



Jane Austen's Novels Themes

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen wrote about she had experienced in her life. She writes about the leisured comfortably off, country middle class people. She describes the sheltered and conventional life. The events she describes are ordinary: a country walk, a horsedrive, a picnic or a ball. The easy aimless life of rural gentility of her age, of well-to-do and complacently unambitious people, is the subject matter of her novels. She avoids romance, emotions, passions, dark passages, secret chambers, tempests, blood, daggers and death-scenes. We miss in her novels tragedy, poverty, violence, crime, villains, adventures, psychological and social problems and lower class characters. But though she works with limited materials, she develops themes of broad significance. The scenes she describes are outwardly small and trivial. Yet they expand in the reader's mind. Describing the theme and materials of Jane Austen S. T.

the heroines seek riches without sacrificing their ideals, whatever the ideals be. And though they care for money, their first aim is a good husband rather than a rich husband. They know that it is foolish to marry without money. But they also know that it is foolish to marry only for money. The theme of Jane Austen's novels is love and marriage in an acquisitive society. Jane Austen deals with relationships between individuals. This is the material with which she always works. She is little concerned with the cradle and the grave. She catches her characters in their vigorous years of life when they are choosing or have already chosen their partners of life. Thus marriage is her theme. But there is no passion. Says W. A. Craik in Jane Austen in her Time, "Jane Austen's own themes do not make it often relevant for her to deal with sexual relations between men and women, outside of courtship and marriage..."

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INTRODUCTION

Though Jane Austen has painted nineteenth century English scenes, her charm lies in depicting the essential human nature and the universal themes like love, marriage money and religion Jane Austen does not deal with illicit, passionate or misplaced love. She deals with various aspects of love and marriage viewed calmly and dispassionately. She distrusts emotion and describes it only by implication. 'Love itself, though she understood its working admirably, did not rouse her enthusiasm unless it was justified by reason, disciplined by self-control. She had little sympathy for romantic imprudence or credulous good nature, she was impatient of people with hearts of gold and heads of wood." All her novels are about marriage. Jane Austen cannot think of love which does not aim at marriage. Says W. A. Craik in Jane Austen in her Time "The novel's happy conclusions all dismiss the heroines, not simply to ideal husbands, but to homes and families of their own. Though the stories look like romance, in that they concern the adventures of their heroines which lead them to marriage, it is not these adventures for their own sake which Jane Austen cares about, but the way in which what happens prepares the heroine for the life that lies ahead of her, and enables her to choose the right life for herself." Thus the right life and right conduct are more important than emotions which should be restrained. Flirts like Lydia may elope with villains like Wickham whose immoderate passionate love does not aim at marriage. There may be others like Henry Crawford and Maria in Mansfield Park who first elope and whose baser passions are let loose. But such love is denounced. Wickham and Lydia must marry before they are allowed to appear again. Jane Austen approved of the marriage of sensible persons like Jane and Bingley. Her love culminates into marriage. She distrusts romance. In Northanger Abbey she ridicules Catherine Morland who expects life to be like the Gothic novels. In Sense and Sensibility she laughs at the exaltation of spontaneous romantic feelings in the heart of Marianne, though the emotions of Elinor are not less intense. She denounces Lydia in Pride and Prejudice and Maria in Mansfield Park for their unruly passions.

Jane Austen does not trust the first impressions of heart without being matured by the judgement of mind. Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth and Emma discover painfully that they have been committing mistakes about themselves. and about others. The cause of the deception lies within their hearts. Catherine in Northanger Abbey is blinded towards herself and life by the Gothic novels. Marianne in Sense and Sensibility discovers that her own impulsive feelings. were responsible for her disillusionment. The subject matter of Emma is the self- deception of vanity. Emma discovers that she was blind to the reality because of her vanity into understanding others. She is spoiled by match-making. Pride and Prejudice deals with the folly of trusting first impressions uncorrected by mature observations. Elizabeth discovers that she has courted ignorance by liking Wickham and driving reason away by disliking Darcy. The theme of disillusionment and awakening or revelation is found in almost all the novels. In Mansfield Park the first impression of Mary Crawford prove to be wrong though Fanny loves Edmund from the beginning to end.

Though we should not trust our first impressions, it is always better to follow the direction of one's own heart than to be swayed by the opinions and advice of others. This is the theme of Persuasion.

Like all other novels *Pride and Prejudice* is about love and marriage. Bare and degraded love is shown in the illicit affair between Lydia and Wickham. Pure and innocent love is presented in Jane and Bingley. The theme of disillusionment and revelation is traced in love between Elizabeth and Darcy. Self-complacency of a fool like Collins and the worldly wise Charlotte Lucas brings them together into a seemingly ill-matched companionship. Successful 'older love' is represented by Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner ridiculed in the cynical Mr. Bennet and the foolish match making Mrs. Bennet. Thus her novels are preoccupied with the business of making matches for her heroines. She laments that there are not so many men of fortune in the world as there are pretty girls to deserve them. The plots aim at match-making. The heroine after a few false starts meets the right man. And" after much misunderstanding and many frustrations the heroes and the heroines are married. The young ladies and sometimes their mothers make cages and the youngmen are willingly ready to be caught in them.

Charlotte Collins affair is ridiculed by Jane Austen. There are critics who think that in the world of Jane Austen young ladies can not afford true love, that their aim is marriage, and marriage with some rich person. We cannot ignore the importance of money in practical life. Jane Austen is accused of being mercenary. W.A. Craik in *Jane Austen in Her Times* defends her. She says that though Jane Austen allows money to take too large a share of her heroine's calculations, she yet seems to spend little time on the actual earning of money. Her heroine do not serve in any office or schools to earn money. Nor do men do anything. They make use of their inherited property and wander about in search of wives. Moreover, if Jane Austen emphasizes the importance of money she is justified in relation to her age. In her age there were no social services no insurance schemes, no national medical care, no pension schemes. An adequate income is necessary to live. Therefore while seeking husbands the heroines of Jane Austen cannot shut their eyes to money which makes the mare go. And love is pious only when, from the very beginning, it aims at marriage. It is wrong to say that Austen's women marry only for money. Elizabeth refuses Collins a well-to-do but foolish person. Fanny does not care for the immoral Crawford, though he is rich. Anne in *Persuasion* marries Wentworth whom she has always loved and does not care for the rich and clever cousin, Mr. Elliot. In *Sense and Sensibility* Marianna does not care for Colonel Brandon's riches because she loves Willoughby. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, though tempted for a moment by the riches of Darcy, marries him only when reality is dawned on her about his true character. She condemns her friend Charlotte for her calculating prudence in accepting Collins as husband.

References

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