



Henry fielding's comic epic in prose: A study of Joseph Andrews in the light of this genre

Swati Suri

Assistant Professor, Shri Guru Gobind Singh College, Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Abstract

The eighteenth century--"our excellent and indispensable eighteenth century"--is known in the history of English literature particularly for the birth and development of the novel. In this century the novel threw into insignificance all other literary forms and became the dominant form to continue as such for hundreds of years. The pioneers of the novel were Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. The work of this foursome is of monumental significance, particularly because they were not only our first novelists but some of our best. "Joseph Andrews" published in 1742 is Fielding's first novel. It is a classical example of a literary work which started as a parody and ended as an excellent work of art in its own right. The work Fielding intended to parody was Richardson's first novel Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded which had taken England by storm in the years following 1740 when it was first published. Fielding was aware of giving a new literary form with Joseph Andrews which he called "a comic epic in prose." The present paper will analyze the novel Joseph Andrews in the light of this new genre.

Keywords: comedy, burlesque, parody, realism, prose

Introduction

Henry Fielding is regarded as one of the greatest writers among English novelists of the Eighteenth century and was determinant in the emergence of the novel as a respected literary form. He is the first novelist to analyze the nature of his art and lay down its rules. He regarded fiction as a high type of art in an age wherein even Dr. Johnson thought it was a form of literature written chiefly to the young, the ignorant and the idle. Besides, Fielding gives a comprehensible picture of life on a wide canvas. No other novelist in the 18th century attempts to portray life on such a vast scale. Fielding created the "comic epic novel". Fielding was the first English novelist to come up to the novel form methodically. He thought up "laws" for a "comic epic poem in prose" that is different from comedy. In fact it contains more incidents and characters. In its fable and action it's also different from the serious romance. It introduces persons of inferior rank. With him the novel becomes epic, even if amusing. The characters belong to different social classes and their psychology is like the ones of epic heroes, but they are travelling to London and not to a mysterious place. Their actions are ridiculous. The plot of Fielding's novels has a series of stories with an organic unity.

"Joseph Andrews", the first of Fielding's novels, is in literary history a work of great importance. In the evolution of the kind of literature – the Novel, it is a hallmark. The novel Joseph Andrews came out in 1742, two years after Richardson's anonymously published Pamela or Virtue Rewarded- a novel in the form of a series of letters from a servant girl to her parents. Infact the novel Joseph Andrews was born, undoubtedly from Fielding's adverse reaction to Pamela. In the novel under consideration, Fielding offers his own alternative conception of art and purpose of the novel, after exposing the absurdities of Richardson. A critic observed,

"Fielding started with the intention of writing a burlesque of Pamela but as the work progressed, it became the pioneer of a new type of novel."

Fielding thought he had hit upon a new genre of literature and it was his prerogative as well as his duty to explore its possibilities. He called 'Joseph Andrews' a 'comic epic in prose'. The preface to Joseph Andrews has many of Fielding's critical doctrines where he draws distinction between comedy and burlesque. In a mock-epic or comic epic like this, small and insignificant things of everyday life are treated as if they were of great importance.

Joseph Andrews is different from a comedy, its action is much larger and varied. And a major difference is that it has a large number of characters. In short it is marked by an epic breath. When Fielding coins the term "poem in prose", he accepts the basic meaning of a poem as any work of creative imagination. Also Fielding's tone is light and he gives satirical, ironical exposition of the ridiculous. It is not a romance, since it is highly down to earth and realistic. It is not history for it is not superficial study of events. Neither is it a burlesque, for a burlesque distorts. Fielding claims,

"This kind of writing I do not remember to have been hitherto attempted in our language."

The quality of episodes in Joseph Andrews is enormous- each of the books has a large number of incidents, like that of an epic. The novel has a great variety of characters which are drawn from all the classes of our society fops, cheating lawyers, brutal squires, amorous and unlovely waiting women. The assaults on Joseph by Lady Booby and her short corpulent and pimply woman, Mrs. Slipslop are described vividly by the novelist.

Fielding mentions Homer's *Odyssey* and Fenelon's *Telemaque*. *Odyssey* relates the adventures of Odysseus and the hardships which befell him. Similarly, Fielding relates the

adventures of Joseph Andrews and Parson Adams in finding their way home and the hardships which befell Joseph after incurring the wrath of Lady Booby. In Fenelon's *Adventures of Telemaque*, it is the strong hatred of Venus that supplies the cause of the entire action. In Joseph Andrews, Lady Booby is in the role of Venus, whose desire for her handsome footman Joseph Andrews is turned to hatred when the young charming boy despises pleasure for the sake of virtue. During their journey, they are involved in fights and battles at a number of places. They appeal to a lot of people for help but find to their dismay that the world is woefully deficient in charity. Since Joseph is armed with a cudgel and Parson Adams has a wrist of which even Hercules may well be proud, they are most of the time able to conquer their enemies. However, both the friends have to take much drubbing once an inn keeper's wife threw a basin full of hog's blood on Parson Adams' face. The form of their battles is that of a serious conflict in the epic tradition in which our sympathies are involved though the description is in terms of a broad comedy.

Thus, the journey of Parson Adams and Joseph Andrews may be seen as parallel to the great voyages depicted in the epics of Homer and Virgil. Lady Booby's fruitless love parallels Calypso's love for Odysseus. Adam's visit to the pig-keeper Trulliber is in parallel to Odysseus' visit of the swineherd in Odyssey. But the novel does not offer a sustained parallel. Fielding suggests occasional comparisons. Following Ben Johnson, Fielding says that the only source of true ridiculous is affection,

"From the discovery of this affection arises the ridiculous, which always strikes the reader with surprise and pleasure."

So the novel exposes affections in a gently satirical fashion. Fielding uses the weapon of irony to hit the pretence, vanity, hypocrisy and inhumanity of Mrs. Grave-airs, who thinks herself too high to travel in the same coach with a footman. In reality, she is the daughter of a steward who started his life as a postillion. A squire boasts of his valor and courage, yet when he hears the cries of a damsel in distress, he slips away. In fact, the novel is full of instances of vanity and hypocrisy. It may with justice be described as an expose of affectation. The novel is a satire against the callous attitude of the people of the then times. Fielding himself has declared,

"Everything is copied from the book of nature and scarce a character or action produced which I have not taken from my own observation and experience."

The formula of 'Discovery' as enunciated by Aristotle is also used by Fielding. There is a compilation in the narrative when the peddler reveals that Fanny is the daughter of Gaffar and Gammer Andrews- the supposed parents of Joseph Andrews. This upsets the lovers but it is soon disclosed that Joseph is the son of a gentleman- Mr. Wilson and so not a brother of Fanny, through the strawberry mark on his chest.

Fielding says that the characters in a comic epic in prose are persons of inferior manners. This is true of most of the characters of Joseph Andrews- Mrs. Slipslop, Mrs. Towwouse, Peter Pounce and Parson Trulliber have nothing grand or noble about them. Some of them are hypocrites, some of them are vain, and all of them are either comic or vicious. Mrs. Slipslop is a figure of feign because of her amorous designs on Joseph. Mrs. Toe-wouse is an ugly, cruel, lustful, shrewd lady. Parson Trulliber is characterized by bestial

roughness though a Parson he runs a brisk trade as a hog dealer. Parson Adams, Fanny and Joseph are cast in a different mould but they only serve to emphasize the lowness of other characters.

Fielding's use of epic similes lends a flavor of its own to the novel. When Mrs. Slipslop tries to make a moral assault on Joseph, Fielding writes,

"As when a hungry tigress who long has traversed woods in fruitless search sees within the reach of her claws a lamb, she prepares, leaps on her prey so did Mrs. Slipslop prepare to lay her violent amorous hands on poor Joseph."

Even the two interpolated stories fit in the epic dimension of the novel. These are not idle digressions. They are highly appropriate to Fielding's scheme and purpose. The interpolated stories of Leonora and Mr. Wilson belong to the conventions of epic. These devices were used to introduce variety into the narrative. The plot of the novel is in fact a parody of romantic plots in general- missing heirs, babies stolen and exchanged at birth and birth marks to be discovered and the foundlings restored to their heritage in the concluding chapters.

Like an epic, a comic epic in prose also has a serial moral purpose. Joseph Andrews is not a mere entertainment. It points out the importance of goodness of heart and active benevolence. It exposes hypocrisy, meanness and expresses the need for charity. Fielding's purpose was didactic. He had no intention of providing laughter for immoral ends. He used his comic epic in prose as a vehicle for making an impact on human mind. Fielding's moral concern is shown through the action of the novel as well as the character like that of Parson Adams. Parson Adams is a clean, vigorous Christian with a Christianity which pays less heed to pure dogmas than to active sympathy for the weak and the disinherited of the earth. By showing people what they are, he wants them to become what they ought to be. Joseph Andrews presents realistic description of contemporary society. It is a realistic description of life in general. He has not only presented society but also criticized it in order to make the world a better place to live in. On this Wyatt and Collins have remarked,

"..... He likes to make us laugh, but to laugh so that we love goodness and honesty and kindness all the more"

Joseph Andrews is the powerful artistic expression of the social conscience of the age. The 18th century society appears in its essence on the pages of this novel. The novel is full of realistic elements. Fielding has not tried to gloss up the ugly realities of the world. 'Truth to nature' was his watch-word. In this light, Digeon remarks,

"Fielding is a selective realist. He observes the whole reality, shutting his eyes to no part of it."

Fielding's world is mainly the world of middle and lower classes Ordinary human nature was the subject of his investigation. The contrast between the magnificent heroic figures of the past and the miniature modern day parts amuses us. Fielding's Joseph and Parson Adams makes us smile at their petty misadventures. Fielding's realism is best seen in his characterization. Saintsbury rightly remarks about his characters,

"They are there- alive, full of blood, full of breath as we are."

None of them is perfect because he knows that perfection is not to be found in the world of man.

Fielding was not only a great novelist but also a great master of plot-construction. From Chaucer down to the modern times English writers have mostly ignored the architectonic part of their compositions. Fielding came to the novel from the drama, and though his plays are ill-constructed, yet his experience as a dramatist served him in good stead. Tom Jones is, according to Elizabeth Jenkins, an "amazing tour de force of plot-construction." Coleridge placed it among the three best constructed masterpieces of world literature-the other two being Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*. Fielding defined the novel as "a comic epic in prose." But, as Oliver Elton points out, in Fielding's novels there is more of the dramatic than epic quality. The last scenes of his novels, particularly, resemble the last scenes of a well-knit comedy, such as one by Ben Jonson. "Fielding was," according to Hudson, "much concerned about the structural principles of prose fiction a matter to which neither Defoe nor Richardson had given much attention. To him the novel was quite as much a form of art as the epic or the drama". Unfortunately, Fielding's successors did not learn much from his example, and offended in respect of plot-construction as his predecessors-Defoe and Richardson-had done before him.

The incidents of the road would not have happened if Joseph had not set out on his journey. So, in a sense Joseph Andrews can be called as an "Odyssey of the road". Byron called Fielding, "the prose Homer of human nature". Fielding gave a prose epic of the England of its day containing the crowded picture of all kinds of people, coachmen and travelers, country clergymen and their wives, squires, inn-keepers, chamber maids, peddlers. Thus, Fielding's Joseph Andrews compiles with Fielding's theory of the comic epic in prose.

References

1. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Notes on Tom Jones. Tom Jones. 1749. Ed. Sheridan Baker. New York: Norton, Print. 1995.
2. Fielding, Henry. Joseph Andrews with Shamela and Related Writings. 1742. Ed. Homer Goldberg. New York: Norton, Print. 1987.
3. McKeon, Michael. The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins U.P., Print. 1991.
4. Bloom, Harold. Modern Critical Views: Henry Fielding. Chelsea House Publishers, Web. 1987.