

“UNIVERSALLY ACKNOWLEDGED TRUTHS” – MORAL AND SOCIAL PARAMETERS IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

Maria Cătălina RADU¹

¹ Lecturer, PhD, Department of Foreign Languages and Communication, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest, Romania
Corresponding author: catalinaradu2004@yahoo.com

Abstract

Jane Austen, nowadays one of the most beloved writers of the British literature, was neglected for almost one century by the history of literature. That was just in the second part of the 20th Century that Jane Austen’s literature was rediscovered and properly approached and appreciated for its sharp critique against the British society of the early 19th Century. Improperly considered as simple love stories with a happy end, her novels are actually an accurate reflection of the British society in a time of severe social and cultural transformation. The social network and the moral quality of its members are the base on which all her novels are built upon. The acknowledgement of the interacting between morality and the social conventions is critical for understanding Jane Austen’s literary work. This article wishes to address analytically the way in which the social and moral aspects of Jane Austen’s novels determine the entire construction of her fiction.

Keywords: *ethic, morality, social convention, society, values.*

1. THEMATIC ASPECTS OF JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

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 cultural transformations, political and social unrest, the emergence of new social structures, war, economic reconstruction, colonial expansion, scientific progress and the efforts to abolish slavery represent the main features to investigate the crisis and the social anxiety in the British territory.

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 organized¹.

For an accurate and realistic interpretation of Jane Austen’s novels and their message it is necessary to understand two key concepts which form the basis of all her novels: the social and the moral network. Jane Austen’s work coincides with a period of the British culture in which there was a general consensus on the elements that constitute a moral life. Understanding the interaction between morality and social norms is essential for contextualizing the work of Jane Austen.

2. THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS

Jane Austen’s novels are a hybrid between romance and comedy, satire and feeling, fairy tale and reality. The novels are populated by female characters with various connections between them, some harmonious, some discordant. Despite the emphasis on the inner life, the heroines are well rooted in the society in which they live; they participate in dialogues and react to what others say. Generally they do not initiate speeches; rather they interrupt, respond, ask questions, flirt and suddenly

become preoccupied in the middle of a discussion. Heroines are aware of the codes and social conventions; they reflect on them and use them to communicate². When their mutual publisher, John Murray, asked Walter Scott to write a review for the novel *Emma*, Scott assessed Jane Austen as the most brilliant example of a new school of fiction that avoids the sensational and melodrama focusing on psychological and social aspects³.

Morality, ethics, respect, compassion and decency are unequivocal values in the society of Jane Austen's novels. The calm and daily life harmony aura in this thoroughly organized world present in the writer's fiction come from the security offered by the existence of some clear moral conventions. Moral values in Jane Austen's novels represent a fixed, unchangeable system, a base of all her novels.

The main condition imposed by the society of Jane Austen's novels is that each person should be a good human being, according to the concepts of the social class to which they belong. Morality involves respect towards those who are socially superior, and benevolence, within certain limits, towards the poor class. Honesty is also one of the main qualities that should characterize any person, regardless of their social class. Almost equally important are shyness and modesty. Darcy in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, enjoys many social and personal advantages - wealth, education, imposing appearance - but this wouldn't have the same value, if Elizabeth did not discover that beyond his apparent pride, Darcy is actually a person of an inherent modesty and even shyness. Also Knightley in the novel *Emma* would not be so appealing to Jane Austen and her readers, if he was infatuated or insensible in the relation with his society.

Social rules are also unambiguous for each situation. Their main defining quality is decency and their purpose is to provide a moral balance, with the goal of preventing the emergence of any offensive situation for any individual. This is why, for example, Captain Wentworth in the novel *Persuasion* cannot confess his feelings towards Anne until Louisa gets engaged because this would risk affecting her reputation.

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 behavior 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 clear⁴.

Jane Austen writes, mostly, about people whose social class is defined by a high degree of education and considerable material resources. Appropriate education contributes to the proper functioning of the society. Jane Austen's books are about people that her contemporaries define as the embodiment of the core values of the society⁵.

3. SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL IMPLICATIONS IN THE NOVEL *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

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 is also caught in a network of family relationships.

One of the main factors in the construction of relationships between individual and society in Jane Austen's novels is wealth. Bingley truly becomes a responsible member of his society when he decides to buy a property. The relationship between individual and society is not limited only to the owned properties, but extends to all forms of wealth and to the way it is used. Wealth is closely linked to the idea of social class and the proper use of wealth is part of the moral integrity of a wealthy person.

Very shortly after being presented the readers all major characters in *Pride and Prejudice* are 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 responsibility⁶.

Manners and ethics are closely related in the real world of Jane Austen as well as in the world of her novels. Appropriate behavior is part of a moral behavior. When people like Mr. Bennet does not behave honorably and responsibly, they prove they do not comply with the social conventions⁷.

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 major romantic actions between the protagonists - the letter that Darcy gives to Elizabeth during her visit to Charlotte, and the moment they finally confess their feelings - are both moral explanations. And between these two points of the novel, the most important conversations between Elizabeth and Jane are also focused on moral issues.

Kindness, as the expression of morality is important not only on a personal level, but for the whole society. Jane and Elizabeth are people characterized by kindness, as well as Bingley and Darcy, and their characters confer stability to the social structure around them. This fact is obvious in the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy. Darcy's kindness saves the disastrous situation created by Lydia and Wickham, turning their elopement into a respectable marriage. The kindness that characterizes Elizabeth and Jane not only strengthens their relationship, but provides stability and order to their society, especially to their family.

The description that the housekeeper of Pemberley provides about Darcy emphasizes his good character; Darcy is responsible and aware of his responsibilities. Therefore he gives evidence of an ethical character. His goodness is what attracts Elizabeth, a goodness embodied in the proper administration of his property. The order is a sign of morality and everything around Darcy proves the best order. The property, the gardens, the relationship with his servants, everything is well organized. In these

circumstances, the chaos created by the news that interrupts Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley, Lydia's elopement with Wickham, is not only an element of disorder but also an element of immorality⁸.

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 behavior of the characters.

CONCLUSION

Jane Austen's novels as well as her characters are a hybrid between traditionalism and feminism, between realism and romance, or perhaps more accurately, a realism tempered by romance, a form essentially conservative. Any criticism of women's dependence coexists with

the perpetuation of traditional social structures through which the dependence is maintained, this feature being fundamental to Jane Austen's fiction.

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 is a general consensus on the definition of morality for all classes. *Universally acknowledged truths* are 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.

Endnotes

1. Cf. Roberts, Warren. *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*. London: The Athlon Press, 1995. p. 18.
2. Cf. Mandal, Anthony. *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel. The Determined Author*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. p. 28.
3. Cf. Mandal, Anthony. *Jane Austen and the Popular Novel. The Determined Author*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. p. 30.
4. Cf. Scheuermann, Mona. *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. p. 2.
5. Cf. Scheuermann, Mona. *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. p. 3.
6. Cf. Scheuermann, Mona. *Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. p. 90.
7. Cf. Emsley, Sarah. *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 84.
8. Cf. Emsley, Sarah. *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p. 89.