

REVIEW ARTICLE

Jane Austen as a Novelist of Manners: A Critical Estimate

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Abstract

Jane Austen is still regarded as one of the best novelists of her era with excellent themes and perfect artistry. She is universally admitted to be a pioneer of English novels, though she had to her credit only half a dozen novels. She occupies a unique position in English literature being neither a Romantic nor a Classic writer, and also being too original and too great to be considered a precursor. Though she worked within a limited field and dealt with materials extremely limited in them, she was able to develop themes of the broadest significance and to present very entertaining and very truthful versions of the human comedy. The great excellence of Jane Austen's work lies in the novelist's knowledge of the materials which she could handle with certainty of success and her taking care not to exceed the boundaries she had set for herself. This paper is going to assimilate the author's novels on the basis of manners as well as this paper is also going to highlight the imaginative or realistic power of author in creating her novels as the novels of manners.

Keywords: *English fiction, Characters, Society, Manners etc.*

Introduction

Jane Austen's novels are characterized by an exquisite perfection which is the result of her being content to work in the limited field she knew best. There is in English fiction no better delineation of the life of the smaller English gentry, enslaved by convention and unaffected by what happened in the outside world, that we have in her novels. In painting her pictures of domestic life as it was lived by the society to which she belonged, she invariably chose three or four families in a country village as the ideal thing to work on. A village like Highbury or a country-house like Mansfield Park formed the center of her novel because that was what she knew and loved best.

Against the background, so familiar to her, she set the creatures of her imagination, making them behave according to the accepted standards of her class and society. Though Jane Austen deliberately ignored the major historical events of her time and refused to make any references, either to the French Revolution or the Industrial Revolution, the reality of the world she has portrayed for us is by no means lessened by it. To quote what Walter Allen has observed about Jane Austen's world in his work, *The English Novel*: "There is a whole larger world

outside it of which she says nothing, but that does not invalidate the world she had made.

A Realistic Picture

The self-contained and narrow world which Jane Austen has created for us is quite true to the one in which her own uneventful life was passed. Even within her restricted world, she excludes all that falls outside the boundaries of a woman's experience. She never attempted to crowd her novels with the kind of characters that Fielding and Smollet and Scott created with their wider knowledge of male society.

In Jane Austen, we hardly ever have a conversation entirely among men, without any female audience. The reason for this is that the novelist could not trust herself to write truthfully and convincingly of the talk and behaviour of men in an exclusively male society which was unknown to her.

Unrivalled Within Her Range

But in depicting realistically the life and manners of the world of men and women she knew intimately, Jane Austen has no rival. The factory, the country mansion, the small town, the professional circle, with rare sallies to Bath or Portsmouth or Lyme, are most truthfully portrayed in her novels.

She has such sureness of artistic insight and power of selection that while introducing us her narrow world, she makes us forget that there is any other world outside it.

Judged by modern standards Jane Austen's world is enslaved by convention. It's very elaborate and subtle class-structure and extremely rigid codes of behaviour are realistically, though ironically, portrayed by Jane Austen. Mr. Darcy and Miss Woodhouse are painfully conscious what people in their situations are expected to do or say on each occasion. Though possessed of innate goodness of heart and truly democratic feelings of sympathy with what is good and noble in any human being neither Darcy nor Emma wants to mingle freely with their social inferiors. Emma, for instance, could not think of mixing freely with the Martins and Coles who were well-to-do but not polished enough. But on the occasion of attending the Coles' party, her feminine instinct of gregariousness at last overcomes her aristocratic scruples.

It is characteristic of Miss Austen's art that she always makes her characters conform to the rigid code of culture and behaviour fixed by their society, however unreasonable it may seem to our modern standards. For example, we find that the conventions of their society made it wrong for the young Bertrams to perform a play when their father was away from home. By keeping strictly to the established code of behaviour for her characters, she makes them, and the society they belong to, all the more real to us.

Author's Personal Experience

In a novel of Jane Austen, we observe the very artistic selection of events and characters from the author's own personal and the combining of them in the crucible of her imagination so as to produce a veritable comedy of manners. Her art is nearer to that of Congreve or Moliere than that of either Fanny Burney or Maria Edgeworth. Both of them were admirable character-mongers, who successfully contrived plots and scenes to depict to individual idiosyncrasies, both their excursions into the field of the comedy of manners were comparatively fewer than those of Jane Austen's.

Her genius was truly dramatic in the sense that character and action can never be separated in her novels, the later being always dependent on the former.

She has in all her novels many scenes which are fraught with dramatic irony and characterized by most brilliant and pointed dialogue, as well as many surprising moments which remind us of the theatre and often rival it.

As she wrote in *Mansfield Park*, she left other parts to dwell on guilt and misery, turning away from such odious subjects as quickly as she could. But in every novel of hers there is much of the comedy of manners. At the end of highly dramatic action, all pretences and delusions are stripped away, all humbug and folly are properly exposed or punished, and the rights of truth and good sense are firmly established. During the action of the novel the various characters are tried and tested and are duly rewarded with happiness, or dismissed with ignominy. By the end of the story the characters have learned to see themselves as they are and are also changed by what they have gone through.

Marriane Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot are all changed and chastened by the time we come to the end of the comedy of manners in which the foibles and weaknesses of each are mirthfully exposed.

Exposure of Human Follies

All the six great novels of Jane Austen can be considered as comedies in which she exposed all the weaknesses and vanities and little snobberies that characterized social life of her contemporaries. Referring to her view of society, Margaret Kennedy points out how, very early in life, Jane Austen had made three important discoveries which are all clearly indicated in her novels.

The first of these was that the manners and culture to which she had been accustomed in her own family circle, was by no means shared by all her fellowmen. The second was that among those who considered themselves her social superiors and dwelt in large country mansions and owed vast lands and estates, much lower standards of manners and culture may be observed. The third discovery of Jane Austen was that these powerful land-owners were evidently ignorant of their own shortcomings and lack of true refinement, and considered themselves socially and culturally superior to other people.

According to their false ideas of gentility, a man who had to work for his living was inferior to one who could afford to waste his time in idleness. They naturally assumed a patronizing and condescending air to a clergyman and Jane Austen, who was the daughter of the Rector at Steventon, formed a strong prejudice against them very early in her life, though she had in later life, come across some people who were truly genteel and deserved her admiration and respect.

Jane Austen's early prejudice against the class was responsible for the pride with which she has characterized Pemberley and the unpleasant and snobbish qualities she has associated with Rosings, Mansfield, Sothton, Uppercross and Kelynych and even Harsfield. Only in Mr. Knightley of Denwell Abbey and Colonel Brandon, we have two blameless and truly admirable characters belonging to the social class which Jane Austen habitually criticizes and holds up to ridicule.

A Balanced View

It is not right to say that as a novelist of manners, Jane Austen was bent upon attacking the privileged classes, because she used her lash against big and small alike. The creator of the self-important Lady Catherine de Borough, the avaricious General Tilney, the oafish Lord Osborne, and the insipid Lady Darleyimple, and Miss Carteret was also the creator of the Steeles and the Thorpes and Mr. Collins and the Eltons and Mrs. Clay Kery. Meanness, selfishness, vanity and lack of proper judgment are shown to be, by no means, the monopoly of the privileged classes.

On the other hand, meanness, avarice and vulgarity of the lower classes are made use of by the novelist to set off the false standards and lack of judgment shown by those who consider themselves their betters. Lucy Steele easily succeeds in imposing upon Barton and on the family of the Ferrars, while General Tilney foolishly gossips with John Thorpe and the designing Mrs. Clay Kery almost hooks Sir Walter Elliot. The vulgarity of Mrs. Elton combined with her snobbishness and ostentation makes her truly insufferable.

Creator of Characters

We cannot help being impressed by the truthfulness of Jane Austen's representation of human nature and the impartiality with

which she analyses the faults and foibles of even her most favourite characters. It is true that she portrays men and women as they are in their private lives, which reveal their true characters and temperaments much better than their behaviour in public.

As Lord David Cecil says, "a man's relation to his wife and children is at least as important a part of his life as his relation to his beliefs and career, and reveals him fundamentally". Jane Austen reveals her characters to us not in moments of crisis, but in the trivial incidents of everyday life. As life is mostly made up of little things, human nature is amply revealed in them as in big crisis. With her faculty for discernment, Jane Austen knows how a picnic or party can reveal selfishness, kindness, arrogance, vanity or sincerity as a battle or any other catastrophe.

Even more vividly than Dickens himself she could visualize outward idiosyncrasies of her creatures and reflect their characters through their manners and ways of speech. The secret of her success in characterization and of her appeal for us is the gift of the imaginative sympathy which demands an abundant share of the qualities on which it is exercised.

We have to think of Jane Austen as a woman richly endowed with great vitality, generous impulses of large hearted charity, pre-eminent quality, power of intuitive sympathy. Jane Austen's sympathy is not confined to the prime objects of her affection; it is rather confined among the children of her imagination. Even if she cannot love or approve all of them, she at least wants us to understand them as she herself did.

Her warm human sympathy is extended even to the objects of her ridicule or disapproval. Jane Austen had given us an astonishing variety of characters. Even in the delineation of her heroines her range is wide enough. Each character is endowed with vitality, brilliance and individuality of her own, and was we to meet them in actual life; we could never mistake one for another.

Conclusion

Jane Austen was endowed by nature with all the requisite qualifications for becoming a successful novelist of manners. She had a fine sense of humor, a ready wit, and keen power of observation combined with a turn for satire and a keen sense of the ridiculous

inhuman character and behaviour. Even from childhood she was characterized by the ambition to become a character-monger like Fanny Burney, but unlike Fanny Burney, she was no respecter of the great. Her creative faculties were made use of in-evolving satirical but lively portraits of both upper-class and lower-class people.

Her attitude to these creatures of her imagination is that of the writer of comedy who is generous and kind to man while holding him up to ridicule and laughing at his foibles. As a novelist of manners, Jane

Austen laughs good-humouredly at the weaknesses, vanities and foibles of men and women. She mirthfully points out how even the cleverest of them are often laboring under the most foolish delusions and are very slow in attaining to true self-knowledge through humiliating or painful experiences. It is evident that the creator of Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot knew so much about the workings of the human heart and found great pleasure in human scene around her which she has attempted to portray and immortalize in her novels.

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