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Jane Austen: Initiating Feminism One Novel at a Time

Jane Austen's birth in the late 18th century occurred during an intellectual movement most notably known as the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. The French Revolution was in full force in an attempt to change the irrational economic, political, and social traditions that were plaguing society. The year 1789 ended the French Revolution as well as the Age of Enlightenment and the 1800's began what was known as the Romantic Period, a time when society began to focus more on emotion rather than reason. This was a period of time when people started thinking for themselves instead of being told how and what they should feel. Jane Austen was reared during this time where her feminist ideas contributed to the ever-changing world around her. Her perspective and ideas on the moral nature of women, marriage, and their societal roles established a foundation in feminism for the women of the next century and even in death her work continues to accentuate feminism upon the women of the 21st century.

Jane Austen had the advantage of being reared during a time when feminist writers had already begun forging the way for women. Mary Wollstonecraft, an early 18th century feminist writer, raised awareness on the importance of an educated woman and that a lack of education for women led to their imperfections not a lack of reason (Frost 257). Cy Frost who researched issues of propriety and economics in Wollstonecraft's work notes, "Wollstonecraft seeks to uncover the distinction between fatuous, frivolous, simple minded 'manners' which qualify as proper behavior and 'morals' which result from education" (257). Morals are what women

needed in order to strengthen the feminist role in society and Wollstonecraft firmly believed that women should not only be able to fulfill their moral responsibilities of being a wife and mother, but that they should be educated in order to contribute to society. She cites in the introduction of her book, “Strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves, the only way women can rise in the world— by marriage”

(Wollstonecraft 9). Wollstonecraft authored her book *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* as a means of justifying her opinion, that marriage for economic viability would destroy the marriage (260-261).

Jane Austen was at the height of womanhood at sixteen years old when Wollstonecraft’s book was published. Austen’s novels were written on the basis of courtship and marriage and share Wollstonecraft’s perception of the women’s lack of development in their individual mind and character making them comparable to that of a dying flower:

The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers that are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after pleasing a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity (Wollstonecraft 6).

Austen like Wollstonecraft believed that the culture of the 19th century was keeping women from obtaining reason (261).

Jane Austen’s portrayal of feminist traditions were not so political or as sensationalized as Wollstonecraft’s, but her works definitely placed the woman as having significance in society. Austen was not as outspoken on the role of women or feminist traditions as her predecessor. However, she didn’t have to be, Austen was able to use her voice through pen to represent her

personal ideals on women. Margaret Kirkham, author of *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* shares her insights on how the novel was a concept in Jane's time. She declares, "The moral nature of Woman, and the rights and duties of individual woman were not subjects much attended to in the philosophic treatise, but they could not be avoided in the novel" (14). The novel was an excellent way to position the author as a participant in their own book and contribute to the moral debates of the time (14). Austen's four main novels portray her significance of womanhood by involving, "heroines that are able to expand their degree of self-knowledge, reaffirm their integrity, and demonstrate their capacity for individual thought and action" (Myers 228). Jane Austen's ability to express her views on the moral nature of the woman and their rights was accomplished through her novels.

Austen's novels have a fascination with the woman finding love, a theme that she began writing about as an adolescent which enabled her to express her views on the feminist tradition. Her father, George Austen established an environment of learning in his home and tutored Austen during her youth, instilling in her a great love for writing her own poetry and plays. At the age of fourteen, she authored the work *Love and Friendship*, one of her first satire's written as a novel through the form of letters. The students including the narrator Laura, is portrayed as a worldly women with free spirits who let their emotions rule their morals and when any misfortune comes their way they are too involved in their emotions to care. (Norton 515). Austen proving that even before Wollstonecraft's book was published, she shared Wollstonecraft's views that, "culture makes women slaves to their emotions . . . blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (515).

Marriage in the 19th century eliminated the human rights of women and allowed the patriarchy of men to use women to their advantage (Newman 694). Kate Millet, 20th century

feminist writer affirms, “A women underwent ‘civil death’ upon marriage, forfeiting what amounted to every human right . . . Her husband owned both her person and her services. . . All that the woman acquired by her labor, service, or act during ‘coverture’ became the legal property of the male” (qtd. in Frost 256). Charlotte Perkins Gillman, author of *Women and Economics*, contends that women must marry in order to avoid the life of spinsterhood and benefit from economic independence:

The pressure under this one was an economic one. The girl must marry, how else live? The prospective husband prefers the girl who knows nothing. He is the market, the demand. She is the supply. And with the best intentions the mother serves her child’s economic advantage by preparing her for the market (qtd. in Frost 263).

Mrs. Bennett in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfect example of a mother who has prepared her daughters for the market. She is anxious for her daughters to marry so that they will enjoy the status, protection, and support that a marriage provides (263). Mrs. Bennett presumably must have feared for Elizabeth’s status when she rejected Mr. Darcy which would have resulted in Elizabeth facing a life of poverty because she defied the role of the woman by declining the offer of marriage.

A wife in the early 19th century was dependent upon the man and was not allowed to have any occupation other than being a wife. In the 18th century, once a woman was married she was independent of her father, but then dependent upon her husband. However, the change is considered to be a step up in society: “The relative independence of a wife, as the “mistress of the family,” is the highest situation that a woman can aspire to . . . for women have no means, other than marriage to establish themselves” (Handler 694). Austen knew that she could not be

considered both a writer and a wife. Frost's article asserts that the woman writer's cultural disposition in becoming a wife, no longer gives them the liberty to make their own decisions, let alone work outside the home. He further claims, "Patriarchal society regarded her manifestation-of-self through writing as an attempt to vitiate the domestic sphere, the married woman's 'proper territory'" (256). In Austin's case, working inside the home as an author already gave her an inferior sense of being a female and a writer. This led her to keep her name from being printed on her first published works. She instead had her works published under, "a lady".

Austen's novel, *Emma* portrays a very different role in marriage and in the personality of her female character. Emma, financially well-off, and has no need to marry in order to gain financial security, unlike past submissive characters of Austen's. Emma is a misbehaving woman who makes it well-known that she has no need for marriage or for love: "I have never been in love; it is not my way, or my nature" (Goodheart 602). Feminist author, Eugene Goodheart writes an article that describes Emma as Austen's errant heroine, since Emma marries anyway and "happily ever after" is believed to be the ending for the couple. Goodheart concludes, "The community at the end is ideally organized or reorganized in a way that makes for happiness" (602). Feminist critics have shown hostility toward the institution of marriage that may confuse the issue of whether Emma's marriage at the end is self-fulfillment or self-betrayal (Goodheart 602). Emma's character fit the life of Austen and her perception of marriage; however, 21st century feminist critic Carolyn Heilbrun argues, "Jane Austen cannot allow her heroines her own unmarried, highly accomplished destiny" (49). Austen believed in happy endings in her novels and she allowed Emma to be happy through marriage.

Jane Austin had good reason to have concerns with motherhood having been placed in a foster home in infancy and spending five childhood years in boarding schools. Austen, the

seventh of eight children, was like the rest of her brothers and sisters who were also placed in a foster home until her mother felt she could take care of them. Austen was also sent to several different boarding schools beginning at the age of six with her eight-year-old sister Cassandra. Austen and Cassandra were inseparable as girls and their mother believed that sending them to school together would be in their best interest. She shared a close relationship with her sister which permitted her to share more confidences and secrets with her sister than her mother.

Austen lacked her own mother's stabilizing presence and has allowed her own conscious to make her decisions against marriage and motherhood. Austen's novels end at marriage instead of continuing into the setting of married life or motherhood. Margaret Moore, feminist critic, sees Austen as "a 'cynical' misogynist who hates being dependent on love and sex (due to a poor relationship with her mother) and who dislikes children because (envy of the maternal role is to be expected in a childless woman)" (qtd. in Brown 323). A lack of an emotional attachment to her mother contributed to her avoidance of motherhood and enabled a close companionship with her sister that caused neither of them to marry.

Austen through her novels had a strong desire to define her own social status as independent of men. She wanted to do what she felt was important and made her happy instead of what society felt was important. Austen was living independently the way Mary Wollstonecraft defined independence, "Independence ought to stem from reason rather than property and that woman, like all humans irrespective of their rank in the current society owe their first duty to themselves as rational creatures" (qtd. in Handler 703). Austen created her female protagonists as women who owe their first duty to themselves with personalities that are independent of others decisions. Richard Handler defines what it means to be independent, he claims, "To be independent is to be governed by one's own will . . . to have power to make

choices and to be governed by those choices alone” (692). In Austen’s texts, a dependent woman is portrayed as being reliant upon superior beings, usually the male. Handler defines a dependent person this way, “A person dependent upon another . . . is not fully a person in his or her own right, in this sense, to be ‘dependent’ is to be incomplete” (692). Austen wanted her female characters to be independent in order to maintain social hierarchy. Her women were subject to a patriarchal definition of womanhood, and had to reinvent that definition for themselves so that it includes such qualities as independence, assertiveness, ambition, and achievement. (Heilbrun 33). Heilbrun characterizes both Emma in *Emma* and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, as “women who do not need men for their self-identification and who hold their own in dialogues with men” (33). Austen defied the culture norms and made it known that social order did not govern her character’s actions.

Jane Austen’s novels empowered women in the next century to continue to write for the social equality of women. Virginia Woolf, born in 1882 at the end of the Romantic period, studied the works of 18th century authors in-depth and was well aware of Jane Austen and her novels emphasizing womanhood declaring, “Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. . . . Think away the surface animation, the likeness to life, and there remains to provide a deeper pleasure, an exquisite determination of human values” (Lambdin 44). Woolf’s novel, *A Room of One’s Own*, focuses on the female literary traditions and expresses her views that a woman needs a room of their own in order to write whatever she pleases. Her novel speaks in behalf of Austen who had to write in a one room setting and hide her works when company came. Woolf, understanding Austen’s patriarchal cultural acknowledges, “Without boasting or giving pain to the opposite sex, one may say that *Pride and*

Prejudice is a good book. At any rate, one would not have been ashamed to have been caught in the act of writing *Pride and Prejudice*" (Lambdin 80).

Not all 19th century feminist authors accepted Austen's work, such as Charlotte Bronte who felt that she had more differences than similarities to Austen. After reluctantly reading, *Pride and Prejudice*, she critique's Austen's work as, "a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck" (Weiser 94). She sees romantic structure, but without the full, heart throbbing, blood flowing passion: However, George Lewes defends Austen for her attempt to present feminism during such a rebellious movement:

There are heights and depths in human nature Miss Austen never scaled or fathomed, there are worlds of passionate existence into which she has never set foot; but . . . she has risked no failures by attempting to delineate that which she has not seen. Her circle may be restricted, but it is complete. (Sentiment)

Austen's work was simplistic in nature, but deep in emotion which allows the reader to find passion in their own way. Her work, in a sense was complete because her novels possessed the feminism qualities that women needed to in order to create change in their society.

Austen's final novel entitled, *Persuasion* was written just before her death in 1817, when her culture was just beginning to experience the changes of the Romantic Period and society was letting their emotions overrule reason. Reason is portrayed through her parent's selection and approval of Mr. Wentworth as a husband and emotion is portrayed through her rejection of him. In this novel, Austen powerfully incorporates her strong feminist beliefs through Anne Elliott's character. Anne forms her own opinions in making her decision based on her emotions and some encouragement from a friend, rather than her own reasoning. However, Anne's rejection is

causing her some profound feelings of regret. Eventually, Anne determines for herself, “it is only good or bad as the event decides—that is in retrospect she was right in yielding (Rohrbach 743). Austen presents Anne with the ability through her own conscious to determine that she was right to wait.

Austen’s work was buried with her death and it wasn’t until decades later that her works were revisited and realized to be relevant to the female women writers of the 20th century. Female women and authors today agree with Joanne Wilkes, when she quotes Anne Thackeray, “Her humor flows gentle and spontaneous it is no elaborate mechanism, nor artificial fountain, but a bright natural little stream, rippling and trickling and sparkling every here and there in sunshine. (Wilkes 44) Austen’s work was filled with her humorous irony, but contained nothing artificial. Critics today have portrayed her as more than a little stream in the sunshine and have paid her with the greatest tribute of womanhood:

She has left to all time, not only her books, but a picture of what a female author and artist should be: true to home duties, while she is true to her genius; delicate and brilliant in her work, yet without a word having ever dropped from her pen that can offend the blush of modesty. (Wilkes 44).

Jane Austen as both a woman and a writer represented feminism in a time when women’s creative and intellectual influence were being challenged. She created her characters carefully with morals and manners and did not allow either the individual or society to dominate at the expense of another (McMaster 739).

Austen’s novels integrated feminism and esteem in an effort to improve the social identity of women in an effort to take the patriarchal ownership out of the marriage. Through her love of writing, she fulfilled her purpose by beautifully portraying the woman as having a role in

courtship and marriage. Mary Poovey, feminist writer, describes Austen as completing the difficult in a difficult time as she explains, “Through her irony and skillful manipulation of point of view, Jane Austen developed artistic strategies that ‘resolved’ some of the most debilitating ideological contradictions of this period of chaotic change” (xvii). In her effort to portray women as “female” she empowered feminist authors into the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as today.

Austen’s novels inspire readers today with a “well-established reputation as the most widely read and loved of all the classic novelists of English literature” (qtd in Langland 44). Her novels have been modernized into award winning movies and miniseries, and today’s authors have made every effort to create sequels in an attempt to carry on her work. Women of the 21st century are the beneficiaries of Austen’s feminine ideals. Her work contributed to the empowerment of female writers who have brought feminist traditions to today’s society. When we sit down to enjoy *Pride and Prejudice*, we ought to be grateful for women like Jane Austen.

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