

Morals, Values and Ethics in the Novels of Jane Austen

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ABSTRACT

The role of the literary artists in shaping the public opinion is vital and their writings exhibit the moral, the religious and the ethical trends which purposely lay sound foundations of any society. The English novel is concerned immensely with standards of conduct and informed often with profoundly moral purposes. Literature has an important but indirect role in moral education, it helps readers develop and practice the central ethical skill of empathizing with other peoples' lives and perspectives. The focus of study of this research paper is an attempt to consider the moral and ethical issues in Jane Austen's fiction.

KEYWORDS

Jane Austen; literature; values; morals; ethics; virtue.

Literature plays a vital role in shaping the opinion of the masses, as truth transcends time, trends and space. The writers shoulder social responsibility in building the opinion of the society. Through their writings, they exhibit the moral, the religious and the ethical trends which purposely lay sound foundations of any society.

Values are the rules by which we make decisions about right and wrong. Morals are far more about good and bad than other values. Ethics means 'rules of behaviour based on ideas about what is morally good and bad'. A central aspect of ethics is "the good life", which is more

important than moral conduct. Ethics are thus internally defined and adopted, whilst morals tend to be externally imposed on other people.

An examination of literature and ethics entails an engagement with the moral principles or values intrinsic to literature. Literature has an important but indirect role in moral education by helping readers develop and practice the central ethical skill of empathizing with other peoples' lives and perspectives. This research paper is an attempt to consider the moral and ethical issues in English fiction particularly in the novels of Jane Austen's fiction.

Perhaps the most commonly cited

ethical conflict is that between an imperative or injunction not to steal and one to care for a family that you cannot afford to feed without stolen money. Debates on this often revolve around the availability of alternate means of income or support such as a social safety net, charity, etc. The debate is in its starkest form when framed as stealing food. In *Les Misérables* Jean Valjean does this and is relentlessly pursued. Under an ethical system in which stealing is always wrong and letting one's family die from starvation is always wrong, a person in such a situation would be forced to commit one wrong to avoid committing another, and be in constant conflict with those whose view of the acts varied. In *Sophie's Choice*, Sophie is an appealing person because she wants to do what is right and is emotionally torn by the moral dilemmas in which she finds herself. We do not blame her for them. If, however, she was a morally callous person who did not care about the dilemmas or about what she did, then it would not be an appealing or tragic story, as it is.

The English novel has been concerned with standards of conduct and informed often with profoundly moral purposes. Jane Austen and her works are generally considered representative of the late eighteenth-century "classical" world view and its values - judgment, reason,

clarity of perception - those of the "Age of Reason." In its best sense, this is a moral world view, reflecting the values of the Enlightenment. Jane Austen is not a proclaimed moralist. Unlike Fielding, her aim is not to propagate the morality. She believes in art for the sake of art. She is the pioneer of the novels. Therefore, her plots are well-knit. Her main interest lies in irony and there is a hidden significance of morality as we come across her moral vision in her novels through irony.

Jane Austen is concerned with the growth of an individual's moral personality measured by the most exacting standards of 18th century values. She uses irony to shake off the self-deception of major figures and expose the hypocrisy and absurdity of some of her minor figures. Irony in her hand is the instrument of a moral vision. Walter Allen comments: "She is the most forthright moralist in English." (Wright: 1964)

The theme of *Emma* is of courtship and marriage; it begins with a marriage and ends with three others. Successful marriage represents a true moral and ethical reality. Emma grows in a moral way as a result of her recognition of objective truth, she evolves into a more integrated person, a better being, and in the process gains what is truly right for her as an individual. The

significance of the moral aspects of the novel is addressed by Arnold Kettle: “the prevailing interest in *Emma* is not one of mere ‘aesthetic’ delight but a moral interest,” and Austen’s “ability to involve us intensely in her scene and people is absolutely inseparable from her moral concern. The moral is never spread on top; it is bound up always in the quality of feeling evoked... The delight we find in reading *Emma* has in fact a moral basis” (114, 119). The moral and ethical issues are implicit in the novels, and spiritual evolution is the outcome of the process of internal change.

Karin Jackson Comments:

We are personally enriched by Austen’s novel, as we are by all of her works, but because of the constant focus on the character of Emma, we are even more enriched by this work. We partake in Emma’s quest for wholeness, self-understanding, integrity, and spiritual insight. In a sense, the dilemma of Emma is also our dilemma, as we work to move toward integration, self-realization, truth, and reality. (vol.2, no.2)

Austen’s moral education is far more direct. Her novels analyze and teach a virtue ethics for bourgeois life – the kind of life that most of us live today. Virtue ethics is the approach to moral philosophy that

understands the good life in terms of the development of personal moral character: in terms of becoming the kind of person who does the right thing at the right time for the right reasons.

Austen celebrates and promotes a solidly middle-class ethics. The success for Austen’s characters depends on their developing a moral character. Her central virtues are conspicuously bourgeois: prudence (planning one’s actions with respect to protecting and furthering one’s interests); amiability (civility to family, friends, and strangers, according to their due); propriety (understanding and acting on an acute sense of what virtue requires); and dignity (considering oneself an independent, autonomous person deserving of respect). In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Elizabeth Bennet rejects Darcy’s haughty condescension out-of-hand: the happy ending must wait until Darcy comes to see beyond Elizabeth’s lowly connections and unaristocratic manners, and fully recognize her true virtue. That’s a moral happy ending even more than it is a romantic one. Like any good virtue ethicist, Austen gives illustrative examples. This is why her characters are moral rather than psychological constructs. Austen’s purpose is not to explore their inner lives, but to expose particular moral pathologies.

Austen carefully illustrates the detail and fine-tuning that true virtue requires. For instance, to show us what true amiability should be, she shows us what it isn't, quite. Fanny Price, the heroine of *Mansfield Park* (1814), is so excessively amiable as to put her own dignity and interests at risk; so self-effacing that her true love almost doesn't notice her (until events intervene). Mr. Bingley's amiability is perfect in pitch, but fails to discriminate between the deserving and undeserving (P&P). Emma (in *Emma*, 1815), is very discriminating, but in a snobbish way: she is rather too conscious of her social status, and does not actually respect others as she should, which of course, gets her into trouble.

Austen contrives her plots to illustrate the virtuous conduct of her characters. The plot is so firmly in the author's hands, not the characters: Austen is primarily concerned with setting up particular scenes – moral trials, in which we can see how virtuous characters behave in testing circumstances. The rest – the rituals of the romantic comedy genre and 'social realism' is just a background. In every novel Austen's central characters are seen working through moral problems of all kinds, weighing up and considering what propriety requires by talking it through either to

themselves or to trusted friends. The character's moral development is evident; for example, in the way Elizabeth and Darcy both learn from their early mistakes about pride and prejudice. The characters are engaging in explicit, almost technical, philosophical analysis, such as debating to what extent Frank Churchill should be considered morally responsible for his failure to visit her father (*Emma*), to the evident boredom of the less morally developed characters stuck in the same room.

Austen carries out her mission of moral education with flair and brilliance, while charitably respecting the capacities of her readers. This is why she is so much more readable than most moral theorists, such as Kant, who seem often to write as if being comprehensible is not their problem. Yet there is one further striking feature that sets Austen's novels apart: her moral gaze. The omniscient author of her books sees right through people to their moral character, and then exposes and dissects their follies, flaws, and self-deceptions.

This is virtue ethics at a different level – it's about moral vision, not just moral content. Austen shows us how to look at ourselves and analyze and identify our own moral character. She shows us how to meet

Socrates' challenge to 'Know thyself'.
Rodham declares Jane Austen as a moral
philosopher (2014).

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