

Style and Technique of Jane Austen in Dealing Her Female Characters

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To Jane Austen the novel was a literary form that called for the exercise of the greatest powers of the mind and as a novelist she displayed a superb supremacy of her craft. She had a meticulous sense of form of which the earlier prose fiction provides no evidence whatsoever. It appears from a close study of her novels that she started writing only after having worked out a clear and detailed plan of her stories. With her for the first time the novel acquired well-organised, compact form. To Richardson, Fielding,

Smollett and Sterns the novel had been a sack—and an immense one—into which they could throw anything they liked. These eighteenth century- novelists presented social life in all its totality. They wanted to include everything in their works. Fielding, considered it to be an indispensable part of the novelist's duty to portray social life on all levels. Other eighteenth- century novelists also aimed at an epical portrayal of the contemporaneous social scene. Naturally, the structure of their novels is

loose. Jane Austen, however, was very particular about the material she took up for artistic treatment in her novels. She had a very strict sense of form, and knew that the compact form of the novel depended mostly upon the nature of the theme. She restricted her range of social portrayal to three or four families in a country village and even within this narrow range she was meticulously selective. She was interested principally in the essential of human relationship and the relationship that interested her most and provided themes for her novels was that between man and woman. Jane Austen dealt with the problem of love and marriage in all her novels and excluded everything else. We find her deeply regarded with the problem of proper adjustment between man and woman. As a detailed analysis of her novels has revealed this adjustment through the best kind of marriage. Jane Austen restricted herself almost exclusively to the English country gentry. Even without this narrow

social orbit, her attention was focused only on a few families. If there are characters representing other classes, they are always on the periphery and do not have any serious impact on her theme. Then, again, Jane Austen's men and women are viewed primarily in relation to their domestic life. Even her mood in all the novels is uniformly comic. This uniformly comic vision also imparts a sense of unity to her theme. David Cecil aptly writes:

“Jane Austen was a comedian. Her first literary impulse was humorous; and to the end of her life humour was an entire part of her creative process; as her imagination starts to function, a smile begins to spread itself across her features. And the smile is the signature on the finished work. It is the angle

of her satiric vision, the light of her wit that gives its peculiar glitter, and proportion to her picture of the world” (Cecil, *Poets and Story-Tellers: A book of Critical Essays* 101).

Jane Austen was determined to go her own way. She had made a deliberate choice of her subject and the angle of vision from which it was to be viewed. Mary Lascelles says that :

“Jane Austen’s choice was deliberate and whole hearted and not, as her critics has loosely inferred the safest thing for her to write about. She had a clear sense of the suitability of her material and the manner of its handling. She never transgressed the boundaries she set herself.

She carved an artistic picture of life on a little bit of ivory and the effect was quite exquisite” (Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Arts* 123).

Nearly all Jane Austen’s critics, admirers and detractors alike have taken note of the smallness of her range. Sir Walter Scott, one of Jane Austen’s earliest and most intelligent admirers wrote in his famous Quarterly Review article:

“...keeping close to common incidents, and to such characters as occupy the ordinary walks of life, she has produced sketches of such spirit and originality, that we never miss the excitation which depends upon a narrative of uncommon events, arising from the consideration of

minds, manners, and sentiments, greatly above our own” (Gafford, *Emma*, *Quarterly Review* 193).

Giving her due praise for the artistic finish of her novels, he further writes:

“The author’s knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to Nature, and with a permission which delight the reader” (Gafford, *Emma*, *Quarterly Review* 193)

Wordsworth, however, was critical of her want of imagination. Defining his attitude towards Jane Austen, Sara Coleridge wrote:

“Mr. Wordsworth used to say that through he admitted that her novels were an admirable copy of life, he could not be interested in productions of that kind; unless the truth of nature were presented to him clarified, as it were, by the pervading light of imagination, it had scarce any attractions in his eyes” (Coleridge, *Memoir and Letters* 76).

Jane Austen achieves a well-knit plot by eliminating everything that she considers superfluous to her purpose. Being rigorously selective, she excluded all that was irrelevant to her theme. Death, for example,

has no place in her novels. The reader, of course, is informed about characters like the elder Mr. Dashwood and Fanny Harville who are already dead before the novels in which they find place begin. Mrs. Churchill in *Emma* remains a mere name whose death is only reported. These deaths have no lasting impact upon the lives of other characters. Destiny, then, has no unlimited field of operation in Jane Austen's novels. Even coincidence is used very rarely.

Money, too, has no limitless power in her novels. Jane Austen mocks at the use of money as a conventional motive in fiction.

In the opening chapters of *Sense and Sensibility* money threatens to govern the action and the first chapter of the novel gives actual figures showing what the characters need to live on. Because Jane Austen gives exact and illuminating financial detail, W. A. Craik believes that:

“she deliberately emphasized money as another aspect of her theme” (Craik, *Jane Austen: The Six Novels* 58-59). But it is not so. John Dashwood's denial of dowry to his half sisters proves of little consequence. To Mrs. Ferrars, money seems to have limitless power over her two son's lives. But it proves to be a power of an extremely transient nature and Jane Austen summarizes Mrs. Ferrars achievements with an obvious note of irony:

“Her family had of late been exceedingly fluctuating. For many years of her life she had two sons; but the crime and annihilation of Edward, a few weeks ago, had robbed her of one; the similar annihilation of Robert had left her for a fortnight without any; and now, by the resuscitation of Edward, she

had one again” (Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* 325).

In *Northanger Abbey* also money receives no reverent treatment. We laugh at the account of John Thorpe’s manipulation of the Morland Fortunes for the sake of his own consequence:

“...by merely adding twice as much for the grandeur of the moment, by doubling what he chose to think the amount of Mr. Morland’s preferment, trebling his private fortune, bestowing a rich aunt, and sinking half the children, he was able to represent the whole family to the general in a most respectable light” (Austen, *Persuasion* 254)..

So also the problem of entail in *Pride and Prejudice*, though hinted at as

very crucial to the future of the Bennet sisters, does not actually appear to be a matter of great significance. Contrary to appearances, therefore, Jane Austen’s characters are never at Mammon’s mercy. The disturbing factors of social life like revolution and war also have no place in Jane Austen’s novels. Again they do not contain abstract discussion of serious philosophy. It was by being rigorously selective that she was able to achieve a compact form for her novels. Everything unfamiliar, remote and alien which was to have an irresistible for some later novelists like Emily Bronte was outside Jane Austen’s province.

Jane Austen had an acute consciousness of the demands of her art. When she started her literary career, there were two popular forms in which novels were generally written. There was the novel in epistolary form which had been in vogue

since Richardson invented that method of story-telling. Fanny Burney adopted this method and so also did a crowd of smaller writers. Jane Austen did not find this form suitable to her purpose. The use of epistolary method, she knew, would involve a sacrifice of dialogue, for instance. In the beginning, of course, we find her using Richardson's epistolary method. *Love and Friendship*, *Elinor and Marianne* and *First Impressions* are all in epistolary form. She had a clear realization, however, of the inadequacies of this method. Later, therefore, she revised *Elinor and Marianne* and *First Impression* which we have now as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* respectively. The theme was the same but the form was new. We find Jane Austen wrestling with the problem of form in *Lady Susan* also. Later, she left the epistolary form once and for ever and adopted the method of relating a story directly as an impersonal narrator.

Plot and characters in Jane Austen's work are really inseparable. She never introduced characters for their own sake and incidents in her novels are arranged in such a way that they reveal the different facets of her characters. Jane Austen, thus, ignores the novel of incident. All her characters are integrally related to the story. In the novels of Scott and Dickens we find a number of comic characters who have no relevance important or insignificant, not according to their agency in the original conception, but according to the success, or otherwise, with which such characters were being brought out. But in the novels of Jane Austen every person has a function. Mr. Collins is a creature of Jane Austen's youthful fancy in its most hilarious mood.' Can he be a sensible man, Sir?' Elizabeth asks her father after knowing the contents of the letter in which he introduces himself. Mr. Bennet answers; 'No, my dear, I think not, I have great hopes of finding him quite the reverse''

(Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 69). Mary Lascelles remarks: “Indeed he is a being of some exquisitely non-sensible world, of another element than ours, one to which he is “native and endued” (Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* 149). But even this creature of the insensible world has a function in the sensible world of Jane Austen.

Apart from his comic role, he has to draw and hold together Longbourn and Hunsford, to bring Hunsford within our reach before we go there with Elizabeth, incidentally, to confirm Elizabeth’s wicked conception of everyone connected with Darcy, to draw Elizabeth to Hunsford at the right moment, and eventually, to send Lady Catherine to Longbourne on her catastrophic visit. Finally he is there to warn Elizabeth against a precipitate closure with the gentleman’s proposals. He felt it his duty to

offer this warning as Lady Catherine did not look on the match with a friendly eye.

Even Mrs. Jennings, whose part in *Sense and Sensibility* appears uncertain, is not without purpose. She takes the Dashwood sisters to London, nurses Marianne and stands up to John Dashwood. Mrs. Allen, Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram are not irrelevant to the stories in which they appear. We see, thus, that even minor characters and purely comic characters in Jane Austen’s novels have a distinct role in the story and cannot be dismissed as superfluous.

Jane Austen was very careful in giving a symmetrical pattern to her stories. In *Sense and Sensibility* the characters are grouped in a symmetrical and antithetical pattern. The difference between Marianne and Elinor is too sharp to be missed while Marianne has her mother and Willoughby on her side, Elinor is grouped with Edward and

Colonel Brandon. We also have Mrs. Jennings whose crude raillery comes at length to seem like commonsense, set against Marianne's excessive sensitiveness. We have capriciously contrasted pairs, the Middletons, and the Palmers. This symmetry is emphasized by the central opposition between the tempers and opinions of Elinor and Marianne. Elinor's coolness in love is contrasted with Marianne's excessively emotional reaction to a similar situation. This parallel is kept throughout the story. The two sisters cannot reflect upon their situation without comparing themselves with each other.

Pride and Prejudice also is shaped on a symmetrical and antithetical pattern. The story has a very methodical development. We have here the movement of two people who are drawn apart from each other until they reach a climax of mutual hostility, and thereafter they move

towards mutual understanding. Every character and incident in the story has relevance to the larger design of the novel. Elizabeth Bennet's misunderstanding is a result of Darcy's rudeness towards her at the ball, and all the characters strengthen the false impression about him; Wickham by his account of Darcy, Miss Bingley by her insolent interference, Charlotte Lucas by causing her to mistake her prejudice for generous sentiment, Mr. Collins by associating Darcy in her mind with the idol of his worship, Lady Catherine herself by answering to Wickham's description and Colonel Fitzwilliam by his indiscreet half-confidence. More or less on the same pattern Darcy's hatred of the Bennets grows while they draw apart. With Darcy's letter to Elizabeth in which he offers an explanation of his behaviour begins the phase of reconciliation between the two. At Pemberley Elizabeth and Darcy find themselves in more favourable

circumstances, and the story moves towards its happy ending in their union. Thus the story in *Pride and Prejudice* has the pattern of symmetry and antithesis, subtler than what we find in *Sense and Sensibility*.

All Jane Austen's novels can be analyzed on this pattern. Her heroes and heroines are presented with their opposites; Marianne with Elinor, Elizabeth with Jane, Catherine with Isabella, Fanny with Mary, Emma with Jane, and Anne Elliot with Musgrove sisters. We have the hesitant, inarticulate Edward Ferrars against the eager, talkative, roguish John Willoughby, the brilliant, witty and perceptive Henry Tilney against stupid and vulgar John Thorpe, the proud, austere, and high principled Darcy against open, warm and disingenuous Wickham, that sober and cool Edward Bertram against the selfish, clever, and unprincipled Henry Crawford; strong correct and forthright George Knightley

against breezy, hypocritical and devious Frank Churchill; the plain, upright, and simple captain Wentworth against the foppish, cruel and crafty William Walter Elliot. It is Jane Austen's balanced vision of life which helps her in achieving this symmetrical balance.

None of the eighteenth century novelists stuck consistently to the main theme. Their novels are mostly episodic. Fielding and his contemporaries made free use of the parenthetical method. Jane Austen would never write such novels. She scrupulously avoided digressions which were likely to divert the readers' attention from the central theme. Scott was no doubt a gifted story teller, but his novels also are full of digressions. Almost all the earlier novelists had the incorrigible habit of deviating from the central theme. Jane Austen makes fun of such attempts to add to the length of a story. A novel with an

episodic plot may acquire bulk, but from the point of view of art it may not prove to be satisfying. There is a note of ironic comment on this habit of the novelists to stretch their stories beyond proportion in her letter to her nephew, Edward, who himself had written a novel:

“You and I must try to get hold of one or two [of Henry Austen’s sermons] , & put them into our Novels – it would be a fine help to a volume; & we could make our Heroine read it aloud of a Sunday Evening, just as well as Isabella Wardour in the Antiquary, is made to read the History of the Hartz Demon in the ruins of St. Ruth” (Chapman, *Jane Austen’s Letters to her sister Cassandra and Others* 468).

Jane Austen would admit no digressions in her novels. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, the husband of Eleanor Tilney receives but a casual attention from the novelist. This is all that we have about him in the novel.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen could have very conveniently introduced Willoughby and Eliza episode if only she had chosen to do so. But she would not introduce any incident unconnected with the central theme. Eliza never comes before us. We have the report of Willoughby having seduced her. Jane Austen mentions this fact with an opinion to showing the villainy of Willoughby. Fielding or Scott would have certainly given a more elaborate treatment to this episode.

Jane Austen cared for factual verisimilitude also. It meant a consistent faithfulness to observed truth. In her criticism of her niece’s novel she offers to correct this or that detail of fact:

“I have scratched out Sir Thomas: from walking with the other Men to the Stables &c the very day after his breaking his arm – for though I find your Papa did walk out immediately after his arm was set, I think it can be so little usual as to appear unnatural in a book ... Lyme will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there I have put Starecross indeed. If you prefer Exeter that must be always safe” (Chapman, *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and Others* 394).

Before Jane Austen, novels were written generally in picaresque tradition. In the picaresque novel characters are always on the move, going from one place to

another and encountering all varieties of adventures in their way. Fielding's heroes are tireless wanderers. In the picaresque novel, therefore, the area of social portrayal is pretty large. In *Roderick Random* Smollett takes his hero up to France. *Peregrine Pickle* also gives us a vivid picture of French social life just a few years before the Revolution burns upon that country. The hero in the eighteenth century novel is a homeless wanderer suggesting a state of social instability. But in Jane Austen's novels characters are rather immobile. They are never seen moving from one place to another; or if they ever leave their country village, they leave it only for a brief visit to Bath or London. They lead a confined civil life and are out of home only when visiting their neighbours for dinner or dance parties.

The heroes and heroines of Jane Austen are permanently settled at one place. The world in which they live is characterized by a remarkable sense of security and stability.

We see thus that even the form of Jane Austen's novels is suggestive of her idea of contemporaneous social life.

Jane Austen achieved perfection of art because of her organic view of social life. She lived in a society which rested on the principle of order and the novels in which she portrays this society are as definite in their outline as the society whose picture they offer. Anne Douglas Sedgwick wrote in 1919: "No novel, alas and I can't think how I shall, until there's some shape in the world" (*Sedgwick, Anne Douglas Sedgwick: A Portrait* 1915). There was 'shape in the world' that Jane Austen portrayed in her novels. Naturally, therefore, her novels are exquisitely balanced in form. Jane Austen concentrated her artistic vision on a very limited area of social life and the picture that emerges in her novels is remarkably clear. The organic connection between the different parts of her novels is due to the fact that there was organic unity

in social life that she portrayed relationship between the characters themselves and with the environment is of closeness whether it is marital, parental, fraternal or neighborly.

The Victorian novel reveals symptoms of disintegration because the world which it portrayed offered a picture of utter chaos and confusion. Dickens had a painful consciousness of the total absence of moral order in the industrial society of his age. A typical Dickens character is social outcast, whether he is David Copperfield or Oliver Twist. Even Fielding's heroes, Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones, suffer from a sense of alienation from their social milieu.

Dickens considered marriage to be the sole way of escape from loneliness. In the chaotic industrial world marriage alone offered the possibility of meaningful human relationship. But in Jane Austen's novel this feeling of isolation is completely absent. On the contrary, characters are linked integrally with the society in which they live. If Jane

Austen had seen life in fragments, she might not have been able to achieve the coherence of form. Jane Austen's great virtue is the completeness of her imaginary world, tiny though it is. Her strict sense of proportion, in content as well as in form, gives us a sure sense of serenity and assurance. For the first time in English novel form and content became indistinguishable.

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