

Jane austen critical analysis

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READER RESPONSE TO AUSTEN'S NOVELS Jane Austen is generally acknowledged to be one of the great English novelists, so it is no surprise that her novels have remained continuously in print from her day to the present. Contemporary reviewers found much to praise in them. Reviewing *Emma* for the *Quarterly Review* (1816), Sir Walter Scott characterized its strengths and weaknesses: 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 to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.... Her merits consist much in the force of a narrative conducted with much neatness and point, and a quiet yet comic dialogue, in which the characters of the speakers evolve themselves with dramatic effect. The faults arise from the minute detail which the author's plan comprehends. Characters of folly or simplicity, such as those of old Woodhouse and Miss Bates, are ridiculous when first presented, but if too often brought forward or too long dwelt upon, their prosing is apt to become as tiresome in fiction as in real society.

George Henry Lewes, writing in 1852, accorded her the status and identified issues that critics would be repeating and arguing about for the next century and a half: First and foremost let Austen be named, the greatest artist that has ever written, using the term to signify the most perfect mastery over the means to her end. There are heights and depths in human nature Miss Austen has never scaled nor fathomed, there are worlds of passionate existence into which she has never set foot; but although this is obvious to every reader, it is equally obvious that she has risked no failures by

attempting to delineate that which she has not seen. Her circle may be restricted, but it is complete. Her world is a perfect orb, and vital. Life, as it presents itself to an English gentlewoman peacefully yet actively engaged in her quiet village, is mirrored in her works with a purity and fidelity that must endow them with interest for all time. Appreciation of her greatness snowballed with the publication of James Edward Austen-Leigh's Memoir and Richard Simpson's perceptive critical essay, both in 1870. Macaulay, for instance, called her a prose Shakespeare because of "the marvellous and subtle distinctive traits" of her characterizations. Austen's novels have aroused intense emotional attachments among readers. E. M. Forster admitted to reading and re-reading her with "the mouth open and the mind closed." Some readers carry admiration to the point of sentimental adoration; for them, her characters are beloved friends and Austen is dear Aunt Jane, a proper, sedate, kindly Victorian old maid. Such readers are often called Janeites, after a short story called The Janeites which Rudyard Kipling wrote in 1924. Not every reader has responded positively to Austen, however. Perplexed, Joseph Conrad wrote H. G. Wells asking, "What is all this about Jane Austen? What is there in her? What is it all about?" Probably the most famous rejection of Austen was penned by Charlotte Bronte: Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as outré or extravagant. She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader

by nothing vehement, disturbs him with nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood ... What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death--this Miss Austen ignores.... Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not senseless woman), if this is heresy--I cannot help it. Bronte's preference for passion over reason in fiction is not uncommon. Horace Walpole suggested a principle that explains the differing responses of Austen and Bronte to life and writing novels: " This world is a comedy to those who think, a tragedy to those who feel." Building on this comment, Ian Watt suggested that Jane Austen's novels, which are comedies, " have little appeal to those who believe thought inferior to feeling." Not all readers agree with Bronte, however, that Austen's novels lack emotion. For Virginia Woolf, Austen was " a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there." In addition to the question of passion, one of the most frequent criticisms of Austen is the narrowness of her subject matter. Her characters' interests and Austen's interests may seem trivial, unimportant, particularly since she wrote at a time when England was engaged in a life and death struggle with the French and Napoleon. Though she focuses on the everyday lives and concerns of a few families in a small country circle, her novels still have a profound effect on many readers. Lord David Cecil offered one way to resolve this paradox; Austen's is a profound vision. There are other views of life and more

extensive; concerned as it is exclusively with personal relationships, it leaves out several important aspects of experience. But on her own ground Jane Austen gets to the heart of the matter; her graceful unpretentious philosophy, founded as it is on an unwavering recognition of fact, directed by an unerring perception of moral quality, is as impressive as those of the most majestic novelists. Another common criticism of Austen is her complacent acceptance of the class structure of her society, its values, and its mores. One response to this charge is to find implicit social criticism in her novels. D. W. Harding theorized that because Austen was torn between her perception of the cruelties and corruptions of her society and her strong emotional attachments to family and friends, she expressed her criticisms of society in ways that were not necessarily conscious; he calls this covert criticism "regulated hatred." Arnold Kettle in effect dismissed the charge of Austen's complacency by finding its source in a historical change in society and in literary practice: ... after Jane Austen, the great novels of the nineteenth century are all, in their different ways, novels of revolt. The task of the novelists was the same as it had always been--to achieve realism, to express (with whatever innovations of form and structure they needs must discover) the truth about life as it faced them. But to do this, to cut through the whole complex structure of inhumanity and false feeling that ate into the consciousness of the capitalist world, it was necessary to become a rebel... The great novelists were rebels, and the measure of their greatness is found in the last analysis to correspond with the degree and consistency of their rebellion. It was not of course always a conscious, intellectualized rebellion; very seldom was it based on anything like a sociological analysis. It was,

rather, a rebellion of the spirit, of the total consciousness, and it was only indirectly reflected in the lives the writers led. Emily Bronte, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, outwardly appearing to conform to the accepted standards of their day, sensed no less profoundly than the radicals Dickens and George Eliot and Samuel Butler the degradation of human existence in Victorian society.

THEMES IN AUSTEN'S NOVELS

In her completed novels, Austen generally explores the same issues or questions, though she explores them from different perspectives, under different situations, and with varied consequences. However, this does not mean that the endings are necessarily different; being comic novels, they all end with at least one marriage.

The individual and society

- What is the proper relationship of the individual to society and to others? What are the consequences for the individual, for others, and for society when the individual ignores or even deliberately transgresses society's rules? What are the consequences when the individual conforms?
- How should conflict between the individual's desires and the individual's responsibility to society be resolved? How are the individual and society affected by the resolution, which may range from self-fulfillment to self-sacrifice?
- Are the society and the values Austen presents a portrayal of actual society or are they an idealization, goals to be striven for?
- Does Austen uncritically accept the values and attitudes of her society? If so, does her acceptance of society give her the freedom to show the limitations and perhaps even the corruption and cruelties of her society?
- Is she concerned with the social responsibility of the privileged? If so, does she idealize their responsibilities and show the consequences of not fulfilling them?
- How is individual worth perceived and determined in a class-conscious society?

What is proper consciousness of class difference and what is snobbery in Austen's view? (Modern readers may also ask the question, is there such a thing as proper consciousness of class difference, or is such consciousness merely one expression of snobbery?) What are the proper class responsibilities of the individual? • How may concern for others be properly expressed? Freedom and constraint • Is constraint or limitation a condition of living in society? (Some critics find this issue at the heart of Austen's achievement: Martin Price suggests, " The larger irony that informs all of Jane Austen's comic art is a sense of human limitations." And Walter Allen believes, " Dickens recognizes no limits at all; the art of Jane Austen is made possible precisely by the recognition of limits.") • Are the rigid rules of conduct in the society Austen depicts necessary to protect the weak and the powerless and to control aggression and violence? • A formal code of behavior or manners prescribes conduct and distances feelings. But do the individuals in a society with such a code feel less, or are they merely less able to express emotion freely and openly? What are the advantages and the drawbacks of living in such a society as Austen presents them? The advantages and drawbacks may seem quite different from the perspective of a twenty-first century reader. • What use does the individual make of freedom, with what consequences? Imagination/fancy versus reason/judgment • What are the consequences of yielding to imagination, which may take the form of prejudice, rather than listening to the dictates of reason? • Do her protagonists generally learn their errors through experience and, as a result, reform? (May such a change also be described as movement from innocence to rational experience?) • Are any of her

characters held up as flawless models, or is even the most rational character flawed? Love, courtship, and marriage • What is proper love? Is it intelligent love, and does Austen understand love " in the fullest sense," as Lionel Trilling suggests? If so, do her protagonists naturally have the ability to love intelligently, or do they develop it? • What qualities and behavior lead to a happy marriage? EMMA Though critics generally regard Emma as Austen's most carefully crafted or skillfully written novel, most readers prefer *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen herself acknowledged that Emma might present a problem for readers, " I am going to take a heroine whom on one but myself will much like." And much about Emma is indeed unlikable; she is snobbish, vain, manipulative, power-hungry, self-deluded, often indifferent to the feelings of others, and on at least one occasion scathingly cruel. But do these traits necessarily make her unlikable? Do her admirable traits redeem her, such as her love for her father, her wit, her good judgment, her sense of social responsibility, and her gradual admission of error? Does the comedy of watching Emma the Egoist get her comeuppance through a series of errors and admit she deserved her comeuppance make her likable? Although Emma knows what the right thing to do is, she still behaves badly; does this all too common human trait make her sympathetic because readers can identify with her? The attitude of the narrator is another consideration in evaluating Emma. Though most of the novel presents Emma's point of view, an omniscient narrator tells the story. Do the narrator's choice of language, her tone, the details she adds, and her comments upon both Emma and the action affect the way we feel about Emma? The narrator clearly presents Emma's faults and her misguided

behavior and unsparingly identifies them as such, but does the narrator also suggest a sympathy or even an affection for Emma that helps to moderate the reader's negative response to her? Or is even the narrator's attitude unable to overcome the negative effect of her faults and irresponsible behavior? The last question I would like to raise about the reader's response to Emma is this: even if Emma is unlikable or unsympathetic, is the novel automatically unlikable or flawed?