



# INVESTIGATING AND UNVEILING TRAGIC ELEMENTS IN HENRY FIELDING'S *JOSEPH ANDREWS*

Sharadi Borah, M.A. in English, Dibrugarh University

## Abstract:

Henry Fielding was an English novelist and a playwright known for his element of humour and satire in his works. Written in the 18th century, Henry Fielding's picaresque novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742) is a comic prose fiction in the length of an epic. The novel can be considered as 'tragi-comedy' as well for its elements of tragedy as well as comedy in the text. For which the novel can be compared to the famous play *Measure for Measure* by William Shakespeare. The novel *Joseph Andrews* contains many dark and tragic elements. Fielding has incorporated a number of characters such as Joseph, Parson Adams, Fanny and a series of crucial incidents, misadventures in this work that initiate scope for the readers to study its tragic elements minutely. Therefore, the comic plot of the novel are linked with its tragic characters, themes and events. Fielding has employed the technique of satire against the follies of the society through the text and carried out the tragic intensity of the narrative.

**Key Words:** comic epic poem in prose, tragedy, comedy, peripetia, anagnorisis, digression.

## Introduction:

This paper aims to study the tragic elements in the novel *Joseph Andrews* (1742) written by Henry Fielding. In his 'Preface' Fielding has mentioned *Joseph Andrews* as 'a comic epic poem in prose'. Although Fielding identifies his novel as 'a comic epic poem in prose', he nevertheless incorporates various tragic elements in the novel to intensify the comic effects. Through the realistic representation of the contemporary eighteenth century English society, Fielding attacks vanity, hypocrisy, deceit of the society with a comic essence and also depicted the tragic misfortunes confronted by virtuous people such as Joseph,

Parson Adams and Fanny. This paper will make an attempt to study those tragic elements and its significance in driving the meaning and functioning a new genre of writing in English literature.

### Statement of the Problem

Henry Fielding's fictional work *Joseph Andrews* falls into the genre of 'comic epic'. This comical work, additionally, comprises several tragic elements in the novel which provides diverse experience to the readers while reading it. Through the tragic elements interwoven with the comic elements, Fielding has exposed the malevolence of the 18th century English society. This proposed study will explore and analyze those tragic elements extensively. Further, this study will reveal Fielding's motif of incorporating the tragic elements in this comic epic.

### Review of Literature

A great number of significant research works, critical reviews, critical articles have been done on Henry Fielding's several works including *Joseph Andrews*. However, there is not found any research work or article on the tragic elements of *Joseph Andrews*.

### Objective of the study

- a) To disclose the tragic elements and its aim and effectiveness contain in the comic-epic novel *Joseph Andrews*.
- b) To analyze the tragedy, conflict, pain and sufferings of the various virtuous characters as a critique of human nature and society as presented in the novel.
- c) To study the tragic elements of *Joseph Andrews* in compare to traditional elements of a tragedy such as 'peripeteia' and 'anagnorisis'.

### Methodology

The methods that are used in this study are- a) Descriptive Method

b) Analytical Method

### Discussion

Henry Fielding has incorporated some stories in the novel *Joseph Andrews* which is not directly related to the main plot of the novel. Here he used these stories as a narrative technique to comment on the moral flaws of the characters of the novel. Moreover, it can be assumed that the purpose of including the tragic digressive tales in the novel is to keep the balance between tragic and comic themes of the novel.

The digressive story of Leonara from the book II of the novel is truly tragic. Leonara was the fortunate daughter of a rich gentleman. Leonara was tall and beautiful but a frivolous woman. She was extremely cheerful, a girl of eighteen, who never missed "a public assembly where she had frequent

opportunities of satisfying appetite of vanity” (Fielding,72). Leonara was attracted by a young barrister, Horatio, to who she was “too delicate to her comprehension” (Fielding,73). The young barrister proposed her and later they got engaged. His devotion to Leonara was truly sincere. After the engagement Horatio went back to his work.

At this inopportune moment, a charming stranger, named Bellarmine with his claimed affluence and power arrived and met Leonara. He was a French gentleman from Paris. Within a very few time Leonara got attracted towards him because of his pretty equipage and external appearance. Bellarmine’s bold and lively gestures captivates the vain Leonara. When Bellarmine get to know about her father’s wealth and property , he proposed her immediately only in order to gain material advantage and Leonara also accepted his proposal readily being unaware of his real intention.

However, she was perplexed and felt guilty for Horatio as she was engaged to him earlier and on the other hand , now she has accepted Bellarmine’s proposal. She shared her thought and feeling to her aunt and she advised her to jilt Horatio. After knowing about the betrayal of Leonara; Horatio fought with Bellarmine and wounded him. Moreover, Leonara’s father also refused any dowry to Bellarmine. As Bellarmine was actually fascinated only by monetary value of Leonara’s father, he immediately abandoned Leonara and left for France. Leonara broken hearted over losing both Horatio and Bellarmine, left the place as she became a subject of conversation and ridicule there. Eventually, by encountering such an unexpected consequence of her affairs Leonara retired to a solitary life.

Leonara herself was responsible for her tragic overcome. She was money minded. Her lust for money led her to her failure of life. The fight between Horatio and Bellarmine is a tragic incident in the story of Leonara. Further, in a tragic narrative, one can see the internal conflict in the mind of the protagonist which is evident in the character of Leonara that she was torn between mercenary motives and love.

Leonara had a happy life with full of fortune. But inspite of being engaged to a scrupulous and sincere person like Horatio, she turned to Bellarmine because of his wealth and superficiality which is a flaw in her character. The greatest mistake which she committed was that she jilted Horatio and trusted an avaricious, whom she met for a short period of time. Moreover she took a foolish decision according to her aunt’s advice and led herself to tragic ending. Leonara’s tragic flaw was her pride. Her pride was for her

beauty, Bellarmine's 'coach and six', his 'French clothes', his superficial mannerism and for her refusal to honest Horatio. So, ultimately Leonara's vanity causes her tragic end.

"In this tragic digressive tale, Leonara is held up as an object of ridicule for her vanity. The unmasking of the hypocritical Bellarmine, who appears to be a sincere lover but not in reality and the exposure of Leonara's vanity carry out Fielding's general purpose for the novel in this digression" (Cauthen 380).

Again, the history of Mr. Wilson from book III is the second major digression in the novel which contains tragic undertones. This story advocates a moral worldview within which the city of London is connected to immorality and corruption. Mr. Wilson was descended from an affluent family. His "...education was liberal,... in which [he] proceeded so far as to become the master of the Latin, and to be tolerably versed in the Greek language" (Fielding,158). After the his father's death , he became the master of his own self. Mr. Wilson left his school and went to London determining to be a gentleman although his father left him enough fortune. But in the city of London, Mr. Wilson degraded morally. He got involved in illegal physical relationship with various women and defamed many. Mr. Wilson ,in London involved in an event of ignominy of a girl's name that almost aggravated a physical clash between him and an officer of the guards. However, he refused to fight with the officer. Again, he got associated with the immoral acts of dangerous entertainment of 'fencing', 'gambling', 'drinking', 'smoking', and 'visiting prostitutes' for which he got infected to a venerable disease. Later, he dissipated a poor widow's daughter, but when his affection towards her faded, he left her in a prostitute company and eventually died in a prison. Thus, he had involved in such several other illicit involvements also with many women before he swore not to involve in unscrupulous activities anymore.

To avoid such evil involvements, he took recourse to a philosophers' society, but they were actually criminals, adulteress and fibsters. He hardly found any peace there and finally lost his all of his fortune in gambling cheap entertainment. He suffered his misfortunes though because of his own folly. Mr. Wilson was trying to succeed by writing a play but also failed miserably. Next, he had got a job as lawyer's scribe but failed in it too. Though the lottery ticket bought by him won money but for earning his bread he had already sold the ticket. Immediately after this, he was imprisoned for debt.

However Mr. Wilson's tragic fortune suddenly reversed by the end of the story which can be termed as 'Peripeteia' according to Aristotle's Poetics. One day he got a letter from a young and beautiful lady named Harriet Hearty "...for whom I had long had a passion, which I never durst disclose to her" (Fielding,174). She revealed in her letter that her father bought the lottery ticket Mr. Wilson, but had died unfortunately on the day of win. In her letter, Harriet enclosed two hundred pounds to Mr. Wilson. Later they got married by acknowledging their love for each other after coming out of the prison. Again tragedy entered into his life when he lost his eldest son. Mr. Wilson's son was stolen by the Gipsies. They had not been able to find their child. This memory of his son is truly melancholic to Mr. Wilson and Parson Adams was also moved by this tragic incident. Another small tragedy occurred at Mr. Wilson's that the little girl's pet dog was shot dead by the young squire. This sudden incident saddens the joyous moment between Mr. Wilson and Parson Adams at his residence.

Mr. Wilson was himself responsible for his tragic downfall. It was his vanity that causes his degradation. This story of Mr. Wilson's tragic downfall reminds us of the stock character of the reckless rake as found in the famous satirical painting series of William Hogarth – *A Rake's Progress* (1732).

The story of Mr. Wilson and Leonara can be compared in terms of moral downfall and tragic undertones. Both these two stories arouse a sense of pity and fear in the minds of the reader. Mr. Wilson and Leonara, both degraded morally because of their own pride or vanity and the both protagonists recognize their flaws too. Leonara and Mr. Wilson yearned for something which was more than they had earlier. This highly ambitious aspect of their character also leads their moral downfall. Leonara as well as Mr. Wilson spent a happy and fortunate days during their earlier life, which subsequently brought them tragic misfortunes that they suffered a lot. However in case of Mr. Wilson's tragedy, his tragic calamity is reversed as he was happily married to a beautiful woman and his lost child was triggered by her own fault and left behind with a solitary life.

Joseph Andrews, the protagonist of the novel confronts various plights and troubles throughout the novel. Misfortunes falls on his peaceful life when he rejected the advances of Lady Booby towards him. Booby's wicked desire for Joseph is unconventional in terms of class and age. The novel posits a continuous moral conflict between virtue and vice in the narrative. The virtuous characters of the novel suffered various troubles because of the evils of the society. The virtuous characters Joseph, Parson Adams, Fanny have to

fight to preserve their honour and chastity. Although Joseph is loyal, virtuous and devoted to his work; Lady Booby dismisses him as he rejects her nasty approaches. This dismissal brings misfortunes and tragedy into his life.

Joseph undertakes a journey with Parson Adams which is full of sufferings and troubles. During the journey Joseph encounters various dangers and threats to his life. He was attacked by highway robbers cruelly and finally they stripped him completely and 'threw him into a ditch to die'. Although somehow he was rescued by the passengers of a stagecoach, the surgeon refused to attend him because Joseph was only a 'footman'. Even Mrs. Tow-Wouse, the wife of the inn keeper where Joseph resided also refused to provide aids and shelter because of his lack of money. Money emerges as a key concern in the plot of this novel. Both Joseph and Adam dealt with financial crisis. Moreover, through the characters of Mrs. Tow Wouse and the Surgeon, Joseph satirises the money-minded higher class people who lack of the concept of Christian charity. However, it is not the Christian charity that made stagecoach people to rescue Joseph, rather it is the legal consideration that ultimately forced them to do so.

Joseph's journey from London to the countryside which is to provide occasions for social satire by Fielding through his sufferings and hardships as they have to involved in battle also. This journey of Joseph which leads to the reunion with his beloved Fanny can be compared with the journey of Odysseus from Homer's epic *The Odyssey*; where Odysseus struggled for ten years to return home to meet his wife Penelope. Similarly, in the novel *Joseph Andrews* also the protagonist struggled for a long time to reunite with his beloved Fanny. In the novel, Parson Adams, the co-protagonist is the protector of Joseph as in the epic *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena is served as Odysseus' protector. The readers can find similar kind of theme of love and loyalty towards their beloved in these two epics.

Some of the traditional elements of tragedy can be found in this 'comic epic poem in prose' *Joseph Andrews* such as 'peripeteia', 'anagnorisis' and sufferings -

"The most effective form of peripety is one that is exactly coincident with 'anagnorisis' i.e. the discovery of some fact as in the *Oedipus Rex*, where Oedipus fortune is reversed at the point where he discovers his parentage" (Bloom,905).

Here we can see that Joseph and Oedipus share the similar fate of peripeteia. As, in the same way Joseph's destiny is also transformed after his discovery of his real parents. Although earlier he belonged to the lower

class of the society, his discovery of new identity as a son of the gentleman Mr. Wilson uplifts his social position. Again, Fanny also discovers her real identity as the daughter of Mr. & Mrs. Andrews and the sister of Pamela towards the end of the novel.

The element of 'suffering', a major element in tragedy which refers to the depiction of tragic foment or adversities such as death, torture, obstacles, fights, killing and fatal wounds. In the novel *Joseph Andrews* the readers come across various instances of suffering. In the beginning of the novel Sir Thomas Booby died. Mr. Booby's death is tragic in the sense that inspite of being a kind and noble person, he did not even get the last honour and condolence from his wife.

Inspite of being a noble and charitable person, Parson Adams suffered in the high class corrupt society. During the journey he had to involve in physical fights. He wandered from inn to inn having no money to pay any bill. He was ridiculed, beaten up and deceived. He was betrayed by Mr. Fickle whom he supported and put all his earnest faith upon him in the election. This exposes the corruption and deceit in the field of politics, insincerity and unfaithful nature of politicians and the corrupt ways they exercise to obtain political power. It also foregrounds innocence and honesty of Parson Adams, who is exploited and harassed endlessly throughout the novel.

The female characters of the novel Lady Booby, Fanny and Betty-the chambermaid also suffered in their life. Lady Booby suffered because of her own fault and misdeeds. There is internal conflict between reason and passion in Lady Booby's mind as she was very conscious of her position and status in the society. She was fascinated by the young man Joseph but felt embarrassed for falling in love with him as he was only a footman. At the same time she suffered the dilemma of pride and passion as well as reason and emotion. In terms of the character of the Lady Booby her vanity and hypocrisy can be considered as her tragic flaw which leads her to seduce her own servant soon after the death of her husband.

Unlike Lady Booby, Fanny is a virtuous girl that was very supportive towards Joseph and his all actions throughout the text. Fanny symbolizes virtue, humility and amicable nature. She confronted physical assault many at times. She had to suffer to protect her honour and chastity. A ruffian attempted to assault Fanny but luckily Parson Adams rescued her from the trouble. Again a captain tried to abduct Fanny where Peter Pounce saved her. Lady Booby also appoints a foppish person named Beau Diddapper to rape Fanny and luckily this time also she is saved by Parson Adams. Lady Booby attempted that in order to separate

Fanny from Joseph. She was separated from her real parents for a long time. This separation is a tragic element in the novel which is applicable in case of the protagonist Joseph also. A tragic situation emerges in the life of both Joseph and Fanny when the peddler reveals that Fanny is the daughter of Gaffer and Gammer Andrews. This news initially becomes an obstacle in their marriage and here the possibility of incest also reminds us of the classical Greek tragic play *Oedipus Rex*. Parson Adams discovered that the incestuous marriage had been presented in the last minute. However it is soon disclosed that Joseph is actually the son of Mr. Wilson and hence the lovers are not siblings. In this way there arises a shift from tragic possibility to a comic resolution in the text.

Betty's life story is also tragic she is benevolent, generous and empathetic but at the age of eighteen she was betrayed by her disloyal lover after getting her pregnant. She again made effort to gain her chastity but failed; Betty could not stop herself from the manipulation of John, the hostler. She even got attracted towards Joseph also, but he strongly resisted her approach for which she was torn by passion and become upset.

Through the character of Betty, Fielding has tried to project how innocent people of the society especially the females are easily manipulated and victimized due to lack of dignity and vigour in their character. Significantly, here, Fielding has juxtaposed the characters Mrs. Tow-Wouse with Betty in a contrasting manner. Notwithstanding the vulnerable sexual instability of Betty, her pure heart and bounty nature is found more appealing than Mrs. Tow-Wouse who is sexually virtuous but egotistical and malicious.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, Fielding has skillfully structured the tragic motifs in the comic novel *Joseph Andrews* in order to make it more profound and intriguing. Tragic elements are used here to create suspense in the novel. Joseph's unawareness of his real parents generates suspense in the novel. He had to work at the very young age of his life and suffered throughout his life only because of his unknowing identity. By incorporating tragic elements and tragic moments in the novel, the author Henry Fielding has strengthened the comic effect of the novel. To achieve the happy ending there should be some misfortunes and sufferings which Fielding has projected in the novel through various ways. The sufferings and troubles confronted by Joseph, Parson Adams and Fanny visualize a realistic picture of eighteenth century English society which

was corrupt and immoral. Tragedy and tragic flaws in the lives of various characters also illustrate a contemporary society of that time. Although the characters suffered from tragic misfortunes, at the very end of the novel they could overcome all the troubles and obstacles. Thus, *Joseph Andrews* is not a merely comic extravaganza in the form of an epic prose, but it also serves a serious didactic purpose. It points out the importance of virtue of heart, morality and charity. It exposes hypocrisy, evils and expresses the need for charity and generosity. He had no intention of providing laughter for immoral ends. Rather, Fielding has used this comic epic in prose along with a tragic essence for making an impact on the reader's mind and founding a new genre of writing in English Literature.

## REFERENCES

1. Bloom, Harold . *Modern Critical Views : Henry Fielding*. Chelsea House Publishers ,1978.
2. Cauthen, I.B. "Fielding's Digressions in *Joseph Andrews*". *College English*, Vol. 17, No 7. *National Councils of Teachers of English*, 1956. Pp. -379-382.  
*JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/371924](http://www.jstor.org/stable/371924)
3. Fielding, Henry. *Joseph Andrews with Shamela and Related Writings*. Ed. Homer Goldberg. Norton Publication,1995.
4. \_\_. *The History of Joseph Andrews and of His Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*. Oxford University Press, 1967.
5. \_\_. *Joseph Andrews*. UBS Publishers, 2016.
6. Spilka, Mark."Comic Resolution in Fieldings *Joseph Andrews*". *College English*, Vol . -15, No. 1, *National Councils of Teachers of English*, 1953. Pp.-11-19, *JSTOR*,  
[www.jstor.org/stable/371598](http://www.jstor.org/stable/371598)