International Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Translation (IJLLT)
ISSN: 2617-0299
www.ijllt.org

The Themes of Attachment and Love in Jane Austen's Emma: A Critical Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: September 28, 2019
Accepted: October 12, 2019
Published: November 30, 2019
Volume: 2
Issue: 6
DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2019.2.6.9

KEYWORDS

themes, love, attachment, Emma: Jane Austen

ABSTRACT

The present study aims at studying critically the themes of attachment and love in Jane Austen's Emma. Jane Austen is the first important woman novelist who stands above both the classical and romantic movement. Moreover, through the fixed character in her novel, "Emma" Jane Austen treats various themes: attachment, love and marriage and thwarted love. The writer also uses them as a medium for criticizing her own society in general and the other societies in particular. Furthermore, married to a clever husband, Emma resembles an unsuccessful marriage based on sexual attraction. Finally, the paper ends with the conclusion that, love, or attachment- the word she preferred – had a precise and perhaps peculiar connotation for Jane Austen. Essentially, it expected the quality of affection that might be found between the members of a happy family. Young men and women who become honorably attached to one another were something more than siblings, something less than lovers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's *Emma* is a beautifully conceived dramatic novel .Originally published in three volumes, it succeeds in endowing each volume with its own surprise and cunningly contrived climax: it is also deliberately didactic However humorously presented, Mr. Woodhouse's vale-***tudinarianism*** is tiresome and self-centered; Mrs. Elton's vulgar snobbery (and her lack of respect for her betters)is wholly in excusable; Mr.Frank Churchill's good nature and polished ease of manner conceal of a lack of candor and a willingness to give pain to others. Intelligence is better than stupidity, as the example of Miss Bate clear, but active goodwill is better still.

Jane Austen's ironic stances forces the reader to think about issues; the restriction of the ' world' of the novel, whether geographical, numerical or social, does not diminish the principles involved.

2. Jane Austen's Contribution, Reputation and Writing Career

Jane Austen is hailed as an author of great achievement. Six novels of assured success-surely they constitute a healthy body of literature which no serious student of the subject can ignore. Nor have they been ignored. Jane Austen who achieved little fame during her life, emerged as a monument of outstanding fiction writer in the twentieth-century. The third millennium has welcomed her as a writer to be read worldwide.(Omer, 2002,p.1)

Almost all major critics of modern day England, like Malcolm Bradbury and Laurance Lerner, have had important comments to make on Austen's comments to make on Austen's contribution to English fiction. Scholars, other than the English critics, have added to the growing body of Jane Austen in good measure. One might think that it would be a rash act to undertake research into such an overworked author. Has not all the salience of this important author been looked into? Then why undertake a fresh work? The answer is simple: one has a right to record one's impression of a writer one likes. One hears so much about the age of anxiety these days, so much about void and ennui and alienation, so much about the collapse of values. Let's go back to an eighteenth-century society and have a look at a portraiture of family and social relations. In addition to relief and artistically pleasure, we shall find them, in good measure, relevant to our own age of globalization (ibid.p.2)

2.1 Jane Austen's Life: Family and Social Background

Jane Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, was descended from a Kentish family. Unfortunately, he was orphaned at an early age and was left no

property. His uncle, an attorney at Tonbridge, took the trouble of educating him. Leaving Tonbridge School, he got a scholarship to Oxford and later became a fellow of St. John's College. He then took Orders and got married in 1764 and benefices were found for him. His uncle bought him the rectory of Deane in Hampshire. In addition to that, Mr. Knight, a distant relative, presented to him the adjoining rectory of Steventon. The two villages were close together and he was able to do the work of the two parishes. He chose for his wife miss Cassandra Leigh, whose father had been a Fellow of All Souls and whose uncle was Master of Balliol for fifty years. The family lived at Deane until 1771 when they left it for Steventon, where Jane was born in the year 1775 and spent the first twenty six years of her short life.

Jane Austen was the seventh of eight children: six boys and two girls. The other girl was Cassandra who was two years older than Jane and was the nearest to her heart. They were devoted to each other and, when apart, wrote to each other continually.

The Austen family was a lively, affectionate, and intelligent one. The members were very fond of one another. Jane and Cassandra spent a great deal of their time with their brother Edward in Kent, who was given Godmersham by the widow of Mr. Knight in 1778. The two sisters seldom paid visits together, since one daughter was always needed at home. Thus the visit to Godmersham always meant a rush of letters to be exchanged. The life witnessed in the letters is similar to the lives of girls portrayed in the novels. There is a great deal about walking, riding, excursions, playing, singing and sketching. They also read novels and did a lot of needlework. They also visited cottages, gave 'shifts' to old women, went to church, and had balls. Jane loved dancing; a passion which she bestowed on the heroines of her novels. Her life can be well epitomized by reading her remarks about the balls mentioned in her letters.

To increase his income, Mr. Austen took pupils. A Thomas Fowle was one of them. Cassandra later became engaged to him; but he died in 1997 of fever in the West Indies where he was sent as an army chaplain. Cassandra never married. The two sisters led the life of spinster-hood together. They had offers but they would not accept a marriage not based on true love.

After Jane's death Cassandra told her niece, Caroline, that she and Jane happened to meet someone one summer by the sea who was attracted to Jane. They young man didn't declare himself, but had he done so, she was sure he would have been accepted. After a few weeks, he and Jane parted and he died before they could meet again.

Mr. Warre Cornish mentions this story in his life of Jane Austen. Mr. Austen Leigh, her nephew and the brother of Caroline, does not attach much importance to it in his Memoir. He thinks that it is likely that the gentleman loved his aunt, but does not believe that her heart was ever won by anybody. All that he would admit was a 'passing inclination'. This cannot mean that he disbelieved Cassandra, who knew her sister better than any brother or nephew could. But he must have distrusted Caroline's account of the story – thought that she might have misunderstood Cassandra or had touched it up (Kennedy 1969:36).

It is not likely to think that Jane Austen accepted spinster-hood without regret. She was once an energetic girl who used to dance and flirt and was likely to love and marry. To compensate for this loss, Jane and Cassandra made a sisterly alliance, which mitigated the loneliness of their single lives. They relied on the intellectual resources and the warm relationship with their brothers who valued them.

In addition to that they were given adequate liberty than most of their contemporaries. Jane's girlhood ended by the year 1800. Mr. Austen took the determined decision of leaving Steventon and retiring to Bath. On this occasion Jane was not happy and even miserable. They removed to Bath and remained in it until the death of Mr. Austen in 1805. Upon the death of Mr. Austen, the widow and her daughters removed to Southampton. About this period litter is known because letters between the two sisters were scarcely exchanged. Maybe the sisters were not often apart and few letters were needed.

The rush of letters was continued again after they had settled in Southampton and Jane once expressed her relief with which she escaped from Bath. It is evident that during the years of Bath she was not happy and she could not write during this period. In 1804 she attempted a novel, the Watsons, but after a few chapters she abandoned it and she never took it up again.

They stayed at Southampton until 1809 when they moved to more pleasant surroundings. The mother and sisters were offered a cottage on Edward's estate at Chawton in Hampshire. In these country surroundings Jane was able to resume writing. During five years, three of her novels saw light: Mansfield Park, 1811-13; Emma, 1814-15; and Persuasion, 1815-16. That was in addition to the three earlier books, which were being arranged for publication, and then Jane Austen was getting into print.

Jane Austen's books achieved a mild success. Most readers were not enthusiastic about them, but Jane was content with whatever little praise or money she could gain. The contemporary critics took no notice of her. Compared to her contemporary Fanny Burney (1752-1840), she was considered a failure. She was not in touch with the literary world. She never corresponded with or met any other writer. Probably, she never in her life met somebody who was her equal in achievement or talent.

Jane Austen is said to have been diffident and shy in company and she would have found fame uncomfortable. But she might well have enjoyed the contact with men of letters, which a more spectacular success might have won for her. Some of her contemporaries appreciated her work, but she never knew about that.

One incident was counted as a success for Jane in the field of contacting the effective characters of her day. Mr. Clarke, the Librarian at Carlton House, told her that the Prince regent greatly admired her works and intimated that she might dedicate the next one to His Royal Highness. Accordingly, Emma was dedicated to the First Gentleman in Europe-the Prince Regent. Mr. Clarke also suggested that she should attempt 'an historical romance, illustrative of the august House of Cobourge'. She replied that if her life depended upon her ability to write a romance she would certainly be hung before she finished the first chapter (Kennedy 1969:33).

The above story shows that Jane Austen wrote for the pleasure of writing and that pleasure was the true reward Jane Austen was doomed to receive. Jane escaped the sweets of success and celebrity but she also escaped their perils.

In the year 1816 Jane's health began to deteriorate but would not accept the life of an invalid. Notwithstanding her sinking health, she commenced a new novel, Sandition, in which she makes fun of hypochondriacs. Of it only a fragment is available which at least indicates her courage and zeal. In 1817, she accompanied Cassandra to Winchester in order to see a doctor there. They stayed in College Street in a small house where a plaque to commemorate her is still seen. Her health made no progress. By the end of June, the case was hopeless and everybody knew that she was dying. On the eighteenth of July she died in Cassandra's arms and was buried in Winchester's Cathedral.

At her death Jane Austen occupied no place in English Literature. She was rated lower than many contemporaries, whose names fifty years later, had been completely forgotten. On the other hand, she is today lodged among the lasting classics (Kenndey 1969:55).

Many readers, even in the United Kingdom, have an impression that Jane Austen was an early Victorian, a contemporary of the Bronte Sisters. This faulty idea is due to two reasons. The first reason is the way in which the motion pictures show the characters of the novels. Jane Eyre, Catherine Earnshaw, and Elizabeth Bennet, for example, are dressed in the same fashion that makes the audiences think of them as contemporaries. The other reason is the standard of Jane's books themselves; the books look so completely removed in thought, sentiment, and atmosphere from all that readers associate with the eighteenth century. Richardson (1689-1761) and Fielding (1707-1754) are, for readers, the typical novelists of that age. There is a gulf between Jane Austen's Elizabeth and Richardson's Pamela that cannot be bridged. The two girls resemble different worlds, although the same reign witnessed the deaths of Richardson and Jane Austen (Kennedy 1969:8).

To some readers, her date and period are vague. They know that she was a pre-Victorian, but they think of her as a nineteenth century novelist, 'the first swallow of a new summer'. Factually, in so far as she belonged to any period she was Georgian. The Victorians did not pay her much attention; she belonged to an age from which they have too recently escaped.

When Jane Austen was mature enough to look at people around her with a critical eye, she must have noticed three things. Firstly, she noticed that the manners and the culture to which she had been used in her father's house were not universal. Secondly, much lower standards can be witnessed in large country houses, among powerful landowners. Thirdly, these great people were not aware of their shortcomings. They think of themselves as a superior class, better bred than anybody else. In their opinion a man who has to work is to rank lower than one who has not to. Jane Austen portrayed and bore witness in her novels to these characteristics of her society.

Notwithstanding her criticism of the privileged classes, Jane Austen did not intend to attack them. She didn't satirize them and she didn't mean to act as a satirist, because her genius was for comedy and the core of the joke was that the landed gentry thought itself superior, but factually was not.

In the twentieth century, new interpretation of Jane Austen's novels appeared in the previous Soviet Union. They described Jane Austen as a 'Marxist before Marx'. The novels were interpreted as an expose of the economic basis of social behavior.

These interpretations are politically oriented and they misconstrue the general direction of Jane Austen's thought. Her social criticism as well as her interest in the material welfare of her characters is not at all politically motivated. To Jane Austen, the political situation was taken for granted. According to Butler, she is not a sycophant of wealth or rank. The class she deals with has local, not national importance. In the eighteenth century term, Jane Austen is a Tory rather than a Whig (Odmark 1981:134).

A lot has been said about Jane Austen's range. The recurring question is how much of England did Jane see? She was ignorant of the northern and the western extremities but if is not true that she rarely ventured beyond Hampshire and Bath. Factually she traveled through fourteen countries. She knew three cities intimately and was acquainted with many stretches of the English coastline. She knew the whole of southern England (Lane 1986:12).

Village life suited Jane Austen well, but she was also familiar with London. This familiarity was an important part of her cultural background, which added to her assurance as a commentator on society. Her brother Henry had a London home, which she visited occasionally. The theatre, galleries and museums of London contributed to Jane Austen's experience. With Henry she visited Drury Lane, Covet Garden and the Lyceum, where they took a private box. In 1969, she attended Astleys equestrian theatre. Henry also took her to Liverpool Museum, the British Gallery, and an exhibition of paintings at Spring Garden (Lane, 1986, p.167).

The idea that her subject matter is limited cannot be justified, because the class of the gentry resembles the backbone of England. Characters of that class were well portrayed in Jane's novels in a way that made her work timeless. Jane Austen paid due attention to the question of choosing a marriage partner, which is vitally important to anyone's life. It is true that Jane Austen was keen not to move out of areas which she knew through and through. She applied her irony to these well-known areas and so what she wrote was realistic and fascinating.

2.2 Jane Austen's Literary Career, Fame and Style

Although Jane Austen lived into the nineteenth century, she is considered and eighteenth century novelist because her art has the qualities of the eighteenth century novel. Jane Austen brought the novel of family life to its zenith. Her works were not affected by the ugliness of the outside world. She kept the action to scenes familiar to her through her own experience. Her first novels were refused by publishers and she had to wait for about fifteen years after beginning to write before any novel was accepted. Northanger Abbey, for example, was sold to a bookseller in Bath for ten pounds, but he didn't publish it, and it was brought back later on.

Though Jane Austen wrote her books in troubled years which included the French Revolution, her novels were calm portraits of social life. She appreciated the significance of the family relations in human affairs. Two of her brothers were in the navy, but she took no notice of the violence of nations.

During the mid-eighteenth-century Johnson was the greatest man of letters. Cowper was the most eminent poet in the last quarter of it. The two of them dominated Jane Austen's youthful horizon. Johnson died when she was eight years old and Cowper when she was twenty four. Johnson was the prose writer she most admired and Cowper her favourite poet (Gillie 1977:37).

Jane Austen modeled her characters upon Johnson's. her style is like his in the way that it has definition, balance and assurance, which reflects faith in clarity, judgement, and good sense. Their styles include a clear sightedness about the incongruity between pretence and reality which makes irony a more prevalent tone in the eighteenth century writing.

According to her brother, Henry Cowper was Jane Austen's favourite poet. The contemporaries whom she admired among poets were the conservative poets: Scott with his ballads and romances, Crabbe with his eighteenth century couplet (Gillie 1977:54).

Jane Austen was not only conservative in her poetic taste, but she was also isolated from contemporary writers. This isolation from the intellectuals of her day makes any study of her work, which is little concerned with sciences and philosophy of her day, and more concerned with the usual cultural interest of her contemporaries and readers, widened only by her choice of literary or cultural influences.

Compared to Fanny, Jane Austen had a wider field. Fanny satirized the meanly born and respected the great. Jane Austen was not so respectful of the great. She found promising materials in the simple and the great.

The six novels which built her fame and success were written over a period of twenty-one years between 1796 and 1817, but they were all published close together between 1811 and 1818. Jane Austen's work is a living example of perfection. She wrote because she loved to write and she always did her utmost best to perfect her work. She once said laughingly about some designs which she had made to amuse an infant

nephew: ‘An artist cannot do anything slovenly’ (Kennedy 1969:29)

3.The Themes of Dependence and Independence and Attachment and Love in Jane Austen's Emma

3.1 The Story of the Novel

Jane Austen's *Emma* is a love story in which young men and women who live in the same area meet at dances, in each other's homes or while walking in the village.

Emma, the main character, is a clever, pretty, twenty-one-years old, who lives alone with her father, Mr.Woodhouse, near the village of Highbury .She becomes friends with seventeen-years-old Harriet, who has been abandoned by her parents. Emma decides that she will find a suitable husband for Harriet,but stops her marrying Robert Martin ,a local farmer ,because she thinks he is not enough for her. She believes that Mr. Elton, the local vicar , would be a much better match.

Her Attempt to make a match between Harriet and Mr.Elton fails miserably but, undeterred, she tries to pair Harriet with Frank Churchill .However, Frank announces a surprise engagement to Jane Fairfax, while Harriet herself believes that Mr. Knightly , a close friend of Emma's, is in love with her. As it turns out, Mr.Knightly is really in love with Emma and asks her to marry him. She accepts and decides to stop interfering in other people's lives. So, when she hears that Harriet has accepted Robert Martin's second proposal of marriage, she wishes the couple all the best.(Blake.p,61)

3.2 The Theme of Dependence and Independence in the Novel

The theme of Emma is 'dependence or independence'-but of mind rather than pocket. To understand how Jane Austen handles this theme we must listen to the voices of her characters-and especially to the voice of the narrator- with great care. What deduction are we to draw from the final words of the narrative comment? Is Emma protecting her father's image of her or is she protecting her own image of herself? Or has she simply not begun to think about her own character: is there a real danger that she secretly suspects she may be perfect? Understanding others is difficult, especially if our perceptions are dulled by prejudice or self-absorption.(Milligan.1984/2005/,p.70).

We are given the word' playful' to hear Emma's tone of voice, but her father, his mind clouded by imaginary ills, misses it. Emma's witty high spirits run the risk of insincerity: she is good at the kind of conversation that promises no commitment. But she is genuinely concern red, as we see here, if her teasing remarks go astray. She is to learn during the course of the novel how deeply such talk can hurt.

Mr. Knightley is immediately established as a man of discernment, honesty and candor, interested enough in Emma to take notice of her, concerned enough to speak genuinely to her. The courtship of Emma and Mr. Knightley-the unavowed mainspring of the novel- is a gradual matching of styles of speech ;' liveliness' is one thing :insincerity is quite another. Mr. Knightley's grave conversation implies a deep attachment to values which are gradually revealed by unfolding action of the novel.

It is a sad mistake to see Jane Austen as preoccupied with worldly success and the nice calculation of income and estate. Money was undoubtedly necessary and significant in the lives of Jane's Austen's women because it assured a level of privacy, independence and freedom to maintain certain social values which they (and she) thought worthwhile. For an unmarried woman the line between independence and drudgery was easily crossed .In her own life Jane Austen's had experienced the precariousness of a woman's independence; her private life of imaginative creativity had to fit in with the demands of a large circle of family and friends .Of the women in her novels only Emma Woodhouse thought of herself as having a personal independence which she might use as she wished.

To conclude, Jane Austen was always ready to contrast undisciplined emotion with those recognition of the intensity of human feelings which could be acted upon because they had been understood .The independence she sought for her heroines was a spiritual freedom: money and position freed them from external constrains; self-knowledge freed them from the great and little passion which destroy life or demean it.

3.3 The Theme of Attachment and Love in the Novel

Jane Austen's Emma is set in' the large and populous village almost amounting to a town' of Highbury, where Mr.Woodhouse has a substantial property. *Emma* is a penetrating story of self- discovery, infinitely sharp in its dissection of the self-deception of its protagonist. Marriage may have been the expected outcome for her heroines but Jane Austen is not content to relate a simple story of courtship with its tribulations and ultimate success .In her novels ' love' has clear ethical and spiritual connotations. Her lovers are not expressing any single domestic affection; they are affirming values upon which their civilized society depends.

Emma is blind about herself, her friends, her own wishes and her own best interests. She takes an interest in Harriet Smith, a girl of no family and uncertain parentage, who has been educated at the local school. Harriet is interested in a decent local farmer but Emma encourages her to set her sights higher. She first tries to throw Harriet into the arms of Mr. Elton, a young clergyman who has a rather higher sense of what is due to him. He surprises Emma by proposing to her; when she refuses, he soon returns with an acceptable bride. Emma and Harriet are then involved with Frank Churchill, a neighbor's son who has been adopted as the; heir of a rich family. His parents see Emma as a suitable match for; Emma thinks Harriet might be in love with him; in fact, he is secretly engaged to Jane Fairfax, the niece of a poor and rather ridiculous spinster. Finally. to her horror, Emma discovers that Harriet is really in love with Knightley; a neighboring landowner and Emma's brother-in-law,who has been her friend for years. Her feelings on hearing this news give her some insight into her own affections.

Emma is suffused by subtler but hardly gentler irony, Emma Woodhouse is, like Elizabeth Bennet, clever and independent, but she is spoilt, and too used to having her own way. In the first chapter a beautiful balance is maintained: Emma's father is shown to be amiably selfish and demanding, intellectually no more than a cabbage. We admire the good-humor and self-restraint with which Emma ministers to his wants and protect him from anxiety or irritation. On the other hand, we see that her solicitude comes in part from her desire to maintain and increase her own independence. Emma enjoys the feelings that, unknown to her, people are dancing as she pulls the strings. She contemplates life aesthetically, and tries to bring things that she would find fitting, nicely patterned, appropriate. Even when she imagines herself in love with Frank Churchill it is the artistic appropriateness of such a relationship that she seems to gain most satisfaction from.

4. CONCLUSION

Every step Emma takes into the world of feelings is mistaken, whether she is trying to promote or prevent marriage. As always in Jane Austen moral questions are illuminated by social behavior. When the self-important Mr. Elton, the vicar, refuses to dance with the illegitimate Harriet Smithson at a ball Mr. Knightley, not a dancing man, immediately takes on to the floor. Similarly, the consequence of Emma's self-well and too-great freedom are finally made clear to the reader when she is rude to poor, silly Miss bates at the Box Hill picnic. Excessive courtesy is likely to be distrusted in Jane Austen, as denoting insincerity, but a failure of courtesy is almost always a sign of egotism and hardness of heart. It is when the enormity of her breath of decorum is brought home to her that the process of regeneration begin in Emma, climaxed by her realization that she is in love with Mr.knightley, who will give her life the firmness of principle it has so lacked. This is something the reader has had the chance to realize all long ,because though Emma is not aware herself of the real nature of her feeling for Mr.knightle, the reader has been given the clues that should have enable him to guess it. In fact, the novel is plotted with all the minute, deceptive skill of a detective story; the surface appearance of the action hints will understand the truth of what is going on better than the heroine from whose point of view we see the action.

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