chandler, *Romances*, 48). Ignatius twice considers murdering Myrna Minkoff, first by mailing her a letter bomb (248), next by strangling her with her own pigtail (452). These plans suggest comic and cartoon-like caricatures of violence so aside from his abuses of his mother his position as rogue as opposed to villain never really come into question.

The terms picaro and rogue both have secondary meanings which are of interest when compared to *A Confederacy*. The word picaroon, meaning pirate, is a derivative of picaro and interestingly enough, Ignatius is dressed in a pirates costume through the story's latter half. A similar relationship exists with the term rogue, meaning elephant or large animal which has separated from the herd and exists in solitude ("Rogue" 2126). Ignatius leads a life of solitude and a self enforced 'separation from his herd' as it were. Moreover he is referred to through the story as elephantine (2), a 'White Elephant' (272), and a wild elephant (447).

4. Conclusion

Having looked at *A Confederacy of Dunces* against the definitions of the picaresque I conclude that it is a picaresque novel. It may not encompass all picaresque traits at once but then again most picaresque novels do not. It fits the description of picaresque fiction by having a *picaro* at its centre whom we follow through an episodic plot. The themes of satire and social criticism from the viewpoint of the lower classes are duly followed as the book provides an convincing panoramic view of its contemporary society, in this case the US's southern state of Louisiana in the sixties. Through the story's seemingly chaotic plot we are allowed a glimpse into the plight of African-Americans and homosexuals who are expected to function within society's boundaries while being simultaneously denied access to it and banished to its fringes. The book's protagonist also fits most of the definitions of a *picaro*. He is roguish and devoid of common heroic traits while retaining the reader's sympathy. He is also a *picaro* in the term's capacity as a literary mechanism. However repellent, Ignatius J. Reilly has duly earned himself a place as one of the most memorable characters in American literature.

Appendix I - List of characters

Ignatius J. Reilly: A 30 year old man with a masters degree who lives with his mother.

Irene Reilly: A poor widow and mother of Ignatius.

Myrna Minkoff: A young activist who is and old schoolmate of Ignatius. She is ideologically at odds with Ignatius and they frequently correspond.

Lana Lee: The owner and proprietress of The Night of Joy. Models for and distributes pornographic pictures on the side.

Burma Jones: An African-American who is forced to work as a janitor at The Night of Joy bar under threats from Lana Lee.

Darlene: A feeble minded employee at the Night of Joy who aspires to become an exotic dancer.

George: A teenager who has dropped out of school and distributes pornographic pictures for Lana Lee.

Angelo Mancuso: A police officer disliked by his superiors. Befriends Irene Reilly after her accident and takes up bowling with her along with his aunt Santa.

Santa Battaglia: An old woman who goes bowling with Irene Reilly and Angelo Mancuso. Suggests frequently that Irene Reilly should take up a harder line with Ignatius and consider having him committed to a mental hospital.

Claude Robichaux: A well off pensioner who becomes romantically interested in Irene Reilly.

Dorian Greene: An effeminate dealer in used clothing who invites Ignatius to stage a political rally at his home as a party gimmick.

Gus Levy: The rich, disinterested owner of Levy Pants.

Mrs. Levy: Gus Levy's wife. She blackmails Gus Levy into allowing her to make psychological experiments on Miss Trixie.

Mr. Gonzales: The office manager at Levy Pants.

Miss Trixie: An octogenarian senile employee of Levy Pants who should have been retired long ago. She is denied retirement by Mrs. Levy.

Clyde: The owner of Paradise Vendors, a hot dog vending company.

Frieda Club, Betty Bumper & Liz Steele: Violent lesbian tenants of Dorian Greene.

Appendix II – Plot synopsis:

While Ignatius J. Reilly is waiting for his mother, Irene, outside of a department store he is asked for identification by patrolman Mancuso who is searching for suspicious characters. Ignatius is outraged and a scene breaks out resulting in the arrest of Mr. Robichaux. Ignatius and Irene Reilly flee the scene into a dingy bar called The Night of Joy. Driving home after a few drinks there Mrs. Reilly skids on the road and crashes into a building causing a substantial amount's worth of damages. She decides that in order to pay off her debt the inactive Ignatius must go out and work. He reluctantly agrees and sees in the endeavour an opportunity to gather material for *A Journal of a Working Boy*, his indictment against modern society which he loathes. He finds employment at Levy Pants where he forges Mr Levy's signature on a libellous letter he writes to one of their distributors before being fired for inciting a revolt among the factory workers. Irene Reilly meanwhile takes up bowling with Mancuso and his aunt, Santa Battaglia, who instantly dislikes Ignatius and urges Irene to stop putting up with his laziness and troublemaking. Ignatius finds a second job as a hot dog vendor, much to his mother's dismay who feels he is not making much use of his education. Ignatius makes money on the side by storing packages of pornographic pictures for George in his hot dog wagon's bun compartment. Clyde, Ignatius' employer at Paradise Vendors, sets him up with a pirate costume to increase sales. While wearing it, Ignatius catches the eye of Dorian Greene who invites Ignatius to a party at his house. Ignatius sees the party as an opportunity to rally homosexuals together, have them infiltrate the military and

establish world peace. During his opening address the guests, bored by Ignatius' speech, turn on him. He is humiliated and ousted from the party. From there he goes to the Night of Joy, having been invited there by Jones as a means of sabotaging the business. He is secretly followed by a disguised patrolman Mancuso. At the Night of Joy, Darlene is about to premiere a stripping act involving a cockatoo pulling at rings attached to her dress. When the bird spots the novelty earring Ignatius is wearing as part of his pirate costume he attacks. Chaos ensues and Ignatius flees out of the bar and into the street where he faints in front of a streetcar. There Lana Lee tries to prostitute herself to patrolman Mancuso and is subsequently arrested. Jones then leads Mancuso to stacks of pornographic pictures hidden under the bar and as a result, Lana's pornography distribution ring is dissolved. Ignatius is moved to the hospital where he is awakened by his mother who has lost all patience with him. She tells him that she plans to marry Mr. Robichaux. When they arrive at their home they meet Mr. Levy who has been sued for 500.000\$ for the letter Ignatius forged in his name. Ignatius denies everything and Mr. Levy pins the forgery on the senile Miss Trixie to whom it is a blessing in disguise as she will finally be retired from work. Mrs. Reilly decides to have Ignatius committed to Charity mental hospital, in part to save him from imprisonment threatened by the forging of the letter. He is saved at the last minute by Myrna Minkoff and they make good their escape.

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