

## A study of digression as a narrative technique in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*.

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**ABSTRACT:** Digression is a notable literary device that conveys a temporary departure from the main part of the narrative to focus on unrelated issues explaining the background details. However, after the temporary move, the author returns to the central topic at the end of the narrative. In his remarkable novel *Joseph Andrews*, Henry Fielding used various digressive or interpolated materials that add variety to the main plot. Here, Fielding deploys digression not as an exaggerated statement but rather as a part and parcel of the main plot. Such digressive or interpolated materials were expected to be related to the main plot by theme, moral, symbolic or ironic inverse relationship.

**KEYWORDS:** Digression, literary device, temporary departure, narrative, Henry Fielding, interpolated materials, symbolic or ironic inverse relationship.

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Digression is a stylistic literary device. It conveys a temporary departure from the main subject of the narrative to focus on apparently unrelated subject matters explaining background details. However, after the temporary shift, the author returns to the main topic at the end of the narrative. This paper intends to study digression as a narrative technique in *Joseph Andrews*. Here the narrator deploys digression not as an exaggerated statement but rather as a part and parcel of the main plot. The literature of Renaissance and eighteenth century sometimes astonishes the reader by introducing extended digressions. For instance, in *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne extensively used this technique of digression in a remarkable way. It is told in the first person narrative by the titular hero and narrator Tristram. It is worth mentioning that various epic poet also use subplots and digressions as reflections of the main plot. The reader of Homeric epic observes that there are twenty-four digressions in the *Iliad* and twenty-seven in the *Odyssey*.

Being a comic epic poem in prose *Joseph Andrews* succeeds the Renaissance tradition of using digressions as a mirror or an indirect commentary on the main narrative. This type of digressive or interpolated materials were regarded as pleasant change of place, adding variety to the main story which was expected to be related to the main story by theme, moral, symbolic or ironic inverse relationship. The major digressions in *Joseph Andrews* are the history of Leonara (Book II, Chapter 4 and 6), Mr. Wilson's Tale (Book III, Chapter 3) and the story of Leonard and Paul (Book IV, Chapter 10).

The digressive story of Leonara is narrated by one of the passengers of the stage coach. The

narrator begins her story with a description of the courtship of fickle Leonara, who jilts her devoted suitor, Horatio for a French fortune hunter Bellarmine. This story of Leonara is inserted in Book 2 through the frame narrative device, which was widespread in the oral and written literature of the East and Middle East, as in the collection of stories called *The Arabian Nights*. This device was used by a number of writers including Boccaccio for his prose *Decameron* and by Chaucer for his versified *Canterbury Tales*.

In the digressive tale of Leonara, the readers can map the thematic parallels and contrasts to the characters and ideas of the main plot. Leonara is a jilt, her unfaithful, unhappy life acts as an inverted image of the constancy of Joseph and Fanny. It is noteworthy that whereas Fanny remains faithful despite Joseph's journey to London, Leonara falls in love with Bellarmine during Horatio's absence. Fanny remains chaste until her marriage with Joseph. On the other hand, Leonara becomes Bellarmine's mistress. Joseph appears poor but is discovered to be a son of a wealthy person. In contrast to this, Bellarmine seems wealthy but he wears extravagantly fashionable dresses only to obtain a rich wife. Indeed, Bellarmine jilts Leonara and leaves her in disgrace when he learns that Leonara's father will not provide a dowry. On the other hand, Joseph is an unwavering lover and remains constantly devoted to his beloved Fanny by preventing the transgressive love of Lady Booby towards him. Like Leonara, Lady Booby is also a patron of feudal aristocracy. The reader can observe various resemblances between these two lecherous women as both of them rejected their first partner and tried to grow an illicit relation with other alluring male.

This digressive tale within the plot can be interpreted as Fielding's way of offering commentary on moral flaws such as vanity and hypocrisy, where, the character of Leonara can be studied as an object of ridicule for her vanity. Again, Bellarmine is also a hypocrite; as his love is not for Leonara, but for her father's wealth. He appears to be a sincere lover, but he is in reality only a fortune hunter. This unmasking of Bellarmine's hypocrisy and the exposure of Leonara's vanity carry out Fielding's general purpose of introducing digression in this novel. Therefore, one can argue that the treatment of appearance versus reality from the character of Bellarmine and Leonara. At the end of the novel, Joseph and Fanny are united in a happy marriage. On the other hand, Leonara is rejected by society, lives alone unhappily. In a way, the story of Leonara acts as a caution against the trusting appearances, against following fashions, against pre-marital sexuality and against infidelity. Leonara has fallen into the temptations that Joseph and Fanny have resisted.

However, this melancholic history of Leonara is interrupted by a slapstick farce at an inn where Parson Adams has a tray of hog's blood spilled on his head (Book II, Chapter 5). Here, a terrible fight erupts between Parson Adams and the landlord of the inn, which is full of caricature. Therefore, the reader can trace that these three chapters of Book II construct a unit, beginning the history of Leonara in Chapter 4, which is interrupted by the farcical scene in Chapter 5 and concluded in Chapter 6. In *Poetics*, Aristotle states that whatever can be left out without injury to the whole is not a part of the unity of the work. However, it is worthy to note that Fielding himself talks about digression as capable of being removed without injury to the whole but, it does not mean that these digressions are totally irrelevant to the novel.

The novel, *Joseph Andrews* contains a panoramic picture of the English country life of eighteenth century. Fielding's main purpose of writing novel is to expose the vanity and hypocrisy of the contemporary society and through the use of digression Fielding tries to portray the society of eighteenth century. This intertextual or allusive function adds some deeper meaning to the text.

The Chapter 3 of Book 2 comprises the major digression of *Joseph Andrews*. It has occasioned much more commentary than the history of Leonara. Mr. Wilson's history must be described as a didactic tale and aimed against the vices of fashionable society. The story of Mr. Wilson deploys the dangers to a young man of having money without moral guidance. Like that of Leonara, the History of Mr. Wilson is a moral exemplum with a model in the satiric sketches of London life. Wilson's fate is an example of what

Joseph's might have been if he had not received Parson Adams' moral and religious guidance while young.

Mr. Wilson's life changes, when he is rescued from prison by a woman whom he loves. Wilson's retirement from the city to the countryside might be said to be a foreshadowing of Joseph's future happiness with Fanny. In this context, the reader can contrast the concept of journey from the city to countryside and vice-versa. The journey from countryside to city can be read as a journey which is related with vices. On the other hand, the journey from city to countryside can be considered as a moral journey. Therefore, Wilson's journey from city to countryside can also be considered as a moral journey. This tension between city and country life is highly projected in *Joseph Andrews*. The narrator gives the picture of contemporary London as a city without police, which is full of vices. On the other hand, the English country side of the first half of eighteenth century is depicted as a storehouse of morality, virtue and good deeds.

The reader can also make a comparison between the love relation of Leonara's and Mr. Wilson's story. The story of Leonara ends with a tragic note, bearing the theme of separation in contrast to this story of Mr. Wilson that ends with the happy marriage of Wilson and his beloved. One can also trace the epistolary technique in this digressive story. This technique can be traced through the letter of Harriet Hearly to Wilson.

Mr. Wilson's history also serves another function in this novel besides offering variety, a moral commentary providing various parallels and contrasts to the main story. The readers are told that he lost a son and in Book IV, the son is discovered to be Joseph. Thus, two stories are surprisingly linked. Although, at first Mr. Wilson's history appears to be a digression, it is finally seen as a significant part of the novel. In this way, Mr. Wilson's story connects with the main plot of the novel. Therefore, we can assert that the digression holds certain relevance to the main story.

The third digression of this novel is the story of Leonard and Paul which is actually a minor digression. However, through this digression the narrator tries to draw the prominent question of marriage of eighteenth century. Moreover, it is important to note that after the digression, the narrator also adds some digressive note to the main text. For example, after the digression of Leonard and Paul, the narrator introduces the chapter of the disagreement between Parson Adam and his wife. Again, through the concept of country and city, the narrator endorses the concept of polite culture, which is associated with the upper strata of society and popular culture, which is in a way associated with the lower strata of eighteenth century society. Horse riding is the popular sports of eighteenth

century, which is vividly portrayed through the digression. For example, the picture of stage coach, the portrait of Mr. Wilson, who can ride a horse.

Eighteenth century literature aims at portraying what is timeless and universal as Fielding describes not an individual, but a species. It is Henry Fielding who describes not men, but manners. Therefore, through characters of the digressive tales he wants to depict the manners of his contemporary society. In this context, one can argue that the digressions, depicted by the narrator is not an exaggeration, rather an integral part of the main plot.

The novel implies that sexuality should be an expression of love and chastity should be preserved for marriage. Thus, the variety of theme in *Joseph Andrews* is an imitation of reality. It is worthy to note that Fielding himself is inspired by the Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence. In this context, one can suggest that the novel is full of high spirits, rough horse play and a healthy sense of the comedy of life.

To conclude, one can state that the digressive stories are not a convoluted one rather a

part and parcel of the main plot. It is a device of the narrator through which he can depict the contemporary society of his time as Fielding is interested in the possibilities of repeating the design of the whole novel in interpolated tales. In *Joseph Andrews*, digressions serve as a means of building the structure and providing the background for the plot, providing information about the characters, delivering the themes of the novel and creating metafiction and intertextuality. However, these digressions are not like the interludes rather these stories do contribute to the main plot of *Joseph Andrews*.

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