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Love, Infatuation and Compromise in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

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Abstract

In *Pride and Prejudice*, we see skilful management of different types of feelings between men and women and their effects on the life of those involved. Love, infatuation and compromise are revealed through the relationships of different characters and their actions which reflect their state of mind and helps the reader to analyse and judge their degree of contentment.. The happy characters prove that for an ideal relationship sincere love is essential; for then one is morally and ethically satisfied. There are those who consider worldly gains as the ultimate source of happiness. For them physical comfort and superficial assurance of a happy life is the ultimate gain. However there are some who consider peace of mind, sound morals and union based on trust and understanding as a source of true happiness. The desire for wealth among different social classes does not matter when it comes to valuing relationships based on material gains. The poor want to acquire wealth and the rich want to have more. For this they are ready to implement fair or foul means without any regard for truth, honesty or morality. Though they achieve their goals yet at a price they are destined to regret forever because then there is no going back.

Keywords: Love, Infatuation, compromise, regret, ideal relationship, contentment.

Introduction

In *Pride and Prejudice*¹, we see how skilfully Jane Austen manages the feeling of love, infatuation and compromise between men and women and how these feelings affect their lives. Jane Austen helps the reader analyse and judge the intensity of her characters' such feelings and degree of their contentment by revealing their states of mind through their relationships and actions. While some characters prove that sincere love is essential for an ideal relationship and happiness since it is morally and ethically satisfying; there are others who consider worldly gains as the ultimate source of happiness, since for them physical comfort and superficial assurance of a happy life are the ultimate gain. Still there are others who consider peace of mind, sound morals and union based on trust and understanding as the source of true happiness. However, the desire for wealth among different social classes does not matter when it comes to valuing relationships based on material gains. The poor want to acquire wealth and the rich want to acquire more; for this they are ready to implement fair or foul means without any regard for truth, honesty or morality. They achieve their goals, yet at a price they are destined to regret forever because then there is no going back. In this paper, I analyse a few couples from P&P whose matrimonial relationships or affairs are based on love, infatuation or wealth and to show their degree of contentment with their relationship.

Love and Matrimony in P&P

Through matrimonial affairs in P&P we see different aspects of a society. The seemingly trivial day-to-day details reveal man's desire for comfort and social acceptability. Individuals live in fear of society's disapproval of their social limitations. Because of the "social order in the process of change"¹ there occurred, accordingly, "moral problems about attitudes to both organization and personal behaviour and it is in the exploration of these areas that Jane Austen is most acute and subtle" (Eagleton/Pierce. 25). The general belief and behaviour of the nobility as presented in P&P reflects that "status is value-laden" (Duckworth 117).²

Bingley is attractive because of his 'chaise and four' and Darcy because of his 'ten thousand' pounds per year in P&P; Wentworth is not encouraged to marry Anne Eliot in *Persuasion* because he is not rich and Catherine Moorland is forced to leave the house by the Admiral in *Northanger Abbey* because she was not as rich

¹ All subsequent references to the novel will henceforth be referred to as P&P and the references to the text from the novel will be incorporated in the text by only mentioning the page number. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (London: David Campbell Ltd. 1991)

as he expected her to be. People would become discourteous by acting against decency towards those who were socially inferior.³

The desire to acquire material comforts leads characters to make their choices for a comfortable life, which seems to be the forethought of most of the characters. As such the relationships are mostly based on financial consideration. Yet her substantial characters, namely her protagonist deviate from the prevailing trends for they manage to see beyond the apparent. They hold a different set of beliefs and morals which help them choose the type of life and living that gives them mental satisfaction.

The ethical terms related to relationships and companionship used repeatedly in the novel carry different connotations for different characters. For Lady Catherine, for example, "obligation" and "decency" carry the same meaning; and she is "not used to have her judgment controverted" (155). She would have everyone agree to her notion of love which revolves around obligation and decency. People like Mr. Collins further enhance her sense of superiority by flattering her. As such she develops her own sense of right and wrong about love. This is why she is shocked to hear Elizabeth, who stands up to defy her authority by stating her own moral reasons for doing so. And Lady Catherine calls her "Obstinate, headstrong girl" (336), but that is how the Lady perceives her even though Elizabeth is right. In the same way Miss Bingley, with her preconceived notions of decorum, fails to appreciate Elizabeth's freedom of spirit. Elizabeth's concept of a gentleman shocks Mr. Darcy too, who looks at her with "mingled incredulity and mortification" (182). Darcy considers himself as the epitome of the idea of a true gentleman according to the standards of that time.

Most of Austen's characters hide their love and feeling, which is yet another shade of love in the interesting moral world of P&P they seem to be confused about the strength of their attachment for the other. Some of them are hypocrites and secretly manoeuvre others, which is truer about her female characters. They tend to hide their true feelings and willingly suppress their desires for fear of impropriety. Elizabeth is surprised to find that she had been in love with Darcy. Jane Bennet tries to convince Elizabeth, her only confidante that her feelings for Mr. Bingley are of a very superficial nature. The reader wonders why she abstains from disclosing her true feelings to the only sister who will keep her secret. Perhaps Jane beguiles herself all the time trying to convince herself of her own fascination for Bingley. She is more conscious of the society and is afraid of being "looked at" not "that I am afraid of *myself*, but I dread other people's remarks" (313). Even Elizabeth blushes quite a lot many times to hide her mortification or when she fears of her secret to be made public. She takes care not to let Darcy

know that he is the object of her observation too. Darcy is surprised by her behaviour and it intrigues him all the more. She defends her sister vehemently before Charlotte and later Mr. Darcy when they accuse Jane of not showing any real interest in Bingley. Her intense love for her family even blinds her at times of their weaknesses and she would retort to all who objected to their behaviour.

For the likes of Collins and Charlotte love is more a matter of compromise in which both parties agree to keep their part of the bargain and continue to live as husband and wife. In a relationship between such people, the “attraction” is mainly due to what the other has and what the other earns. Theirs are tailored roles that both have to play which most of the times, revolve around indifference to each other. In such relationships, the persons involved have nothing to complain about because the contract has been made with a lot of deliberation. The pain or the embarrassment which one or both might be feeling is endured without complaint. They are doomed to suffer like Dr Faustus⁴. Luckily Charlotte manages to avoid damnation by staying in her parlour at the back of the house. In this regard she reminds the reader of Mr. Bennet who also got married caught by a whim and later after the birth of daughters realizes that there was no escape from the relationship so he shuts himself up in his library to avoid interaction with his wife who had a “mean understanding” (3).

On the other hand, the relationship of people like Lydia and Wickham begins with apparent “passion” which is in fact, infatuation. The bond is based more on the physical attraction that each has for the other. There is not much of a thought or calculation behind forming this kind of a relationship which is why the “fire” of “passion” is likely to die soon. Theirs is a physical relationship devoid of any respect or care for the other, which is why Wickham’s “affection for [Lydia] soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer” (366) with every sign of a substantial decrease.

Considering such relationships one is led to ask certain questions. Can the action of Charlotte Lucas of marrying for money and economic security be pronounced immoral? Is there anything wrong with making sure that the material comfort and economic means are sufficiently available through the life that a person chooses to have with another? Is her utilitarian approach wrong? Does one false step, according to other’s judgment, though deliberately taken, label a person as immoral? She marries Collins with full knowledge of his character. Charlotte’s decision to get married to Collins does not in any way harm another person. She does the “right” thing in marrying Mr. Collins. She does not harm anyone through her decision; the decision rather provides the lonely Mr. Collins with a family he never knew before. Besides, she rids herself of the fear that she has of “dying an

old maid" (117). Like others she too has a general desire of her happiness. Charlotte's decision to get married to Mr. Collins may appear wrong on a certain level to certain people e.g. Elizabeth who thought Charlotte too intelligent and morally sound in making such a lifetime decision.

The same decision, however, appears rather benevolent and good from another perspective. That means the "goodness" or "badness" of actions depends on how far it influences or does not leave any impact others; and how far it ensures happiness and satisfaction to the people involved in the execution of that action. Judging actions from the point of view of morality, though apparently easy, is in fact a complicated thing. Right and wrong or good and bad are relative phenomena; the value that we attach with human actions change with change in perspective and the consequences that the actions have. The Bennet sisters — Lydia, Elizabeth, Jane — and Charlotte Lucas are right in their own ways when it comes to making choices for the life each decides to live. We have to learn to accept them as different faces of life — something which is apparently very simple.

Austen's moral world, however, is not so simple to understand. "Propriety," "good manners," or "integrity" are not necessarily the result of good breeding or a personal characteristic. A couple may have children with totally different kind of dispositions. Jane and Elizabeth are different than their younger sisters; Mr. Gardiner is different than Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Phillip; and the Bingley sisters are different from their brother. One is often led to wonder who to blame for this lack of propriety and integrity so important in a character. It is difficult to figure out why some children turn out to be different than the others even though they are bred and raised in the same environment. One is led to question the role of the society and the prevailing trends in the formation of a person's character.

Some of the questions that may trouble the reader are: how far is the love or the lack of it between parents responsible for how the children will be when they grow up? How far is the environment around them or their internal mechanism responsible for how they grow up? Does the relationship between/among siblings impact their personality? How much is an individual responsible for his actions? These are questions too difficult to answer. But what is good is that knowing about these factors makes us conscious of the education and upbringing that our children, families, and homes require for contentment and peace.

When Elizabeth alone "blushes" at the imbecility of her family, it seems strange because that is not how Jane reacts though she is a well-mannered and "sweet girl" according to the snobbish Bingley sisters. Very strange that nobody talks of her role in the upbringing of her younger sisters. It seems that everybody is on its own;

even the father who now and then points out the stupidity of his younger daughters does not check them severely or even compassionately. Elizabeth's dislike of her younger sisters' manners is precisely what makes her more desirable, and a better candidate for having a better home and a stronger relationship with her spouse. She judges things and people not just on their face value as most of the other characters in *P&P* do. It is difficult to have some notions or measured steps for ensuring a loving family. These are moral issues which are a little too subtle and complicated. Perhaps this is what *P&P* conveys to the reader that "Precepts are inadequate in [this] matter. People are all too frequently in the moral muddle, a state either of blindness or of confusion" (Benditt.246).

This is why Devlin believes that "Austen's novels are "novels of education" to greater extent than any previous representative of that sub-genre of fiction." But to Kelly her recurrent use of the terms, "feel", "know" and "think," shows her occupation with the ideas related to it and hence she wants people to become conscious of their actions.

In the novels of Austen one becomes consistently aware of her uneasiness as regard to the prevailing norms (standards) and mores (traditions) of her society. She gives due regard to classes and admires all that reflects goodness and abhors all that is vile. At times one is even led to feel as if she wishes to reshape the morals of her society. Cohan believes that "All Austen's heroines are relatively neglectful of class barriers and are upwardly mobile like Elizabeth—with the exception, of course, of Anne Elliott, who does one better than her sister heroines and marries 'beneath' her"(Cohan. 2). I contend that her heroines are never neglectful though they are conscious of class distinction or barriers. They are too mature to consider it a hindrance in the path of happiness. Though Elizabeth realizes that it is something to be the mistress of Pemberley yet she refuses his proposal because she believes that Darcy's proclamation of love does not qualify her ideals of love-based relationship.

What was going on in Miss Austen's mind when she sat down to construct Pemberley can perhaps be never known but critics guess that she wanted to paint meticulousness and perfection for the eyes, and seemingly, Pemberley is all but perfect. With neat grounds, well-kept park and pleasing surroundings, its interior is equally elegant that makes Elizabeth envious of the future mistress of this great place. Yet, the society of Pemberley lacks warmth, ease and vitality. When Elizabeth becomes sure of Darcy's true then she accepts his proposal. She manages to bring out the best in him by making him realize the true meanings of love. It is Elizabeth's presence that gives life to this seemingly petrified house. She manages to make a home out of it, by disregarding the 'others' who try to become

a hindrance, in the acquisition of her happiness. Love, in Ms Austen's world is more of an intellectual entity than a physical exhibition. Romance in her world is more a commitment than a show of emotions or a physical activity. Her persistence in remaining within her domain has no match; she manages to conform "more closely to real life"⁵ (Whately 5).

Conclusion

Austen's social ideology is based on the thesis that human emotions and feelings have their validity in human life if placed in the proper context or they may breed social evils like greed, hypocrisy, and selfishness. The novels subtly reveal these social and moral ills which deprive people of their peace of mind which they otherwise achieve if they do not fall a prey to them. Realization of one's self helps humans to counter all those wicked desires that destroy characters, pollute relationships, and degenerate intellectual powers. A basic lesson that we learn from the study is that education plays a vital role in creating sensible individuals who know the value of human relationships, especially as husbands and wives, who become role models for others to follow. Family is the basic unit of a society and perhaps this is why Miss Austen lays so much stress on the foundation of this unit. Critics who comment on her obsession with marriage ought to realize the importance of this institution. Children of happy families are likely to have comparatively balanced personalities for they carry the imprint of the impressions they form in their early childhood.

In Austen's world relationships are based on love, understanding, respect and tolerance. There is a strong relationship between objects and man as well as between one individual and another in her novels. Elizabeth, unlike other females of her society, rejects the obsession of the individual with the physical objects, especially those of comfort and status. They are potentially threatening and may overshadow other human relationships. Humans are ruled by the desire of objects that in themselves do not provide any satisfaction. When Charlotte marries Collins, she receives all the objects of comfort but moves to the back of the house to avoid the encumbering company of the source that provides it.

Whole lives are spent in the pursuit of achievement of things valueless in themselves and so contentment is not felt. For this reason Miss Austen promotes prudence in men and women, making them realize that they should direct their energies towards mental gains in the form of morality and strong ethics for that is where satisfaction lies. Charlotte cannot totally shun the society and hence sees as little of Collins as possible and Elizabeth observing her doubts of her "degree of

contentment" (149). Charlotte manages to survive because she is the part of this pretentious society.

Though Miss Austen never openly criticizes any type of relationship not based on love yet the reader manages to understand what it is that she admires in the formation of relationships which is why she herself refused to marry Harris Bigg-Wither though the engagement had been announced. She had realized that she did not love him enough to make him/herself happy by such a communion. A good relationship had to be based on love and respect.

Notes

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- ¹ The society was going through a remarkable social change; a new culture, so to say, was in the offing. Smith and Preston put it more appropriately. They say that social changes occur when the institutions change with a significant shift in the material and nonmaterial culture of a society (283). Mercer and Wanderer also believe that alteration in cultural values bring about new patterns of interaction (Mercer, Wanderer 478) ¹ among the people. As such we see a sharp influence of the French on the lives of the English intellectuals which Daiches considers a hedonistic liveliness at court (538). The English interacted with more people and new cultures than they ever did before. The society was opening up to new ideas and new practices. The result was that the people preferred the rejection of the severe moral laws to free expression and of formation of character as the chief object to be attained (Logouis 176). Excess of everything is undesirable and hence the excessive stress on form and manner resulted in bringing about an artificiality of sorts not only in literature but also in the lives of the people. Conduct books for females and books on observance of perfect manners for men came in the market.
 - ² The term appears in Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the State: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1971)
 - ³ Even Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, is presented in the beginning as highly conscious of her status and like Lady Catherine in *P&P*. She also needs someone to show her condescension to a grateful object (168) which turns out to be poor Harriet Smith. Without realizing the outcome of her actions, she spoils the sweet, docile and grateful disposition (23); an innocent girl by inculcating worldly ambitions. She forces her to refuse Mr. Martin whose mind has more true gentility than Harriet Smith can understand (63). Here we see Emmas schemes resembling the worldly Mrs. Bennet whose ambition in life is financial improvement through matrimony.
 - ⁴ The character Dr. Faustus in Marlow's play *Dr. Faustus* makes a contract with the devil by submitting his soul to the devil in return of a long life that will ensure him all worldly happiness and fulfillment of earthly desires. It is when he nears the end that he realizes his mistake but then it is too late.
 - ⁵ The lines are taken from an extract by Richard Whately that appears in *Critics on Jane Austen* edited by Judith O'Neill, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1970).

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