

Entry printed from *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

Copyright © Oxford University Press 2006

picaresque, *adj.* and *n.*

DRAFT REVISION Dec. 2005

Brit. /ˌpɪkəˈresk/, *U.S.* /ˌpɪkəˈresk/ [**< PICARO** *n.* + **-ESQUE** *suffix*, after Spanish *picaresco* of or relating to a picaro, in the style of a picaro (1569), (of narrative fiction) in the picaresque style (1836 in *anécdotas picarescas*, although cf. quot. 1827¹ at sense A. 1). Cf. Portuguese *picaresco* (1619), Italian *picaresco* (1635), French *picaresque* (1836). With use as noun cf. Spanish *picaresca* (1605 in sense 'vagrant lifestyle', prob. short for *vida picaresca* picaresque life; 1989 or earlier denoting the literary genre, prob. short for *novela picaresca*, *historia picaresca*, or *literatura picaresca*), French *picaresque* (1910, denoting the literary genre).]

A. *adj.*

1. Originally: relating to or characteristic of a rogue or knave. Now chiefly: designating a genre of narrative fiction which deals episodically with the adventures of an individual, usually a roguish and dishonest but attractive hero (cf. **PICARO** *n.*, **PICAROON** *n.*¹ 1). Also: having the attributes associated with this genre of narrative. The picaresque novel originated in Spain in the 16th cent., *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes* (c1554) usually being cited as the earliest example. In English, the genre is associated particularly with 18th-cent. writers such as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett. The picaresque style is characterized by social satire and realistic descriptions of scenes from low life.

[**1827** SCOTT *Misc. Prose Wks.* IV. 284 Works of fiction in the style termed by the Spaniards *Gusto Picaresco*.] **1827** SCOTT *Misc. Prose Wks.* IV. 285 We could select from these *picaresque* romances a good deal that is not a little amusing. **1829** SCOTT *Jrnl.* 28 Feb. (1946) 27 *Memoirs of Vidocque*..a picaresque tale..a romance of roguery. **1837** H. HALLAM *Introd. Lit. Europe* I. viii. 614 This [*sc.* the *Lazarillo de Tormes*] is the first known specimen in Spain of the picaresque, or rogue style. **1879** *Times* 26 Dec. 9/2 There was a recent case..of which I venture to condense the particulars, as they seem to me to..illustrate the windings and turnings of *picaresque* ingenuity. **1918** A. G. GARDINER *Leaves in Wind* 245 Near by lives a distinguished lady of romantic picaresque tastes, who dotes on street pianos. **1955** *Times* 9 Aug. 9/7 The Russians are paying a price for the energetic imposing of rigid form..on a nation which is in character essentially picaresque. **1974** *Times Lit. Suppl.* 11 Oct. 1112/3 The eternal resilience of the picaresque hero. **1994** H. BLOOM *Western Canon* II. v. 130 Cervantes' remarkable experiment is credited by many as

having invented the novel, as opposed to the picaresque narrative. **2004** *New Yorker* 9 Feb. 81/2 A picaresque series of exploits that illustrate her ability to live by her wits as an *ashawo*—a ‘semi-professional’ prostitute.

2. Of a lifestyle, etc.: wandering, drifting; transitory, impermanent.

1959 *Manch. Guardian* 28 July 6/5 The boys are attracted by the picaresque nature of working with a private building or decorating firm. **1963** *Times* 30 May 17/5 They are not the kind of books to be held in a child's hand or slipped in the teenage pocket. Weight and size deny the volumes a picaresque existence. **1992** B. E. ROLLIN *Animal Rights & Human Morality* (rev. ed.) 227 The ideal life envisioned for the dog has never been part of its nature. No wild canids live this picaresque existence. **2004** *Sunday Independent* (Ireland) (Nexis) 20 June, It was a picaresque life, lived in hotels on the fringes of ‘normal’ society.

B. n. Usu. with *the*: that which is picaresque; the genre or style of picaresque literature. As a count noun: an example of this; a picaresque narrative, experience, etc.

1895 H. B. M. WATSON in *Bookman* Oct. 19/2 He exalts Disraeli... He loves a trickster; the picaresque amuses him. **1911** C. E. MORGAN *Rise Novel of Manners* i. 46 The form, but not the matter of the picaresque is utilized in a curious little work, *The Compleat Mendicant* (1699). **1928** C. MORLEY *Essays* 533 Those authors' delicious mysteries and picaresques I took for granted, not troubling over their method. **1965** *Times Lit. Suppl.* 25 Nov. 1035/4 There is a strong school of black picaresque. **1976** *Times Lit. Suppl.* 23 Apr. 481/5 The central character of this contemporary picaresque of the mind [*sc.* a novel]. **2002** A. N. WILSON *Victorians* (2003) i. 19 The story, published between 1836 and 1837 in serial parts, was a rambling picaresque.
