

Short Article

Jane Austen as a Moralist

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the British territory has experienced a period of change, dislocation and unprecedented crisis. This period marked by the industrialization, is extremely attractive from the historical point of view. Industrial and social changes, political and social distress, the development of new social structures, war, monetary remaking, provincial extension, logical advancement and the endeavors to abrogate servitude speak to the primary highlights to examine the emergency and the social tension in the British region.

Living in a time of ideological conflict and social unrest and witnessing the profound alteration of the stable society in which she lived, Jane Austen responded to the turmoil of her time in a way suitable to her environment and social class. Her novels are a proof of what that critical period of social change meant. Although Jane Austen was not, certainly, a person actively involved in politics, her writings have shown in their own way her answer to the great events of the time, the response of a person deeply interested in the question of how individual must live in society and how this society must be organized.

Mona Scheuermann in her work 'Reading Jane Austen' states that the decency and morality which define Jane Austen's novels are values that confer a sense of comfort. When we enter Austen's world, we know exactly where we are situated in terms of beliefs and attitudes of the characters, probably because the writer's ethical perspective is so clear. There is no doubt in Jane Austen's fiction about who is virtuous or whose behaviour is admirable. This confidence establishes a social structure that clearly defines every aspect of life. For the reader, the social and moral network is extremely clear.

To the mind of F.R. Leavis, Jane Austen is one of the truly great writers and herself a major factor in the background of other great writers. Leavis gives her a sort of five star rating by including her in his 'The Great Tradition'. He observes—

*"Jane Austen, in fact, in the inaugurator of the great tradition of English novel and by 'great tradition' I mean the tradition to which what is great in English fiction belongs."*¹

Jane Austen, the last exquisite blossom of the 18th century civilization is the grandmother of women novelists. The study of her novels presents her primarily as a moral writer, striving to establish criteria of sound judgment and right conduct. Really, the vision of life presented in her

novels is cool and calm. Her world is too limited, too ordinary and too uninteresting. The secret of her art lies how she has made this world interesting and fascinating.

To the mind of Walter Scott, Jane Austen keeps herself confined to the middle classes of society and her most distinguished characters do not rise greatly above well-bred country gentlemen and ladies. In his words—

*“The narrative of all her (Austen’s) novels is composed of such common occurrences as may have fallen under the observation of most folks; and her dramatic personages conduct themselves upon the motive and principles which the readers may recognize as ruling their own and that of most of their acquaintances. The kind of moral also which these novels inculcate, applies equally to the paths of common life.”*²

Austen conveys the moral lesson clearly and impressively but she does not put it forward offensively. It springs incidentally from the circumstances of the story. She does not want to preach any gospel nor she has any axe to grind. She simply and sincerely sets herself to glean pleasure from human follies. However, she is keen on detecting falsity in exposing hypocrisy and vanity.

Leavis thinks that without her intense moral preoccupation Jane Austen would not have been a great novelist. She intelligently and sincerely impersonalizes her moral intensions in her novels. She always in her art to remain fully conscious of her responsibility to life as an artist. She always strives her moral preoccupation and it characterizes her peculiar in life.

- **Austen’s plots versus moral** – W.A. Craik makes a very illuminating comment on Jane Austen’s art of plot and character and says—

*“She (Austen) carries out of the novelist’s obvious elementary duties to sustain interest in her stories..... Her greatness lies in the way in which she combines the artist and moralist; hers is perfect because a natural reconciliation of the two and in none of her six completed novels does either the artist or the moralist have to give way.”*³

‘Pride and Prejudice’ is regarded as the best novel of Jane Austen. To the mind of S. Maugham, it is a well-constructed charming novel. Its plot explores the issues of money, marriage and so on. Austen has showed her intention with the very opening line—*“It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife”* of this novel. Thus, the marriage of Darcy and Elizabeth provides not only a satisfactory ending to the events in the story but also a significant culmination of the moral concern of the plot. W. A. Craik in this regard says—

*“The novel (‘Pride and Prejudice’) thus has the appearance of the inevitability of real life, at the same time by the same means as it organized to embody its author’s moral plan.”*⁴

Although ‘Pride and Prejudice’ is a novel built around a love

story, it focuses at least equally on the familial relationships. The relationship between Elizabeth and Jane, for example, is shown significantly broader than that between any pair of lovers in the novel. Every character involved in a love story in also caught in a network of family relationships.

One of the principle factors in the development of connections among individual and society in Jane Austen’s books is riches. Bingley genuinely turns into a dependable individual from his general public when he chooses to purchase a property. The connection among individual and society isn’t constrained distinctly to the possessed properties, however stretches out to all types of riches and to the manner in which it is utilized. Riches is firmly connected to the possibility of social class and the correct utilization of riches is a piece of the ethical honesty of a well off individual.

Very shortly after being presented the readers all major characters in ‘Pride and Prejudice’ and placed at the intersection of two axes, social position and moral quality. In most cases, the first one does not change, but the perception regarding the placement on the second axis represents actually the subject around which most part of the novel’s action is built. The fact that Darcy is part of the aristocracy does not diminish his charm; but for Jane Austen, true aristocracy is necessarily linked to social responsibility.

Manners and ethics are closely related in the real world of Jane Austen as well as in the world of her novels. Appropriate behaviour is part of a moral behaviour. When people like Mr. Bennet does not behave honorably and responsibly, they prove they do not comply with the social conventions. The blend of morality and ethics in ‘Pride and Prejudice’ supports the romantic plot of the novel. The complex romantic actions, especially between Darcy and Elizabeth, are based on moral analysis and explorations. The two noteworthy nostalgic exercises between the heroes—the letter that Darcy gives for Elizabeth amid her visit to Charlotte and the miniature they at long final concede their feelings are both great clarifications. What’s more, between these two purposes of the novel, the foremost noteworthy talks among Elizabeth and Jane are moreover centered around ethical issues. Benevolence, as the expression of ethical quality is critical not as it were on an individual level, but for the total society. Jane and Elizabeth are individuals characterized by thoughtfulness, as well as Bingley and Darcy, and their characters bestow solidness to the social structure around them. This truth is clear within the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy.

Darcy’s benevolence spares the deplorable circumstance made by Lydia and Wickham, turning their elopement into a respectable marriage. The thoughtfulness that characterizes Elizabeth and Jane not as it were fortifies their relationship, but gives soundness and arrange to their society, particularly to their family.

The portrayal that the servant of Pemberley gives Darcy emphasizes his great character; Darcy is responsible and responsible of his obligations. Hence, he gives prove of an moral character. His goodness is what draws in Elizabeth, a goodness encapsulated within the appropriate organization of his property.

The arrange may be a sign of profound quality and everything around Darcy demonstrates the most excellent arrange. The property, the gardens, the relationship with his workers, everything is well-organized. In these circumstances, the chaos made by the news that hinders Elizabeth's visit to Pemberly, Lydia's elopement with Wickham, is not only a component of clutter but also a component of corruption.

The last part of the novel, from Darcy's marriage proposal to the end contains, perhaps paradoxically for the end of a love story, more philosophy than romance, especially at the level of conversations. Even his marriage proposal constitutes rather a moral issue than a romantic one. Both Elizabeth and Darcy have to go through a process of learning and self-awareness to admit their mistakes and to correct their false opinions. Distinguishing between good and evil is a crucial concern for both of them, as well as for all Jane Austen's characters; this concern inevitably involves the need to analyze their own prejudices and principles.

The central aspect of 'Pride and Prejudice' is not the accomplishment of a romance and the achievement of a happy end, but the moral message it carries and the way in which characters fluctuate between social obligations and personal happiness. Pride and prejudice are two powerful concepts and Jane Austen's characters have to face a difficult task in order to learn how to use them correctly, with love and courage. Not all her characters are able to walk this path and not all virtuous characters do it in a consistent manner. But the charm of the novel consists precisely in analyzing how the characters relate to the society in which they live and to their personal wishes. Consequently, the novel is based on a moral message, rather than on a simple love story. Morality is a central element for the social class of Jane Austen, allowing the society to maintain its structure. The happy end of the novel comes as a reward for the moral behaviour of the characters.

'Emma' (1815) is a very popular and most perfect and mature novel of Austen. It is outstanding and brilliant for the matchless symmetry of its design and the endless fascination of its technique. The social world and the moral world have been beautifully harmonized. The principle of contrast has effectively been executed. Here, the 'comedy of manners' is actually 'the comedy of morals'. In this concern Ian Milligan says—

"Austen's 'Emma' is a beautifully conceived dramatic novel. Originally published in three volumes, it succeeds in endowing

each volume with its own surprises and a cunning contrived climax: it is also deliberately didactic."⁵

'Mansfield Park' (1814) was written more than ten years after 'Pride and Prejudice' but before 'Emma' and 'Persuasion'. It is a love story in which the heroine rejects one man and accepts another as her husband because of her moral concerns and values. The material and moral values clash here.

'Persuasion' (1818), Austen's last novel seems to be propounding that in love it is better to follow the direction of one's own heart than to be swayed by the opinions and advice of others. Austen as usual is uncompromisingly moral in aim and intention here.

• Literature and society versus Austen's moral approach—

Austen earnestly tried to bridge up the gap between literature and life that continues to exist throughout the 18th century. She stresses more squarely than Defoe the social-moral problems raised by economic individualism and the middle class quest for improved status. Her novels often deal with the relationship between individuals and the society in which they live. She, like all novelists, is interested in social orders and social conventions and the advantages and shortcomings of various ways of ordering the world. Therefore, money and marriage acquire significant places in her novels. The financial and social aspect of marriage dominate her novels. There is a shortage of men with money, so women have to trade in their good looks and good luck to gain a suitable partner. 'Pride and Prejudice' is its fine example. However, Austen is against the conventional marriage. Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage is its fine example.

Though Austen deals with love and marriage in her novels, she never goes sentimental and hysterical in depiction of love. There is no sex-thrill there. She herself values common-sense, discipline, restraint and good taste both in life and literature. She has presented a brilliant defence of the novel-readings as well as a penetrating study of the possible effects of bad novels on susceptible readers. Good novel really helps to see things as they really are. Novels offer us insight into how people live and suggestions about how to live well. Austen's novels have the imagination of a novelist and the convictions of a preacher. In this concern Ian Milligan says—

"Austen is a master analyst of the unacknowledged assumptions which are revealed in speech habits of families or individuals, the self-deception which covers the aggressive and hostile aspect of human life."⁶

• Austen as a novelist with moral-realistic vision

Austen is an outstanding writer of moral- realistic vision. Pride and prejudice are two sins as conspicuous in everyday affair as when she delineated their effects so humorously in the novel that bears their names. 'Pride and Prejudice' keeps the evidence of Austen's 18th century moral concern

of a man in relation to society. 'Emma' tells of a delightful girl who is as essentially true to life today as she was in the years when Napoleon was the emperor. Further, whether we consider Fanny's visit to her parents home after an absence of more than 10 years or Darcy's proposal to Elizabeth and its rejection or the union of Emma with her lover after many years or such trivial incidents as a tea-party, an evening walk or a ball, we are struck by Austen's fidelity to life. And this Austen has as her forte. In this concern we may quote A.C. Ward—

"Austen was strictly honest with herself as well as with others and she could not pretend that what was happening in other countries distressed her greatly or even that foreign affairs interested her a hundredth part as much as what was going on in her own village."⁷

Austen is unlike her contemporaries. She stands for vertical movement in fiction. She stands for certain moral and social values and anticipates the Victorian novelists in this regard. She seems to be always preoccupied with social morality. Arnold Kettle observes—

"On the contrary, our faculties are aroused, we are called upon to participate in life with an awareness, a fineness of feeling and a moral concern more intense than most of us normally bring to our everyday experience."⁸

Like all great comedians, according to L.D. Cecil, Austen satirises in relation to a universal standard of values; her books express a general view of life. It is the view of that 18th century civilization of which she was the last exquisite blossom. One might call it the moral-realistic view. Austen was profoundly moral.

• Austen's novels as broad allegories

Austen is no narrow expositor of an outworn morality. She is not a missionary. She is merely striving to find some mode of existence for her critical attitudes. Many of her novels can be taken as broad allegories in which a number of virtues and vices are set forth in narrative form and commented on. For example, 'Sense and Sensibility' is a vindication of sense and a comic treatment of sensibility. 'Pride and Prejudice' displays and illustrates the dangers of excessive pride and overwhelming prejudice. 'Emma' is a drawing-room comedy of self-deception. 'Mansfield Park' is a treatise on education. The theme of 'Persuasion' is 'over-persuasion'. However, to take her novels as didactic treatises on certain vices and virtues shall be oversimplification. In this context A.H. Wright rightly observes—

"My argument will be that Austen's novels are too complex to allow a merely didactic interpretation, Too serious to be dismissed as a simply light hearted."⁹

Conclusion

Though Austen is an undisputed moralist, her characters and situations are not the vehicles of her moral philosophy as

those of Rasselas'. Austen's novels are never openly didactic. In this regard, the observation of W.A. Craik is worth-noting—

"Austen maneuvers her events and characters into an artistic form that hath both proportion and inevitability; and she makes the form embody a moral assessment, first of her characters and their acts, and then though them, of men's conduct in society. Her greatness lies in the way in which she combines the artist and moralist."¹⁰

Austen's moral concern with the behaviours of the people in society has been well expressed in what Elizabeth says to her sister in 'Pride and Prejudice'—

"The more I see the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it, and everyday confirmed my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense."¹¹

Jane Austen's writings coincide with a period in British culture in which there was an extraordinarily homogeneous and stable perception about what constitutes a moral life. There was a general consensus on the definition of morality for all classes. Universally acknowledged truths were moral. The interest of the eighteenth century for morality at the level of society and how this is reflected in the individual's morality and in its place in society is central to the contextualization of Jane Austen's fiction. Therefore, the world that we see in Jane Austen's novels, the morality that defines her entire fiction represents the core values of her time.

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