

IB Extended Essay 2010

Does Jane Austen merely comment on 18th Century courtship, or does she show, through example, her solution to its faults?

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Abstract:

In this essay the question asked is how Jane Austen instructs 18th century society on how to achieve a good and loving marriage by examples throughout her novels. This question was answered through careful consideration of all the full novels written by Austen. Within each, the different rendezvous, conversations, and fraternizations between the men and women were shown careful consideration. The examples in the books showed that friendships that developed into a romantic relationship were in Jane Austen's opinion, the best kind of courtships. The clearest example of this was in *Emma*, where the main characters, Mr. Knightly and Emma, realize their love for one another after years of friendship and conversation. The clearest example of bad courtship is of Lydia and Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. Due to the fact that their union is formed fast and based solely on passion, and the marriage is hinted by Austen to degenerate in this quote, "His affection for her soon sunk into indifference; hers lasted a little longer..." (399). This proof of a happy or unhappy marriage is found at the end of Austen's novels. She brings us to the endings through depictions of passionate trysts, platonic friendships, argumentative acquaintances and many other forms of courtship. It therefore becomes clear that she uses these forms of courtship to express the process in which a marriage can be formed in; and through that, the type of marriage formed in consequence to the type of courtship. This cause and effect argument proves that Austen is indeed instructing through example how to achieve a good marriage

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Jane Austen's themes in the 18th and 19th century were universal. The themes of courtship, romance, society and wealth, have been written and analyzed hundreds of times, in all different perspectives. However, through her writing, Austen gave a woman's perspective of the ageless theme of love, and its conflicts, a perspective which given the time period, was rare, and often disregarded. Although her genius may not have been recognized for what it was, an insightful, satirical, and honest description of the conflicts of the heart and "laws" of marriage, until after her death, its themes still ring true today. The truly amazing quality of Jane Austen's work however, is instead of merely writing unrelated stories of love and loss, she demonstrated over and over in her novels, a solution to the 1800's modern day courtship. Although she recognizes, through her satire, that people are more often than not hindered by their almost inability to change, she gives a simple solution to creating a happy union between a couple. Her belief, proved through her novels, is that the 18th and 19th century popular idea of courtship was only beneficial for marriages based on money and little understanding of one's partner. Her idea was that in order to form a felicitous union, the man and woman should understand each other's interests, emotions, and beliefs, and most especially faults, before a marriage is arranged. In this paper, Jane Austen's main themes, courtship, pedigree, society, wealth, and friendship will be discussed in their relation to good and bad courtship, and her claim to a happy marriage solidified through these themes and comments from characters within her novels.

At this point it is best to state that by courtship, the idea of traditional courtship, or present day dating is not implied. Courtship in Austen's novels can mean a variety of things. One of its more popular meanings in Jane Austen's novels can be a long friendship, in which one or both of the characters has hidden feelings of attraction, such as Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* or Mr. Tilney and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. In another sense, it can mean

open flirting between two characters, as well as a hidden relationship, which is not of the official kind and often involves secret rendezvous, such as Lydia and Wickham in “Pride and Prejudice”, or Marianne Dashwood and John Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. Therefore, it is more an idea or pre-state to an engagement, instead of an official or established state, in which everyone related to the characters is aware of.

Austen’s idea of good courtship is the most common theme throughout all of her novels. Austen’s rather satirical view of 18th and 19th century courtship is portrayed in her books with a certain technique. She expresses these types of marriages and romances to be based on two extremes. The first was a complete disregard to the feelings that create the emotion of love, instead focusing on the material benefits of the specific courtship. In *Northanger Abbey* General Tilney aims to see his son and Catherine Morland married because he (wrongly) believes Catherine will receive the estate of the Morland’s family friends, the Allens. To the other extreme, Austen writes of couples who base their marriages upon passion only, such as Lydia and Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. Their courtship was fast and secret, based solely on the fleeting passion that shallow attraction creates. In most of Austen’s novels, she reveals the true intents of those involved in the courtship and forces her main characters to understand their suitors on a deeper level. This takes into account not just their assets, but their faults as well. Austen expresses this ideal idea of courtship through argument, friendship, and long acquaintances. In essence, her main characters court one another without being fully aware of it themselves, often until the last chapters.

A clear example of this is the one of Fanny and Edmund in *Mansfield Park*. The two grow up together and exchange their thoughts and ideas as they mature. However, Edmund sees Fanny as his close confidant and friend, nothing more, until the end of the novel when he realizes that he has stronger affections for her. “With such a regard for her, indeed as his had long been, a regard founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and

completed by every recommendation of growing worth... dearer by all his own importance with her than anyone else at Mansfield, what was there now to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones." (436, *Mansfield Park*) This quote shows that not only do Edmund and Fanny develop into a romantic relationship, but that Edmund had to grow and experience life as well as mature before their love could in Austen's opinion, come into the light. Although the characters took part in all the activities said to be associated with courtship in those times, they are unaware of the courtships romantic side until the end of the novel. The relationships which demonstrate the sharing of ideas between the couple and connection of the mind are end in good marriages.

the couple Catherine and Mr. Tilney, in *Northanger Abbey*. The couple is different from Edmund and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* because attraction between the two is evident upon their first meeting. However, certain circumstances and cautions from Catherine's guardians prevent them from entering into an engagement quickly. Because of this, Catherine visits Mr. Tilney's mansion, and discovers an extraordinary amount of secrets about the Tilney's that would have remained a secret, or entrapment, had she married Mr. Tilney earlier. She also matures from a naïve and only recently "almost pretty" (17) girl to a woman through her attachment to Tilney and trial and error when thrown into Bath society and soon afterwards, *Northanger Abbey*. The chief reason for this long courtship is because of Austen's belief that Catherine is too immature and new to the world to settle before she has had some experience of the darker aspects of it. Through this Austen shows us when characters need time to gain a deeper insight into their romantic interest's personalities, or backgrounds. Not only does this allow characters to separate themselves from dangerous personalities easily, because no official announcement of their attachment has been made, but it also allows characters to think more about their own feelings and inclinations before entering into more binding relationships with their courting partners. Austen says this most clearly herself on page 235, "...The General's unjust

interference, so far from being really injurious to their felicity, was perhaps rather conducive to it, by improving their knowledge of each other, and adding strength to their attachment..." (235).

Austen also indicates a good courtship through the characters actions. In all but *Mansfield Park*, one of the leading male characters saves a leading female character from a crisis. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy sets up a marriage between Lydia and Wickham to save Elizabeth from scorn in society. "“If you *will* thank me,’ he replied, ‘ let it be for yourself alone. that the wish of giving happiness to you.. I believe I thought only of *you*” (377). This quote in which Darcy acknowledges Elizabeth’s thanks for his help in marrying Lydia shows the length Austen’s leading male characters will go to to protect their loved one. This depth of devotion is a trait Austen shows as essential in a good marriage.

Another method Austen uses to show the depth of characters understanding of one another is through correction. The best example, in *Emma*, is that of Emma and Mr. Knightley. Emma upon treating a woman of lower social standing rudely, is reproached by Mr. Knightley. "“It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant... to have you now, in thoughtless spirits... laugh at her, humble her... before others, many of whom would be entirely guided by *your* treatment... I will tell you truths while I can; satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel...” (340). Knightley criticizes Emma’s behavior not out of spite, but out of concern for her. He proves himself to care deeply for her, and to know her deeply as well. His care for her personality and disposition show that he is not merely concerned with her social standing, or appearance. His love for her is deeper than mere passion or material want would allow. Therefore, criticism, while unpleasant is one of the factors Austen believes demonstrates love and care for another person.

In contrast, relationships that are deceitful, or weak, are usually formed by a more social method, with far less emphasis placed on connecting the two lovers minds, or sharing their

ideas. In Austen's novels, these sorts of relationships are often formed for these three major reasons. The first and second reasons are financial and pedigree. In *Mansfield Park*, Maria courts Mr. Rushmore and accepts his engagement for the social and financial advantages it would bring her. "In all the important preparations of the mind she was complete; being prepared for matrimony by a hatred of home, restraint, and tranquility; by the misery of disappointed affection and contempt of the man she was to marry. The rest might wait. The preparations of new carriages and furniture might wait for London and spring, when her own taste could have fairer play." (188, *Mansfield Park*). We see through this quote that although she does not love or respect Mr. Rushmore, his wealth and standing in society make him an ideal match for Maria, who wants to ascend to a higher level in society than she is already at, despite the fact that she has no understanding or respect for him.

Another example of this is Isabella and Mr. Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. Isabella expresses dramatic love for Catherine's brother and wished to marry him as soon as possible, without waiting out the process of courtship that is not only thought by society as good, but also not fitting to Austen's utopian view. However, as soon as she realizes that Mr. Morland is not so rich as she previously thought, she cuts all ties from him and flees. Upon realizing her friend's true character, Catherine Morland observes, "You think it is all for ambition then?— And, upon my word, there are some things that seem very like it. I cannot forget, that, when she first knew what my father would do for them, she seemed quite disappointed that it was not more." (193, 194) In these "courtships" there is no exchanging of ideas and passions, which makes it far easier for fortune hunters such as Miss Thorpe to secure husbands without being found out in most cases.

Despite the corruption that money brings in many of Austen's novels, she makes it clear that whether a character is rich or poor is not what defines them as a good or bad person. Fanny, from *Mansfield Park* is born into poverty, and lives more or less as a servant in

Mansfield Park, a choice made on page 12 when Sir Thomas says, “as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up; ... she is not a *Miss Bertram*... and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will always be different.” Despite her uncles judgment of her future upon her fortune, her character is shown as truthful, loyal, a good judge of character, and a good and moral person.

These values are shown in a different situation in regards to Emma, in *Emma*. “Emma was of no feeble character; she was more equal to her situation than most girls would have been, and had sense, and energy, and spirits” (15). Although rather headstrong, she is a kind hearted and moral woman, no matter to her wealth. Austen does show the conflicts wealth brings in other novels such as the villainous character of Wickham, and Henry Crawford who seek wives based on their fortune; demonstrated in the case of Wickham’s brief intrigue with Mary King, and Crawford and his sister’s original reason for becoming acquainted with the Bertram’s.

The final indicator of a bad courtship is passion ruling over all else. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia runs away with Wickham after spending just a few months time in his company, only a few weeks of which were spent with the idea of marriage or mutual love. Because of this, she brings shame on all her family and has to live with a man who quickly shows his true colors, as a gambler and a cheater. Furthermore, she looks upon her upcoming nuptials with naivety and no thought to what her family had to go through to achieve an outcome that had only a slight hint of a scandal to it. “You need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater, when I write to them, and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing.” (216). This is a clear example of two things. One is that Lydia is simply not mature enough to see marriage as what Austen believes it to be. The second is that instead of the marriage being a public

announcement of mutual understanding and love for one another, it is a secret, a joke, a punch line to Lydia's joke. Wickham too, is shown to be of immoral character not only for the same reasons as Lydia, but also from refraining to ask Mr. Bennet for Lydia's hand.

In all, Jane Austen uses wealth to corrupt a character, as well as poverty and lack of social class to ruin others. She does not stereotype the rich and the poor which individualizes each of her characters, and helps to show that class and wealth does not define a person; although at times can influence them. Although Edmund Bertram grows up in a family ruled by wealth, class, and arrogance, it is his strong morals that push through the certain temptations he has met with and prove his character to be a shining one at the end of the novel. This is in contrast with Fanny Price's upbringing within the family. Although she lives within the same four walls as Edmund, her experience is vastly different. She is treated with no respect, and instead of experiencing the luxury wealth brings, she is forced to live below it, as a servant of low class, with none of the same privileges or futures her cousins are looking at. However, again, her strong moral resolve, and knowledge of literature (although self educated) seems to give her the strength to rise above all the temptations or hindrances thrown at her, and remain an untarnished character through the entire novel. The only way Jane Austen insinuates that wealth could be a weakness in either of these characters; it is in Edmund, when he is swayed by the charming but insincere and corrupted Mary Crawford. In this, Austen could be implying that because Edmund has never had to deal with large drawbacks or hardships, like Fanny, he is weaker and easier to be swayed to temptation and corruption.

Another effect that pedigree in particular has is seen in the character Emma, from *Emma*. Because she has been born into a high class family, she is very used to having a wide range of options in how to spend her free time, how to conduct herself, and "the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (3). Among the faults that fortune from a young age had bestowed upon her, Emma was also immature

when it came to matchmaking, and courtship. Because she is young and naïve she believes that because she has the good fortune to be able to pick from very wealthiest and highest social standing of men, all of her friends can as well. Though for her this is a blessing, due to the fact that her father is a kind and mostly understanding man, and allows her to choose a man for more than just social standing and money. Therefore she seeks to match people in the same manner in which she can match herself, which is seen best when she tries to bring together her friend Harriet and Mr. Elton, to which, Mr. Knightly puts the situation best by saying that “Elton will not do. Elton is a good sort of man, and a very respectable vicar of Highbury, but not likely to make an imprudent match... he is as well acquainted with his own claims as you can be with Harriet’s.” (58). Her social standing makes her blind to the fact that others do not possess the same ability to choose men of good social standing, and her naivety makes her forget that many high standing men or women prefer to choose from within their circle or from a higher circle (seen also in *Sense and Sensibility* when Willoughby marries the heiress Miss Grey instead of Marianne Dashwood). In this way, Austen shows that pedigree can affect weaker characters like Elton and Willoughby. It can also, in the case of Emma, blind the less matured to the reality of their world because of the comfort it provides.

In each novel, not only does the leading lady have her leading man, but also her confidant. The confidants are most usually women, although in *Emma* Mrs. Watson, as well as Mr. Knightly (the leading man) play Emma’s confidants. Jane Austen also shows her view on friendships through these confidants. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland befriends Isabella Thorpe over the more trivial matters of life. They share common interests in questionably racy literature, and connect over social ideas and gossip, rather than a meeting of the minds in more worldly or intellectual affairs. Austen’s view throughout her novels is that while one should be able to move through society with an element of grace, it should not be the dominant part of one’s life. To have it be is to suggest a character with little emotional or

insightful depth in them. They are ruled by what society dictates instead of becoming their own person. Because the girls connect simply over more trivial matters, it is much more difficult to see where Isabella's heart and mind really lie. Austen then proves to us that this is a dangerous friendship to have, when Isabella leaves Catherine's brother because of her discovery of his lack of wealth.

However, although there are misleading friendships in many of Austen's novels, usually the leading ladies confidant is a person of good morals, although slightly flawed. Austen takes special care in *Persuasion* to show that confidants are not to be viewed as the epitome of a mentor. Although Lady Russell cares for Anne's welfare greatly, and is not the villain of the novel, she advises Anne not to marry Captain Wentworth, and Anne, believing "Lady Russell, whom she always loved and relied on, could not, with such steadiness of opinion, and such tenderness of manner, be continually advising her in vain. She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing- indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (27) ends the engagement, which almost ruins Anne's chances for happiness. The trusted and good confidant in Austen's novels is often developing as the main character does seen at the end of *Persuasion* on page 233, "she had been unfairly influenced by appearances in each; that because Captain Wentworth's manners had not suited her own ideas, she had been to quick... she had been pretty completely wrong." Their advice always has what they believe to be the main characters best interests at heart (Such as Lady Russell or Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*) however they are complex characters, with their own outlook on issues, that often differs from the character. They are the in-between of a villain and purely good character. They are a rounded character, who although possessing many sides, is often biased by their own view. Austen also uses them as a device, a devil's advocate in some manners, to give her idea of truly strong attachments more evidence, by having not only lovers grow through their courtships, but friends to mature through experiences.

Austen also uses the example of Marianne and Elinor to show that certain confidants can balance one other out. Marianne is purely full of passion and life, while Elinor relies far more on practicality and reason to guide her. However, the two extremes, although often at war within the novel, help to balance the family as a whole during their severe alternation to living. Elinor's practicality keeps the family afloat financially while Marianne keeps the spirit and vigor of the family from dying out in their hard times. This use of opposites to provide influence on characters is found in *Pride and Prejudice* as well. Elizabeth's two closest confidants, Charlotte Lucas and Jane Bennet, are two extremes. Charlotte is purely practical and rational in her lifestyle, relying more on the idea financial comfort to be the guiding force in making a good marriage. Although her extreme views put her in a less than happy arrangement, she helps awaken Elizabeth to the fact that one cannot scoff too easily at the tradition of courtship, because for many, it is the only means of them making a marriage, much less a good one. Elizabeth's prejudice is also tempered by her sister Jane, who is loving and understanding of everyone, despite her tendency to often judge too softly. Although this tendency leads Jane through hard times, it also helps Elizabeth to judge slower, and is one of the guiding factors in her consideration not to completely disregard Mr. Darcy's sentiments and look more deeply for his qualities instead of resolving to only find fault.

In all, Jane Austen's message is clearly represented in all forms within her books. Jane Austen shows a pattern in her portrayal of good relationships versus the bad. She persists in showing that while it is true that a married couple will mature and evolve together, there must be a step to that effect before the marriage itself. Her message throughout all her books is that her characters are not perfect heroes or heroines. Emma has the fault of arrogance and a predisposition to overindulgence, Catherine begins immature and naïve, Elizabeth is too much prejudiced, Marianne has only passion and emotion whereas Elinor has only reason and practicality and Edmund too much sway from family, wealth, pedigree and temptation.

However, during each novel, Austen shows their growth of character, encouraged through experience, criticism, most often from their eventual spouse, and in some cases, arguments between the eventual couple, which not only force the leading lady to mature and accept different views on the world, but also influences her partner to evolve in respect to the ladies world perspectives. Austen makes many comments on society, which often disguise her underlying messages. She subtly encourages her idea of what true love is made up of, and the steps that are required in order to attain it.

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