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Men And Women's Relationships: A Study Of Social Realism In The Novels Of Jane Austen

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Abstract

Jane Austen's works collectively represent an original blend of personal romance storytelling and pointed social commentary within the trajectory of English literature. This literature review has been written to review existing scholarship regarding the representations of male-female interpersonal relationships in the primary novels of Jane Austen, specifically: Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma, Persuasion and Mansfield Park. The literature analyzed in this review, published between 2020 through 2023, is discussed within a framework of social realism. By offering insight into how Jane Austen depicts gender relations, marital relationships as a social institution, limitations derived from class structure, female empowerment, and male identity, this document intends to demonstrate that Jane Austen continues to be relevant in today's discussions about feminism and sociology.

Keywords: Social realism, gender dynamics, marriage, female agency, masculinity, Regency England, feminism

1. Introduction

One of the foremost chroniclers of early nineteenth century England is Jane Austen (1775-1817). Her novels not only tell a romance story, but provide a significant social commentary regarding the social structures that dictated how men and women lived. Much of this portrayal reflects the tension between individual desire and societal expectations, and is further influenced by the socio-economic and political conditions of the time (International Journal of Scientific and Development Research [IJSDR], 2023).

Realist literature seeks to reveal the contradictions of everyday life as they relate to a specific time and place. The honesty found in Austen's works provides insight into the social realities of the time, as well as the moral character, motivations and behaviours of the people who lived during that time (Sutherland, as cited in 123helpme.com, 2021). This paper synthesizes the existing body of literature and research on Austen's works and explores how they illustrate the relationship between men and women as it relates to social realism.



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2. Social Realism as Austen's Literary Framework

One of the foremost chroniclers of early nineteenth century England is Jane Austen (1775-1817). Her novels not only tell a romance story, but provide a significant social commentary regarding the social structures that dictated how men and women lived. Much of this portrayal reflects the tension between individual desire and societal expectations, and is further influenced by the socio-economic and political conditions of the time (International Journal of Scientific and Development Research [IJSDR], 2023).

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3. Gender Dynamics and the Institution of Marriage

Austen's view of marriage as both a personal and political arrangement is central to her social realism and her novels serve as a reflection of the gender and class-based expectations that characters must navigate in Regency England. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Sense and Sensibility* are key novels that support this idea (IJSDR, 2023).

An example of this is Charlotte Lucas who does not marry for love, but rather out of necessity, which illustrates the compromises women have to make in a marriage-based economy that places a higher value on finding a partner who will provide for them rather than on seeking happiness from their marriage (Usmani, 2022). By presenting Elizabeth Bennet as a character who neither accepts nor conforms to the limitations on women's rights that society places on them and who challenges the institution of marriage because of the emphasis placed on economic security, Austen critiques the conventions that are put upon women and that create barriers to their autonomy (Library Progress International, 2022).

According to Sevgilican (2022), Austen critiques many aspects of women's status in English society and advocates for equal treatment for men and women. Sevgilican also states that women's unequal treatment is a result of English society creating inequality between the genders as a result of arbitrary social norms/traditions that stem from the marriage plot and the educational system.

4. Female Agency and the Quest for Autonomy

A common thread in contemporary studies of Austen's work is she subtly yet forcefully promotes female agency. Austen expressed her viewpoint of the world she inhabited through each novel and how the world imposed expectations of obligation on women regarding family, education,



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and marriage while simultaneously questioning those values through her female main characters (JETIR, 2023).

Emma Woodhouse, for example, rejects societal pressures to marry, instead focusing on her own personal development and autonomy; therefore, she derives pleasure from her independence instead of simply being successful as judged by others when often the view of a successful female character is to be married (International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences [IJELS], 2022).

On the other hand, Fanny Price in Mansfield Park chooses to marry for love and reject the traditional path of marrying for economic reasons, therefore taking a huge step away from societal norms of her time. In similar fashion, Anne Elliot from Persuasion suffers through decisions forced upon her to reject a man she loved due to the demands placed upon her by society (JETIR, 2023).

Gilbert and Gubar (2000), recently reviewed in the current literature, portray Austen and other 19th-century female authors as creating an image of feminist rebellion against patriarchy by providing their heroine's actions that challenge the female norms of the time. One of the examples used to illustrate the action of rebellion against the oppressive gender expectations was Elizabeth Bennet's refusal to marry Mr. Collins (Library Progress International, 2022).

5. Masculinity and Power in Austen's World

Despite many feminist critiques of Austen's work in prior literature, more recent scholarship has increasingly examined how masculinity is constructed within Austen's fiction. For Sharma (2020), the manner in which Austen imagines the ideal man in a rapidly changing industrial culture creates space for the reconfiguration of traditional views about masculinity through social realism—thereby transforming the representation of manhood within the overall context of domestic fiction. As an example, Mr. Darcy demonstrated his privilege through his self-important demeanor and sense of entitlement when he proposed marriage to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* but eventually changed due to the realization that his missed opportunities were a direct result of his own behavior (IJELS, 2022). In regard to Austen's use of narrative to challenge the notion that gender, by itself, reinforces immutable constructs based upon an individual's gender or social status in *Persuasion*, studies have shown that both men and women can exhibit a wide range of emotions and, therefore, it can be argued that gender constructs created prior to an individual being born into this world can be altered does not constitute a gender-based rationale for limiting one's choices in life, nor does socioeconomic standing (123helpme.com, 2021).



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6. Class, Economics, and Relationships

In the world created by Austen, economic concerns go hand-in-hand with romantic relationships. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, women cannot achieve social standing and fiscal independence without marriage (MLSR, 2021). Women were pressured to marry to gain long-term financial security; thus, female protagonists in Austen's novels often face an equally split conflict: their desire to be independent and their need to marry advantageously (JETIR, 2023).

According to Sharma (2020), the vast majority of Austen's female characters eventually relent to a multitude of social pressures — Charlotte must marry the foolish Mr. Collins because society demands that she marry to gain financial stability, while Lady Catherine de Bourgh, one of the few women in Austen's text who has gained economic independence, is vilified through the text for being a vehicle of patriarchal oppression. Austen uses irony and satire through Mr. Collins' and Lady Catherine's characters to demonstrate the absurdity of rigid class structures and unrealistic gender roles (Library Progress International, 2022).

7. Female Solidarity and Sisterhood

Recent academic research considers female friendships in Jane Austen's novels as significant in addition to romantic relationships. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood's relationship in *Sense and Sensibility* serves as the heart of the story due to their polar opposite personalities providing the support necessary for confronting the various obstacles they experience (Usmani, 2022). Austen uses this type of female friendship to demonstrate that women can connect with one another socially outside of a male-mediated relationship (Usmani, 2022).

Elizabeth Bennet and Charlotte Lucas develop their friendship by revealing the different ways they think about marriage as they navigate their society together in *Pride and Prejudice* (IJELS, 2022).

8. Austen's Continued Relevance in Contemporary Discourse

The works of Jane Austen continue to reflect present-day ideas surrounding gender roles, marriage, and the dynamics of power. The way Austen depicts the relationship between public and private spheres is still very relevant today when analyzing how the constructs of social institutions affect individual decisions. Furthermore, Austen also provides significant insight through her subliminal feminist criticism (IJSDR, 2023). As Glosson (2020) and others have recently pointed out, the enduring ability of Austen's works to be re-interpreted in popular culture can be attributed to the fact that the tensions that exist between an individual's desires and those imposed by society identified by Austen, continue to be unresolved in contemporary society.



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Pride and Prejudice represents the evolution of female individuality towards independence continues to gain traction in the 21st Century and is frequently referenced within feminist literary critique of Austen literature (Library Progress International, 2022).

9. Conclusion

The results of this analysis show that works by Jane Austen provide an extensive and lasting foundation for examining the connections between men and women through the prism of social realism. Throughout her five major novels—Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma, Persuasion, and Mansfield Park—Austen continually scrutinizes the social, economic, and gender-related factors affecting personal relationships. The most current studies have demonstrated that Austen's critiques regarding marriage, class, and gender are not only important from a historical perspective but also important with respect to current social issues concerning power, autonomy, and equality.

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