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REVIEW ARTICLE

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Theme of Marriage in Jane Austen's Novels

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen was an English novelist whose books, set among the English middle and upper classes, are notable for their wit, social observation and insights into the lives of early 19th century women.

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 in the village of Steventon in Hampshire. She was one of eight children of a clergyman and grew up in a close-knit family. She began to write as a teenager. In 1801 the family moved to Bath. After the death of Jane's father in 1805 Jane, her sister Cassandra and their mother moved several times eventually settling in Chawton, near Steventon.

Jane's brother Henry helped her negotiate with a publisher and her first novel, 'Sense and Sensibility', appeared in 1811. Her next novel 'Pride and Prejudice', which she described as her "own darling child" received highly favourable reviews. 'Mansfield Park' was published in 1814, then 'Emma' in 1816. 'Emma' was dedicated to the prince regent, an admirer of her work. All of Jane Austen's novels were published anonymously.

In 1816, Jane began to suffer from ill-health, probably due to Addison's disease. She travelled to Winchester to receive treatment, and died there on 18 July 1817. Two more novels, 'Persuasion' and 'Northanger Abbey' were published posthumously and a final novel was left incomplete.

Jane Austen uses her novels Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility as mediums to explore her feelings on the subject of marriages and relationships, concluding that a marriage is only satisfactory when there is love between the two people involved. The plethora of relationships in her novels shows that Austen deems a marriage unsatisfactory if it occurs primarily for reasons like gain of wealth, practical reasons, or solely for pleasure.

Austen's attitude towards marriage in her novels strongly reflect those she held in her own life. Though she never married, Austen involved herself in several serious relationships and came close to matrimony more than once. The situations and circumstances of these relationships certainly helped shape Austen's feelings toward the subject of marriage and the way that it is approached in her novels.

In 1795, Austen fell deeply in love with Irishman Tom Lefroy, and was perhaps set on marrying him, according to Clarice Swisher, the editor of Readings on Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. However, Lefroy's mother realized the seriousness of the relationship and determined that her son could not gain any wealth from a marriage to Austen, so she sent him back to Ireland where he married a wealthy woman. This heartbreaking event must have affected Austen enormously, because one can find certain aspects of her relationship with Tom Lefroy within her novels.

For example, in Sense and Sensibility, Lucy Steele is set to marry Edward Ferrars, but Edward's mother has other ideas, particularly that Edward will marry Miss Morton for wealth. Just as Lefroy's mother sent him back to Ireland to destroy his engagement to Austen, Mrs. Ferrars disinherits Edward, thus causing the severance of his relationship with Lucy. Though the situation is different, the concepts behind each disrupted marriage are essentially the same, showing that Austen's views on marriage are influenced greatly by the relationships in her own life.

Another relationship in Austen's life occurred in 1802, with a man named Harris Bigg-Withers. Bigg-Withers proposed to Austen and she accepted; however, she spent a sleepless night thinking over her decision. According to Swisher, Austen finally decided that "she could not marry a man she did not love just to have a suitable husband" and broke off her engagement in the morning. Indeed, Austen believed that it was "dishonorable to enter into wedlock without affection".

This realization is the main focus of all of Austen's novels. It is the means by which she judges if a marriage is successful or not in her novels and if the characters involved live happy lives. The love that Austen had with Lefroy perhaps helped to shape the negative feelings she had for marriages based entirely on money matters and reasons other than love. Naturally, the platonic feelings she held for Bigg-Withers skewed her feelings on marriages without love. These experiences helped to shape her ideas of what a satisfactory marriage might be like,

though she never actually got married to anyone in her own life.

A marriage filled with love, one in which the two people involved overcome a difficulty and yet are able to remain together, is the type of marriage that the heroines in Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility yearn for and, ultimately, receive. According to literary critic Bernard J. Paris, "Austen feels that one should marry for love, for personal satisfaction, and out of regard for the human qualities of one's partner". Similarly, literary critic Sullivan proclaims that "the pursuit of a loving and prosperous marriage, and the ability of such unions to benefit all society -- despite contrary impulses and forces -- that is the central theme of all of Jane Austen's novels".

One such happy marriage is the union between Elizabeth and Darcy in Pride and Prejudice. Whether or not they are in love is not a valid question --- Darcy begins to love Elizabeth shortly after they meet, and Elizabeth would not have accepted Darcy's proposal if she did not love him, because "however magnificent her prospects as Darcy's wife, she cannot think of marrying him until she comes to care for his personality".

Darcy and Elizabeth were also able to overcome a great difficulty together, which is another key element to a happy marriage in Austen's eyes. Throughout a large portion of the novel, Elizabeth views Darcy as a snooty, unlovable, arrogant man of whom she will never be fond. In fact, Elizabeth tells Darcy that "you could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it" when he unsuccessfully proposes to her for the first time. Darcy also goes through a struggle before the happy ending. He realizes that he loves Elizabeth, but he must overcome his resistance to her social status and get around his own proud nature. By the end of the novel, they are both able to defeat their previous inclinations and enter into a happy marriage.

The same components of a happy marriage are evident in Sense and Sensibility, which starts off with two heroines, Marianne and Elinor, in want of suitable husbands. At the end of the novel, both women end up with content marriages in which love is present and a struggle has been overcome, but the journey to get to that point is the focus of the entire novel.

Elinor finds her match in Edward Ferrars, a gentleman with whom she falls quickly, completely, albeit quietly in love. When Elinor hears that Lucy Steele has been named as "Mrs. Ferrars" at the end of the novel, she becomes extremely distraught and her family realizes how much she has suffered due to the loss of marriage prospects with Edward.

However, the aforementioned marriage was really between Lucy Steele and Edward's brother Robert, thus leaving the opportunity of matrimony between Elinor and Edward open. Edward reveals that he could only think of marrying Elinor and quickly proposes to her, and it is apparent that theirs is a satisfactory marriage. The relationship between Elinor and Edward contains both elements that must be present to have a good marriage in Austen's view. They are most certainly in love with each other and they also struggle through Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele together. Edward and Elinor also have quiet, sensible personalities that complement each other quite well, which is a nice finishing touch on their marriage.

The other heroine in the novel, Marianne, eventually marries Colonel Brandon, a man who she does not see in a romantic light until the very end of the novel, though he falls in love with her early on. First, Marianne throws herself into a passionate romance with Willoughby and is set on marrying him. Though they both love each other, Willoughby realizes that the marriage will not work and decides to marry for money rather than for love. Marianne is heartbroken, but finds consolation in Colonel Brandon, later resulting in their marriage.

"Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband as it had once been to Willoughby," Austen writes at the end of Sense and Sensibility. Yet again, a marriage motivated by love has been achieved. The couple also overcomes a difficulty, which is Marianne's inability to see the Colonel in a romantic way.

At the beginning, Marianne claims that she will only marry someone who shares all of her passions and interests, a claim that does not fit the description of Colonel Brandon in the slightest. However, it is obvious by the end of the novel that all of that has been forgotten. Marianne's sensibility and emotional persona complement the sensible personality of Colonel Brandon as well.

Other examples of good marriages are scattered throughout Jane Austen's novels, but they are far and few between. "Though romantic marriage is clearly the ideal in Pride and Prejudice, pragmatic marriage is presented as common practice". In almost all cases, any marriage other than the one between the heroine and her match is an unsatisfactory pairing. Critic Norman Sherry states that "Jane Austen is not very optimistic on the subject of marriage -- it is rarely that we see a completely happy marriage in her novels until the heroine and hero marry". Indeed, it seems that any marriage Austen deals with "in a significant amount" other than the main coupling during Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice are unhappy marriages.

An unpleasant marriage in Austen's novels is motivated by one of three things - money, practical reasons, or pleasure. Money was certainly a huge determinant of marriages in Austen's day, since females and younger sons did not inherit property and therefore had to marry into wealth. One prominent example of marrying for wealth is Willoughby's union

with Miss Grey in Sense and Sensibility. He even admits to Elinor that he only married his new wife for economic reasons. Also, through his enigmatic recollections of Marianne, it is evident that he loves Marianne more than he will ever love Miss Grey. At the conclusion of the novel, Austen writes that:

"Willoughby could not hear of her marriage without a pang; and his punishment was soon afterwards complete in the voluntary forgiveness of Mrs. Smith, who gave him reason for believing that had he behaved with honor towards Marianne, he might at once have been happy and rich."

Willoughby thought that marrying Miss Grey's money would benefit him and improve his life, but in the final pages of the novel he regrets his decision. Had he decided to marry Marianne for love and accepted the challenge of starting a life together without a lot of money, he would have been infinitely happier. Critic Yasmine Gooneratne declares that "Jane Austen holds up for examination in this way, society's tendency to place a price, quite blatantly and complacently, on an intimate human relationship such as marriage". Willoughby's relationships as well as other relationships in both novels determine that Austen did not feel marriages driven by monetary concerns were successful.

Though marrying solely for practical reasons may seem like a reasonable decision to some, it still did not create a celebratory marriage in Austen's mind. One of the best examples of a pragmatic marriage takes place in Pride and Prejudice, a novel that "centers on marriage for its value as plot and as a central, civilizing social institution -- whatever the limitations it suffers in the hands of the vulnerable, the superficial, or the incurably selfish". That marriage or compromise, as a better term for it is between Charlotte Lucas and Mr. Collins.

Charlotte marries Mr. Collins not because she loves him, but because society at that time looked down upon women who did not marry. She claims that her only goal in life is to get married and live quietly in "a comfortable home". She also finds security with Mr. Collins, and says of her new husband, "Considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state". Charlotte does not realize that her marriage is of the least desirable sort, and that security and social connections are not enough to comprise a happy marriage.

Her reasons for marriage are all quite practical, but Charlotte is obviously miserable in her situation and certainly finds no love with Mr. Collins. "We are eventually made to feel not that Charlotte's attitude towards marriage is correct or that she has made a happy choice, but that she has been realistic for herself," states Paris. Along with marrying for wealth, marriage just for the sake of it does not form a promising or happy life, as Charlotte finds out when she marries the insufferable Mr. Collins.

Austen also touches upon the unhappy marriage of one who marries for the reasons of pleasure and excitement. A prime example of this type of marriage happens between Lydia and Wickham in Pride and Prejudice. Brown maintains that "in Pride and Prejudice the scathing dismissal of the Wickhams offers a striking contrast from the ideal implication of Elizabeth's marriage". This is undoubtedly true; the two marriages and circumstances under which they take place are entirely different.

Lydia and Wickham do not even get married at first; they must be bribed into it by Darcy after they elope together. Marcus says that "their chief motivation appears to be sexual passion" in running off together. They are merely attracted to each other in a physical sense, but good looks and passion cannot drive a marriage forever. After the passion and excitement of the situation cool down, the Wickhams are left with a senseless, burned-out, immoral marriage with no love involved.

After examining the causes of matrimony in Austen's novels, one can see that happy marriages may contain examples of gains of wealth, comfort, or pleasure, but if one goes by those factors alone and without love involved, a marriage is not likely to be successful. One critic equates Austen's view of marriage to a spectrum, with one side devoted completely to social claims and the other, personal claims. Collins and Charlotte "demonstrate a complete yield to social claims" while Wickham and Lydia "represent capitulation to personal claims". Marcus notes that Darcy and Elizabeth, the only truly happy ones out of the three couples, fall in the middle of the spectrum because "struggles lead to reconciliation of personal and social claims".

Because Elizabeth and Darcy have worked through their struggle of pride versus prejudice, or in other terms, social versus personal claims, they fall in the middle. They have not married simply for social acceptance, like Charlotte and Collins, or simply for exhilaration and pleasure like Lydia and Wickham. This moderation of forces, combined with the fact that they are truly in love with each other, separates their marriage from the masses of unhappy marriages in the novel.

The same idea goes for Elinor and Marianne's marriages in Sense and Sensibility. Unlike Miss Lucy Steele who married Robert Ferrars due to financial reasons, Elinor marries for love and does not marry solely for social or personal claims, therefore placing her marriage with Edward in the middle of the spectrum. Likewise, Marianne falls in love with

Colonel Brandon and marries him not for the sake of marrying or for elation and excitement, but because she is in love. This also places her in the middle of the spectrum, the ideal spot on the scale for a successful marriage.

The message that Jane Austen is trying to send out with her novels Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility is simple. Marriage with ulterior motives, such as pleasure, money, or practical reasons, simply will not last. It can be concluded that Austen feels that the only correct reason for marriage is everlasting love, such as the love that Darcy and Elizabeth, Elinor and Edward, and Marianne and Colonel Brandon respectively share.

There are few more famous opening lines than that of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

However, single women with even small family inheritances also had to protect themselves from dangers of being "caught" by fortune-hunters. Everyone knew the so-called hunting was taking place, but it was not mentioned as such in polite society.

Men and women donned their finery and paraded themselves around at parties, social events such as recitals, and balls. The game was on. Most pretended to or simply did not see the truth of what was happening.

Jane Austen saw through the games and frippery and felt frustrated by the plight of those without fortunes, especially women. A loveless match and a resulting lifetime of misery were the prices paid for survival.

CONCLUSION

Critics often accuse Austen of portraying a limited world. As a clergyman's daughter, Austen would have done parish work and was certainly aware of the poor around her. However, she wrote about her own world, not theirs. The critiques she makes of class structure seem to include only the middle class and upper class; the lower classes, if they appear at all, are generally servants who seem perfectly pleased with their lot. This lack of interest in the lives of the poor may be a failure on Austen's part, but it should be understood as a failure shared by almost all of English society at the time.

In general, Austen occupies a curious position between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her favorite writer, whom she often quotes in her novels, was Dr. Samuel Johnson, the great model of eighteenth-century classicism and reason. Her plots, which often feature characters forging their respective ways through an established and rigid social hierarchy, bear similarities to such works of Johnson's contemporaries as Pamela, written by Samuel Richardson. Austen's novels also display an ambiguity about emotion and an appreciation for intelligence and natural beauty that aligns them with Romanticism. In their awareness of the conditions of modernity and city life and the consequences for family structure and individual characters, they prefigure much Victorian literature as does her usage of such elements as frequent formal social gatherings, sketchy characters, and scandal.

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