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A New Insight in the Novels of Jane Austen

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Abstract

This paper views the novels of Jane Austen from a new perspective and tries to portray how she raised the whole genre into a new level of art. In all her novels, one fabric runs common; she considers love and marriage to the fundamental problem of human life. This paper presents how marriage is a social institution, therefore places it in the larger social context. She has studied the theme of marriage in all her novels in contemporary England. In order to get her true vision of life it is necessary to study her novels in new light and to understand the impact marriage has on the marriageable persons and the married couples on one hand and on the society on the other.

Keywords

Implication; Attitude; Restraint; Romantic; Insensitivity.



Jane Austen has put a new life into decaying genre that is modern English novel, which has become the most popular and vastly read literary

genre, which appeared first in its characteristics form in the eighteenth century. She raised the whole genre into a new level of art. And perhaps it will not be wrong to call her the 'first modern novelist'. In the much crowded history of English novels, she holds a unique and distinctive place. She is perhaps the most complete and perfect woman novelist in the language. There is thematic similarity in all the six novels written by Jane Austen. The main situation in her works is marriage, existing or intended. The plot usually centres around love and the novel invariably comes to close as soon as marriage bells are rung. She takes love and marriage as the central theme for her novels. In fact, she considers love and marriage to be the fundamental problem of human life. Human nature in its essence unfolds itself through this most intimate of personal relationships. Beatrice Kean Seymour says that Jane Austen's heroines "had to fall in love and find their happiness not alone in marriage but in the best kind of marriage." Jane Austen in her novels commits herself to careful exploration of the theme of marriage.

Her novels present the deep implication of the institution of marriage both for the individual and for the society. She presents marriage as a fact of life and the moment of its decision is one of paramount importance on which the whole of the future of the marriage entirely depends. She considers marriage as a social institution, therefore, placed it in the larger social context. A major part of her fiction closely examines marriage in contemporary England. In order to get her true vision of life it is necessary to understand the impact marriage has on the marriageable persons and the married couples on one hand and on the society on the other. The marriage theme in the novels of Jane Austen is fulfilled by the "good match"; society moves around the well matched couples and moral integrity, equality of being and spiritual insights are the result. "Good match" is prime requirement for successful marriage on which depend the stability and happiness of family life. It was in order to stress upon the idea of stability both on the domestic as well as on the social plane that

Jane Austen highlighted the importance of sensible marriage and never approved of marriage which was an outcome of unbridled passion.

In the novel *Sense and Sensibility* the theme of love and marriage is built in a very intricate and artistic way. The principal characters in this novel are Mrs. Dashwood, whose husband has just died, is foolish and impulsive but charming lady, her two daughters Elinor and Marianne and their lovers. So from the very beginning the hunt for suitable suitors for two young daughters is the main concern of the mother. In the novel, two complicated but very interesting love stories are interwoven to show the failure of romantic love and success of true love. The novel unfolds two love stories of twin heroines Elinor and Marianne. The attachment between Elinor and Edward Ferrars grows at the beginning of the novel when the Dashwoods stay at Norlands after the death of their father. The callous and indifferent attitude of Mrs. Dashwood compels them to leave Norland and shift to a new place Barton. This displacement of Elinor suspends the love between Elinor and Edward. There are mainly two obstacles in the union of Elinor and Edward and coincidentally both the obstructions are the women-mother of Edward and Lucy Steele, who is engaged to Edward.

Edward had been for four years secretly engaged to Ms. Lucy Steele, the evil genius of the story, false, unscrupulous and vulgar with the vulgarity of a bad heart. Engagement had much moral significance in Jane Austen's period and a man or woman engaged was expected to observe the moral code of the actually married couple. Elinor is rewarded for her goodness and restraint and her joy knew no bounds when she hears that Edward Ferrar is going to be free to marry her: "She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy" (*Sense and Sensibility* 57). Elinor marries Edward who is a perfect and compatible match for her and is Elinor's equal in right thinking with high principles and properly regulated sensibility. In the marriage of Edward and Elinor, Austen anticipates the sort of union she

develops in her later works; it is based on compatibility of temperament and attitude. Jane Austen, no doubt gave first priority to love in marriage but she in her own subtle way touched on the fact that economic soundness and security is also essential for marriage. Marianne because of her highly romantic temperament falls passionately in love with Willoughby who appears to her as the hero of the favorite story. Marianne and Willoughby very romantically advance in their love. The young lovers bother little about everyone else and are completely shut off from the rest of the world. Jane Austen gives very little space to the courtship of Marianne and Willoughby in the novel. Marianne partly resembles later Austenian heroines, falls for a young but callous man, merely to learn the errors of her ways and acknowledge the greater suitability of the older and more stable man. When Marianne and Colonel Brandon marry, she knows very little of him, and he chooses to know even less of her. Marianne, like many other 18th century heroines, but unlike the typical Austen heroine, undergoes almost no internal change. Reluctantly, she acquires a measure of enlightenment with the help of her sister and still manages to catch a good husband-aided by a pretty face that resembles another. The love stories of two sisters play a very significant role in revealing the difference of temperaments between two sisters.

The difference in the responses of the two sisters highlights that Elinor's sources of strength lie within herself and her struggle for self-control is won without the help or the suffering of any other person. On the other hand, Marianne turns to her sister in her misery and mistakes Elinor's calmness for insensitivity. Jane Austen deliberately chooses two young girls as central characters who fall in love and their involvement in the course of events help the writer to expose their respective temperaments and develop the theme of 'love and marriage' which is constructed on the foundation of variant behavior of the two real sisters. *Emma* which is considered to be the literary masterpiece is like a person – not to be comprehended fully and finally by any other person.

In this novel, the social world is carefully and precisely drawn to build the theme of love and marriage. The main plot of the novel focuses on Emma and her marriage but before her marriage, there are many ups and downs which transform Emma from a dreamer to realist. So, the subject of *Emma* is marriage. It begins with one marriage that of Ms. Taylor and ends with three more. Just as in real life, marriage is not an abstract problem. Similarly in the novel Austen very skillfully deals with the theme in terms of actual and particular personal relationships. Emma takes upon herself the holy mission of promoting love and marriage among others while she herself cleverly and obdurately resists either. She fondly takes on herself the task of a match maker. Emma becomes too busy in prospering the life of her beautiful companion Harriet with whom she has no intellectual ties. When Mr. Knightley comes to know that it is Emma who spoils the intended marriage of Harriet with Mr. Martin, he scolds her for creating false hopes of higher chances and false aims of superiority in the mind of that poor girl. Austen presents Mr. Knightley as the most eligible bachelor in Highbury but at the same time a morally tall person whom air of vain 'romance' has not touched even a bit. In this sense, he stands diametrically opposite to Emma and his most important role is to tell the truth to a person whom he is attached to unconsciously. Emma accepts the attentions Frank offers; she realizes the hollowness of his flattery. Jane Austen repeatedly tells Emma has no intentions toward Frank and that his gallantry means nothing. Frank Churchill, in conversation with Emma, expresses his love for Jane Fairfax. Jane is Frank Churchill's angel would now have to her wear a tiara, a crown, in her dark hair, and be his princess and they might live happily ever after. All this fits into Jane Austen's typical fairy tale structure of well-deserved conquests of the heart.

Emma is so engrossed in herself that she radically misconceives even her own attachment to Mr. Knightley. She is referred to as an imaginist, a word created by Jane Austen in this regard. When Emma suffers herself and realizes

that she might lose Mr. Knightley she genuinely transforms herself. Her dark mood is reflected in the unsettled weather, just as in the Greek tragedies and Shakespeare's plays, stormy weather mirrors the disruptive nature of human relationships. When the weather clears, the stage is set for the transformation leading to the resolution of the novel; the secret engagement of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax is revealed. Also the error of Mr. Knightley's perception that Emma cared for Frank is rectified. Mr. Knightley declares his intentions to Emma, and, within half an hour, all is well and happy. After the forces blocking the three primary relationships are removed, we have a flurry of weddings that are socially suitable and based on love, on true "attachment," and therefore meet Jane Austen's criteria for good match: Jane and Frank, Emma and Mr. Knightley, and Harriet and her first and best suitor, who never flagged in his love, Robert Martin, and whom Mr. Knightley knew all along should marry Harriet. The rightness of the matches in her novels in all ways- socially, economically, and psychologically- make us take such satisfaction and pleasure in her characters and plots. Thus Jane Austen once again through Emma represents her concept of 'ideal marriage' where marriage is not a personal matter but is perceived in relation to outer larger reality called society. For marriage to be successful it must be an intrinsic part of, and connected to the fabric of the genuinely ordered society, and thus represent a true moral and ethical reality. It must never occur just to fulfill societal and economic structures, which would be highly unethical as well as lead to personal misery. Instead there has to be genuine 'affection,' or a true 'attachment,' as she was so fond of saying, which engenders genuine ethical and moral behavior.

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