

Joseph Andrews: Eighteenth-Century Sitcom

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Abstract

Although situational comedy is a recent phenomenon, some of its characteristics and traits date back to the 18th century. Novel as a form was an emerging genre and novels like *Joseph Andrews* were highly successful because of their satirical humour on men and manners. In a situational comedy characters are put in various comical situations to create humour and it is mainly episodic. This article explores the phenomenon of situational comedy in *Joseph Andrews*. Following the great tradition of novels like *Don Quixote*, Henry Fielding writes his humorous novel *Joseph Andrews*. The full title of the novel is *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*. Joseph Andrews is kicked by his mistress and is now a destitute. He along with his pastor friend Abraham Adams embark on wild adventures exposing the vanity, hypocrisy and self-delusion of the world. It is through the interactions with the innkeepers, pastors, rakes and gentility that Fielding reveals and unravels the double standards of the world. Parson Adams is a character similar to Don Quixote and Joseph Andrews is Sancho Panza. Don Adam, Sancho Andrews are a mismatched pair travelling the highways and byways of the English countryside. The humour or comedy is generated when they meet different kinds of people on their way and get embroiled in different types of situations.

Keywords: Joseph Andrews, Henry Fielding, Situational Comedy, Popular literature, Pop Culture.

Introduction

A sitcom, or situational comedy, revolves around humorous situations. Typically, it features a consistent ensemble cast of characters who undergo minimal changes or personal growth. The starting point for writing a sitcom is the situation itself, which is heavily influenced by the location and the cast of characters. The “precinct” or primary setting plays a crucial role in fueling the comedy. In the case of *Joseph Andrews*, examples of these precincts include inns, countryside settings, or barns, which serve as the primary locations where

the characters live. While a sitcom may have additional locations for characters to interact privately and publicly, it is rare for the entire story to centre around a single place. However, it is essential to establish a meeting point for the characters to facilitate their various comedic escapades.

Yet, merely having a precinct does not automatically make it a sitcom. The situation alone is just one component. Without comedic characters, it becomes more akin to a soap opera. To be successful, a sitcom must have inherently funny characters. However, their humour should not be their sole defining trait. The comedy should stem from an intrinsic connection to each character's personality. Creating a foundation of contradictory personalities and conflicts is crucial for any sitcom and comedy in general. When developing characters for the sitcom, this should be the primary consideration.

The context in which *Joseph Andrews* is written is in itself a situational parody. What would happen if a young boy is affronted by the sexual advances of his mistress. He must thus preserve his virtue from "predatory women and lustful hags" (Neale 1). This role reversal is the central tenet of the novel. The episodes or interactions of Joseph with his mistress are ambiguous to his innocent mind. He fails to understand the reason why his mistress is behaving in an uncommon manner and frustration of the mistress is apparent in her trying to persuade him to give in. But even with many attempts she fails time and again in her efforts to win him. The humour arises from the very fact that virtue in men is an unheard of concept hitherto in Literature. It was always a question of women's virtue and it never was associated with men. Henry Fielding is mocking the absurd virtues which can be seen in his contemporary novelists like Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*.

The episodic nature of *Joseph Andrews* is perfectly suitable for creating many situations. Many criticised Fielding for the lack of strict form and for the loose plot. There is no coherent plot and the story transgresses so much from the point that it almost seems many episodes do not fit in or were unnecessary. Mark Spilka in his "Comic Resolutions in Fielding's 'Joseph Andrews'" writes "...there is little or no dramatic connection between one episode and the next" (Spilka 12). If we look at most of the sitcoms today, their episodes may not add directly to the plot advancement but they still hold significance and relevance to the central theme of creating comedy through situational

awareness. We have the story of the History of Leonora or the History of Gentleman and many more such digressions. They simply become an intricate way to engage the characters and create humour within the narrative. This process, however suitable or formulaic for a sitcom of today, had the same effect in the 18th Century when it was written.

All the components which distinguish a situational comedy can be seen in this novel. There are three components in a situational comedy, like the main character, supportive characters and transient characters. The main characters are very few in number. It is through them that most of the action takes place like Joseph and Adams in *Joseph Andrews* or Tom in *Tom Jones*. Supportive characters play a supportive part and have a specific personality trait. These personality traits require a mental effort on part of the reader or audience in order to connect with the ongoing plot. Transient characters act as people who provide a “plot problem” or “agents of complication”.

Elements of a Sitcom

When exploring the elements of a sitcom, we often find certain things which elevate the humour. Various comedic devices and techniques are employed in order to generate laughter and engage the readers. Absurdity serves as a powerful tool in sitcoms, enabling writers to push the boundaries of reality and challenge conventional norms. By exaggerating situations or characters to a comical extreme, sitcoms provide a refreshing escape from mundane reality. Shows like *Seinfeld* and *The Office* capitalise on absurdity by placing their characters in bizarre and outlandish scenarios, highlighting the inherent hilarity that arises from such situations.

Allusion is a clever technique employed by sitcom writers to refer and draw upon popular culture, historical events, or well-known individuals. By incorporating these references into the dialogue or plot, sitcoms create a sense of familiarity and connection with the audience. For instance, *The Big Bang Theory* regularly alludes to famous scientists and their discoveries, allowing viewers to appreciate the humour on both intellectual and comedic levels.

Coincidences are a staple in sitcoms, often serving as catalysts for comedic misunderstandings and entanglements. Whether it is the characters bumping into each other at precisely the wrong moment or events unfolding in a

serendipitous manner, coincidences inject unexpected humour into the narrative. Sitcoms like *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother* expertly employ coincidences to generate comedic situations and keep audiences engaged.

Deceitful behaviour forms the basis of many sitcom plots, as characters often resort to lies and deception to achieve their objectives or navigate tricky situations. These deceptions are often revealed or unravelled in hilariously awkward ways, leading to humorous consequences. Shows such as *Frasier* and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* skillfully utilise deceitful behaviour to generate comedic tension and create opportunities for witty dialogue and situational comedy.

Misunderstandings are a recurring theme in sitcoms, contributing to comedic chaos and confusion. The misinterpretation of information or intentions between characters fuels the humour and keeps the plot engaging. Parody is a comedic device that satirises or mimics a specific style, genre, or individual for comedic effect. Sitcoms frequently employ parody to lampoon societal norms, popular culture, or even other television shows. Puns and repartee are verbal comedic devices that rely on wordplay, wit, and quick thinking. Sitcoms frequently employ these devices to create clever and amusing dialogue exchanges between characters. Shows like *The Golden Girls* and *Parks and Recreation* showcase characters who possess razor-sharp wit and engage in rapid-fire banter, leaving audiences entertained and laughing at their clever wordplay.

Ridicule and self-deprecation are powerful comedic techniques frequently employed in sitcoms to generate laughter and establish a relatable connection with the audience. Ridicule involves mocking or satirising certain aspects of individuals, situations, or societal norms. Sitcoms often utilise ridicule to highlight absurdities or flaws, offering a humorous critique of various elements of life. Characters may engage in exaggerated behaviours or engage in humorous antics that poke fun at common stereotypes, social conventions, or cultural phenomena. By exposing the humorous aspects of these targets, sitcoms invite viewers to laugh at themselves and the idiosyncrasies of the world around them. Self-deprecation, on the other hand, involves characters making fun of their own shortcomings, mistakes, or embarrassing moments. This technique allows sitcoms to create a sense of vulnerability and humility in characters, making them more relatable and endearing to the audience. By openly

acknowledging their flaws and embracing self-mockery, characters become more human and relatable, inviting viewers to laugh along with them.

Sitcoms often feature characters who engage in self-deprecating humour as a means of coping with their insecurities or navigating awkward situations. Through their willingness to laugh at themselves, these characters disarm potential criticism or judgement, fostering a sense of camaraderie with the audience. By showcasing their own vulnerabilities and flaws, characters in sitcoms encourage viewers to embrace their imperfections and find humour in their own lives. Furthermore, self-deprecation can serve as a form of catharsis, allowing viewers to release tension or anxiety through laughter. By highlighting relatable experiences and engaging in self-mockery, sitcoms create a safe space for viewers to find solace and amusement in their own everyday foibles and missteps.

The usage of ridicule and self-deprecation in sitcoms not only generates laughter but also encourages a light-hearted perspective on life's challenges. By showcasing the humorous side of human nature, sitcoms promote a sense of empathy, acceptance, and the ability to find humour in even the most embarrassing or difficult situations. These techniques allow viewers to reflect on their own experiences with a comedic lens, offering a refreshing and uplifting escape from the complexities of everyday life. By ridiculing societal norms, stereotypes, and conventions, and engaging in self-mockery, sitcoms invite viewers to laugh at themselves and find humour in their own imperfections. These techniques not only generate laughter but also foster empathy, acceptance, and a lighthearted perspective on life's challenges. Sitcoms that skillfully employ ridicule and self-deprecation contribute to the enduring popularity of the genre, providing audiences with an entertaining and relatable comedic experience (Juckel 2).

Situational Comedic Episodes in *Joseph Andrews*

In one comedic moment, a battle ensues at an inn where Joseph takes a tumble from his horse, injuring his knee. Seeking solace, Joseph sits by the fireplace while the inn's landlady kindly massages his aching knee. Meanwhile, Parson Adams finds himself in a pot of pig's blood, leading to several amusing situations, such as when Tru river mistakes Adams for an actual pig, and a squire's dog

playfully tears apart Parson Adams' cassock. Another comical scene unfolds when Mrs. Tau Woz stumbles upon Betty in Tau Woz's bed. Chaos ensues as Didapper inadvertently creates a mess in the room. Later, Parson Adams mistakenly enters Mrs. Slipslop's room and confuses Didapper for a distraught woman, engaging in a hilarious scuffle until Mrs. Booby arrives, holding a lit candle.

Irony is used in a scene where, a self-proclaimed patriot who vehemently condemns cowards finds himself fleeing in a critical situation, presenting a sharp irony. Parson Adams, known for his sense of humour, indulges in plenty of ironic jests. In one instance, he takes a wrong turn and mistakenly falls asleep in Fanny's bed. Adams' adherence to moderation and philosophical acceptance of adversity, as advised by Joseph, is ironically subverted when his son is reported to have drowned. Despite his conceit in considering his sermon a masterpiece, Adams faces a poignant irony. Additionally, the portrayal of Mrs. Slipslop's character and the allure of Lady Booby contribute to the novel's satirical elements.

Fielding effectively employs satire in a scene where each passenger on a bus confronts a naked Joseph, leading to their metaphorical vulnerability. The scene exposes the sensitivity, selfishness of an old man, and the professional pretence of a lawyer, resulting in a satirical critique. Parson Adams, the most notable character in *Joseph Andrews*, is a creation of pure humour. When he travels to London to sell his sermons, he forgets a valuable manuscript at home, leading to comical consequences. Furthermore, Adams' absent-mindedness is accentuated by his peculiar gestures and amusing demeanour.

Resemblance to a Sitcom

Another reason why *Joseph Andrews* resembles a modern sitcom is it does not have as Irwin says "an orderly plan of attack" (Irwin 169). Transient characters come and go playing their parts and serving their purpose for that particular episode or chapter. Fielding's novels like *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews* are bildungsroman and coming-of-age novels. This provides a perfect context to weave the elements and components of a sitcom. Lawrence Mintz says, "Situational comedies are weekly half-hour plays involving a recurring cast of familiar characters who face new adventures initiated and resolved in

each episode” (Mintz 42). There exists a problem which breaks the normalcy of an everyday life creating tension and thus paving a way for characters to then solve issues using “wit” and “humour”. In *Joseph Andrews* the conflict resolves by itself at the end of the episode and does not last till the end of the plot. Mintz breaks down the structure of a typical sitcom as he writes:

The problem of the situation comedy is almost always a minor threat—either an embarrassment, a confusion or misunderstanding created by a failure to communicate or an opportunity for change which equally threatens the common, familiar pattern of existence for the characters. Faced with the threat, problem or opportunity, the characters act, and invariably make things worse, complicating and compounding the difficulty, creating new, secondary dangers. The plot thickens until there is a miraculous, unexpected, almost always unearned rescue; the situation is resolved as artificially as any *dues ex machina* ending in a classical Greek drama. All is explained, all is corrected, all is forgiven, all is restored to the condition of normality. (43)

Considering the nature of the novel, its structural elements and characters it is filled with many lively characters who represent ordinary people with single characteristic traits. The main character along with supportive and transient characters combine to create a holistic fulfilment which does not require a well-structured plot and serves the purpose of a perfect situational comedy. Abraham Adams is a curate of the parish in his fiftieth year, he supports a wife and six children on £23 a year. He is Fielding’s delightful example of the “good natured” man, he is entirely ignorant of the ways of the world— “a sort of Christian Quixote” (Neale 2). Pugnacious in defence of injured innocence, he sees life through the bookish lens of classical literature and the Bible. His forgetfulness always lands him in trouble. “The parson had exhibited a fresh instance of his absence of mind; for he was so pleased with having got Joseph into the coach, that he never once thought of the beast in the stable; and, finding his legs as nimble as he desired, he sallied out” (Fielding 133).

Adams represents a common innocence in all of us when we are deceived by the world and its people who fraud and exploit our weakness through deception and ill means. Adams is so generous and helpful that he throws

away his manuscript of Aeschylus for saving a friend in need which had cost him many years to write. “Adams jumped up, flung his Æschylus into the Fire, and fell a roaring to the People of the House for Help”. At once Joseph Andrews on his way home to see Fanny and providentially located in the next room appears and the lovers are for the time being reunited. But the manuscript, “his dear Friend, which was the Work of his own Hands, and had been his inseparable Companion for upwards of thirty Years” (Fielding 157) is lost forever. He has to survive in the world of deceptive people who claim to be well read in the classics and often dare to challenge him in his learning and having found nothing they could have related to, blame him as a rogue who is pretentious in his learning and trying to befool everybody.

Abraham Adams is not a hero of the novel but holds immense significance as Grimm’s puts it:

It is not without reason that Fielding added the name of Mr Adams to the title page. If he is not the real hero of the book, he is undoubtedly the character whose fortune the reader follows with close interest. Whether he is smoking his pipe, or losing his way while pondering a passage of Greek, or groaning over the fatuities of the man of fashion in Leonara’s story, or brandishing his famous crabstick in defence of Fanny, he is always the same delightful mixture of benevolence and simplicity, of credulity and of ignorance of the world. He lives upon Aristotle’s ‘Politics’ but he knows nothing of the politics of his own day; he is perfectly familiar with the cities of ancient Greece, but he knows nothing of the city of London. (Grimm 24)

Adams thus is not a perfect man but he is way better than those of his supposed superiors. Regardless of his faults he has a native dignity which cannot be taken away from him. Of these, only the quixotic parson is a truly comic personage, and he is so not because of affectation but of naivete. And despite his frequent ludicrousness, Adams is always dignified.

In defense he merrily revealed the scribblers in their true nature and invited all men of sense to laugh with him. He opposed affectation because he valued plain-dealing among men and saw all about him

vanity and hypocrisy. Again, his method, although more highly systematized, was simply to pull away the sham and show the reality. Fielding gave this serious business his full energy and achieved what he attempted, the entertainment and instruction of those lively, thoughtful readers who love comedy. (Irwin 188)

Betty the chambermaid and her interactions with Joseph create another situation which becomes a fertile ground for humour. Her condition in the society and her fears of remaining an invalid compels her to make advances towards Joseph and Towhouse, the owner of the inn, and finding her advances being refused she goes into an uncontrolled rage of fury.

Most of the character names are emblematic in their nature. Like Slipslop is sloppy with language. Peter Pounce does not lose any opportunity to pounce on money. The characters always resist authority and defy them in many ways. Joseph defies his mistress, refuses to give in. Slipslop refuses to obey Lady Booby even when admonishing her. Adam challenges the authority of Lady Booby by not complying with her orders. They exhibit an almost independent nature irrespective of the authority which commands them. The authorities cannot do anything because they too know that servants possess many compromising secrets which when leaked will put them in a difficult and embarrassing position.

Dismissing Slipslop was a point not so easily to be resolved upon. She [Lady Booby] had the utmost tenderness for her reputation, as she knew on that depended many of the most valuable blessings of life, particularly cards, making curtsies in public places, and, above all, the pleasure of demolishing the reputations of others, in which innocent amusements she had extraordinary delight. She therefore determined to submit to any insult from a servant, rather than run the risk of losing the title to so many great privileges. (Fielding 52)

The characters display one dimensional aspect of either being overtly mortal or immoral. Lady Booby's husband has just died and instead of mourning she devises plans to woo Joseph. He refutes the advances giving a glimpse of his familial chastity and of the greatness of his sister, the great Pamela. Thus preserving the chastity tradition of his family, the writer says, "O Pamela! My

mistress is fallen in love with me, but I hope I shall have more resolution and more grace than to part with my virtue to any lady upon earth” (Fielding 55).

Fielding “modified his modes of writing in light of audience response, moving away from traditional models of comedy to the madcap forms of burlesque and farce that released his most exuberant satire” (Rawson 20) in all human actions. We see in the cowardly gentleman a reproachful hatred towards the British army in failing to protect their own country from French invaders. But when it comes to his being patriotic he escapes his duty as a countryman. Thus, the inclusive folly can be seen in a typical hypocrite preaching moral principles which he himself does not follow. When the time comes of facing the danger, he makes haste to protect himself rather than abiding by the principles he vehemently believes that others must follow. “The man of courage made as much expedition towards his own home, whither he escaped in a very short time without once looking behind him; where we will leave him, to contemplate his own bravery, and to censure the want of it in others” (Fielding 140).

Fielding breaks away the moral tradition set by Samuel Richardson. He does not expect the reader to mend his follies how pernicious they may be. His intent is the “exposure of the offence than on amendment of the offender” (4); he probably does not anticipate that a Lady Booby would remake herself after reading Joseph Andrew.

Fielding had a deep hatred of hypocrisy and affectation and could see with keen humour the ridiculous situations that resulted when man assumed qualities that did not befit him (Grimm 8). He in his preface gives the nature of hypocrisy, he says “For as vanity puts us on affecting false characters, in order to purchase applause; so hypocrisy sets us on an endeavor to avoid censure, by concealing our vices under an appearance of their opposite virtues” (24). This can be seen in the insincere courtier, the dishonest lawyer, blockheaded physicians and religious hypocrites who are evenly distributed throughout his novels.

The episode of the travellers in a stage coach speaks of the moral dilemma which they face when a helpless human being is robbed and left on the road to die. Every traveller aims in protecting his or her skin rather than helping out.

There is Miss Grave-airs, who protests against the indecency of his entering the vehicle; there is the lawyer, who advises that the wounded man should be taken in, not from any humane motive but because he is afraid of being involved in legal proceedings if they leave him to his fate; there is the wit who seizes the situation for a fast round of double-entendres; and lastly there is the coachman, whose only concern is the shilling for his fare, and who refuses to lend any of his many great-coats lest they be made bloody.

The episode of “The History of Leonora, or the Unfortunate Jilt”, Leonara, the Unfortunate Jilt tells the story of an opportunistic girl, who as a consequence of her extreme sorrow, spurns her true love and honest fiancé Horatio in favour of the rich and Frenchified fop Bellarmine. The result of which is that she gets deceived by the fop and ends up as an invalid. The tone in which Fielding expresses is not an admonishing one but rather that of pity, as he retorts, “She hath ever since led a disconsolate life, and deserves, perhaps, pity for her misfortunes, more than our censure for a behavior to which the artifices of her aunt very probably contributed, and to which very young women are often rendered too liable by that blameable levity in the education of our sex” (Fielding 132).

In another episode of mistaken identity Adams meets Parson Trulliber, a pig-farming clergyman who, though a man of religion, refuses Parson Adam’s charity. The theme of hypocrisy is once again touched here. A religious and holy man denying service to his fellow brother.

Conclusion

Joseph Andrews, written by Henry Fielding in 1742, embodies an early English novel that predates sitcoms by centuries. However, its comedic essence shares resemblances with the genre, presenting a satirical and amusing narrative. The novel’s eccentric characters, akin to those found in sitcoms, possess distinct personalities and quirks. Joseph Andrews, the virtuous and naive protagonist, and the pompous Parson Adams exemplify exaggerated traits that generate comedic scenarios. Witty banter, clever wordplay, and humorous exchanges lace the dialogue of this novel. Such comedic discourse contributes to the overall humorous tone, mirroring the reliance of sitcoms on quick-witted lines and clever repartee. The situational comedies create a myth of an ability to

solve complex problems using “wit” and “humour”. The episodes of *Joseph Andrews* are short and in few cases don’t exceed more than three chapters (at the most four). This shortness of the episodes bares likelihood to television sitcoms. This technique of shorter episodes had been in literature way before they had shown their presence in popular culture. Sitcoms may be a recent phenomenon but their antecedents can be seen in literature way before they have entered mainstream popular culture. The novel is filled with a wide variety of characters who provide ample opportunities and situations to exercise situational comedy. They give us fuller insight into the actions and manners of men. Fielding himself says in his preface that he described “not men, but manners; not an Individual, but Species” (186). This becomes a fertile ground for exploring his prowess in creating situational comedy. It offers many episodes which are equivalent to the episodes of sitcoms weaving diverse threads of narrative episodes together.

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