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Literature Reflects Society: The Social Setting in Jane Austen's Time

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ABSTRACT: The world Jane Austen was born into was, in some respects, very different from our own. The charge has frequently been levelled against Jane Austen that she lived rather a sheltered life, content to write novels about a middle-class, provincial, unchanging society in a world of change and turbulence to which she was largely indifferent. Such a view must come from a casual or unimaginative reading of the novels. Jane Austen lived and wrote in a social environment in which one class felt completely isolated from another because of this sense of its distinct group life, it also felt safe from all intrusion of elements foreign to its nature.

KEYWORDS: Born, different, sheltered, provincial, turbulence, unimaginative, environment, intrusion, foreign.

I. INTRODUCTION

The world Jane Austen was born into was, in some respects, very different from our own. The charge has frequently been leveled against Jane Austen that she lived rather a sheltered life, content to write novels about a middle-class, provincial, unchanging society in a world of change and turbulence to which she was largely indifferent. Such a view must come from a casual or unimaginative reading of the novels; it has been propagated even by eminent writers. G.K. Chesterton says. "There is not a shadow of indication anywhere that this independent intellect and laughing spirit was other than contented with a narrow domestic routing, in which she wrote a story as domestic as a diary in the intervals of pies and puddings, without so much as looking out of the windows to notice the French Revolution."¹

"What calm lives they had, those people. No worries about the French Revolution, or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic wars", wrote Winston Churchill with *Pride and Prejudice* in mind. However, had he been more observant or read *'Mansfield park'* or *Persuasion*, he would not have written so.

II. DISCUSSION

In a highly educated family such as the Austens', national affairs of the times were not likely to be overlooked and must often have taken precedence over more parochial matters, local gossip, and books.

Jane Austen, however, restricted herself almost exclusively to the landed gentry of England. The landed gentry was the class which had a place of pivotal importance in English society, standing in between the aristocracy and the middle class and forming a sort of link between them. This was the class that Jane Austen knew best or wished to know. She had no curiosity to overstep the limits of that sphere of social life with which she was intimately familiar. At the time she was writing, class distinctions had become sharply noticeable; very few writers were able to ignore these distinctions and take a broad view of the contemporaneous social life as fielding had done earlier. Jane Austen lived and wrote in a social environment in which one class felt completely isolated from another land because of this sense of its distinct group life, it also felt safe from all intrusion of elements foreign to its nature.

Chronologically Jane Austen's literary career had its fruition in the early years of the nineteenth century, but the society she portrays in her novels is that of an earlier age. As a matter of fact, social life in England during this period did not undergo the kind of radical change that took place in France. As Sir Walter Besant observes.

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There were so few change, and the these so slight in manners, customs and prevalent ideas between 1700 and 1837, that we may consider the eighteenth century as continuing down to the beginning of the victorian era.³

It was especially in the life of the gentry that one could find clear evidence of the prolongation of an earlier age.

The class that Jane Austen portrays in her novels is self-contained and constitutes a small world of its own. It receives outside influences rather tardily and with extreme difficulty. The member of the gentry, as Jane Austen's novels reveal, are rather parasitical, living on other peoples labour and appear to be under no pressure or obligation to work. The nature of their engagement is completely different from that of persons who have to worry about their daily bread. A squire or baronet of Jane Austen's days contents himself with the society of his equals. He lives mostly on his own estates and does not often go out on a tour of France, which in earlier times was considered a necessary part of a young gentleman's was considered a necessary part of a young gentleman's education. He hunts with people of his own status and dines with them whenever invited. He feels perfectly at ease in their society. He makes only short visits to London or Bath as a longer stay at these places would be expensive and also possible beyond his means.

Among a landowner's privileges, sport was given a high place. After a morning's hunt a country gentleman would go home and give an account of his adventures, mishaps and successes to the rest of the family. He would not suspect that female ears had little attraction for the eternal repetition of such accounts. One single word fully expressive of the character of sir john Middleton In sense and sensibility is the word 'Sportsman'. According to him, one who is a good shot cannot but be a perfect gentleman. The privileged group of landed gentry as nothing to do but to enjoy leisure and tranquility, which it considers to be its birth-right.

Jane Austen never shows us men who work for money or fame. We see, thus, that in the world Jane Austen portrays work is not at all important.

Following the example of the master of the house, his wife and children also a life of leisure and ease. The manor house on the family estate is a centre of varied amusements. Lady Bertran, under the pretext of ill-health, but really from indolence, gave up the house in town to stay almost permanently in the country, leaving Sir Bertram to attend to his duties in the parliament. Similar, the Bennet sisters have been away from Lonabourne only to see friends in the neighbouring counties. The mental horizon of the gentry, thus, was very limited and more limited was their mental borazon. "There was not a quiver in the atmosphere, not a storm in the sky" as leonie Villard puts it.⁴ They led a perfectly tranquil life with a sense of infinite contentment in the present and with a feeling of confidence and security about the future. Such a way of life inevitably engendered a sense of complacency, which rendered these people altogether blind to the reality of misery and pain around them. Their belief that the world is without irreparable catastrophes or unforeseen disasters keeps them in a relationship of perfect harmony with their social environment. It was a matter of great concern when the even tenor of family life was interrupted sometimes by an illness like that of Marianne Dashwood, an elopement like that of Lydia Bennet or a filahat as that of maria Bertram with such a contemted and untroubled life these well-born people had no torments of ambitions and desires incapable of fulfillment. They were fully satisfied with their lot and had no envy against their betters. This prevented them from seeking the society of the higher ranking aristocracy towards which they were more or less.

So, the snob who is ever anxious to get familiar with the lilted people and would not mind stooping to any meanness or enduring any humiliation in order to find entry into their social circle, is an exception in the society which jane Austen portrays. It was twenty years later that snobbery as a social malady was considered deserving of serous study by Thackeray in his famous work, Book of snobs.

Jane Austen, leaving aside both the poor and the fabulously rich, concerns herself mainly with the country century. There is no free mixing of different classes in her novels. In the world portrayed by her, all social groups stand apart from each other. There is no suggestion of sympathetic understanding between classes class division are pretty rigid.

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But what was actually happening at the time with Jane Austen was busy writing her novels? The days of subsistence farming by cottagers were coming to a close. Influential voices had argued earlier that common wastelands, where the poor grazed their sheep or cut furzes, must be enclosed to make larger units for the new scientific farming. During Jane Austen's lifetime, the change to mechanized, large scale farming was taking place. Economic gains were great; the human cost was frightful, as country people lost their common land and were forced into dependence on such day's work as were offered.

Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted village* (1770) sum up the state of affairs earlier on.

"Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, where wealth accumulates, and men decay; Princes and lords may flourish, or may fade; a breath can make them, as a breath has made; But a bold peasantry, their country's pride, when once destroyed, can never be supplied."⁵

The village become deserted, of course, as families migrated to the new industrial towns and other places in search of work.

Materialism and ostentation, getting and spending' were undoubtedly characteristic of the period. However, this did not receive Jane Austen's sympathy or approval, even though Elizabeth Bennet married a man with a large fortune. The author's scorn for John Dashwood and his wife, and her disapproval of Wickham and Mr. Elliot are evident.

As more and more people in commerce became wealthy, divisions in the higher social ranks became increasingly irregular and uncertain. Few were affected by the French Revolutionary principles of equality and fraternity; still economic and social differences were often ignored, particularly between the upper and middle classes.

The professions recruited mainly from among the wellborn younger sons, though some professions were considered gentlemanly and some were not. Young men of good families were likely to go in for the law, the church or the armed services. The increase in population and prosperity during the eighteenth century was matched by expansion in the professions of the law, medicine and the clergy.

The word 'doctor' was rarely used except for doctors of divinity. Physicians were members of the Royal College of Physicians, were members of the Royal College of Physicians, founded by Henry VIII. They were mostly gentlemen by birth and education. However, medical men could not presume too far in terms of their usefulness. With medical knowledge uncertain and the treatments drastic, the concern shown by Jane Austen's characters over each other's colds becomes understandable.

A university degree was considered sufficient training for the church. "Church benefices may be considered or a fund for the provision of the younger sons of our gentry and nobles,"⁶ said R.L. Edgeworth. Bishops and deans were appointed by the Crown.

Status, income and comforts of the clergy rose during the century; Jane Austen's clergymen seem to have been better off financially, more acceptable socially, than the average clerics of her time. A clergyman's daughter, herself, Jane Austen took the keenest interest in the duties and status of the profession.

Mary Crawford regrets that Edmund is to be a clergyman instead, she wishes, he had gone into the Army at sixteen, the normal age for doing so. Commissions had to be purchased, an innovation introduced by Charles II. Promotion was rapid in wartime; deaths in battle and from sickness would mean a large number of empty posts to be filled.

The manners of the new genteel, middle class were very formal by our standards wives and husbands addressed each other as 'Mr.' and 'Mrs.' Even in the company of friends. Lady Bertram addressed her husband as 'Sir Thomas Bertram'. At any time, Mrs. Elton's mention of 'knightly' would have indicated some lack of breeding, but she was familiar and patronizing after a very brief acquaintance. Children in their early years used such common

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terms as 'mama', 'papa' and 'maam' but as they grew up, they became habituated to addressing their parents as 'sir' and 'madam', 'cousin', 'brother', 'sister' were common forms of address.

There is a noticeable inconsistency in Jane Austen's use of names. In the earlier novels, titles for eminent characters such as Darcy and Bingley are often omitted. Among the characters, too, it is not just Lydia who speaks of 'wickham', but also the estimable Mrs. Gardiner, Marianne and her mother address Willoughby as 'Willoughby' whereas Elinor is quite formal in speaking to Edward Ferrar's.

Outdoor recreations for youth included riding, baseball and an early form of cricket. For women there were few; driving out rather than riding seems to have been the fashion, though Lord Osborne wondered that more ladies did not ride, especially in 'dirty weather'. And an early form of cricket. For women there were few; driving out rather than riding seems to have been the fashion, though lord Osborne wondered that more ladies did not ride, especially in 'dirty weather'.

London was the main theatrical center, and there is sufficient evidence in Jane's letter that whenever she had the opportunity, she saw important plays and great actors and actresses on the London stage.

In the education of young Ladies, manners and accomplishments took the first place. Lady Susan thought that 'grace and manner' would do more to gain her daughter an eligible lover than would the whole gamut of accomplishments. These included languages, sketching and painting, music and singing. Broadwood pianos were fashionable, as music and singing. Broadwood pianos were fashionable, as we are reminded in Emma but playing on the harp was the most attractive, accomplishment for a young lady or governess.

Writing for contemporary readers only, Jane Austen gives us little information about dress, and this little is so incidental that it soon fades from the memory of the general reader. This is particularly true of her men. The most memorable detail is that Mr. Bingley wore a blue coat: Lydia wondered whether Wickham would appear in his for their wedding. As could be expected, there is much more on ladies dress, but the detail is distinctive rather than general, and quite inadequate to give a reader, who is not familiar with the illustrations of the period, any idea of their long, high-waisted elegance.

Hair styles were not neglected by women or men. Curls were in fashion: Mrs. Robert Watson was anxious that her husband should powder his hair more often. Henry Tilney teasingly asked Catherine Morland how her various dresses, her complexion, and the curl of her hair could be described if she did not keep a journal. Costume illustrations of the Regency period suggest that generally it was not so much the hair as the head-dress which constituted a lady's 'crown of glory'.

This selective survey of the life and customs might end, as do Jane Austen's novels, with marriage, a subject associated with dancing and parties. Few careers as attractive were open to women in these lines. Jane Fairfax abhorred the prospect of being a governess and Watson preferred 'any good humoured man with a comfortable income' to joining 'the ignorant class of school mistresses'. For the more impecunious, such as Charlotte Lucas, marriage was 'their pleasantest preservative from want'.⁷

For a young lady to be seen out often with a man was rash unless they were engaged. Nor was it expected that a young woman would write to a young man, as Marianne did, unless they were engaged. However, parents were growing to accept the view that young people had the right to choose their life partners for themselves. Marriages between cousins were common. Weddings are rarely the great social occasions they are nowadays. Mrs. Rushworth did not attend her sons. Marriage and Emma's was very much like other weddings'. Attended by a 'small and of true friends' and lacking in 'finery or parade'.

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III.CONCLUSION

As a novelist, Jane Austen's interest was predominantly in people rather than in things, in principles of conduct, personal bias, and errors of judgment rather than in the detail and color of the social scene. She left the familiar to the imagination of her contemporary readers; for them no detailed description was necessary to visualize manners and scenes which inevitably make a fainter impression on most readers of today. This helps to concentrate attention on characters and motivation, the inner values and forces of good or evil which create the real interest and supreme drama of her novels. Indeed, her novels are less subject to the mutation of time than historical customs and the trappings of a distant era.

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