

Analysis of Female Consciousness in Jane Austen's Works

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen is the most important and most famous female writer during the 18th and 19th centuries in British history. She has written 6 novels during her whole life based on her own life experiences and her own understanding of women's love and marriage. Most of the novels she has written are world-famous and have attracted millions of readers. In her works, Jane Austen has created various different female characters with different personalities and experiences. From their stories, we can see that even under the pressure of patriarchal authority at that time, many women began to pursue their true love and independent social status. The awakening of female consciousness in Jane Austen's works can be clearly seen.

Keywords: *Jane Austen, female consciousness, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice*

1. INTRODUCTION

British female writer Jane Austen (1775-1817) is the most important female writer in the 18th and 19th centuries in Britain. Her works use delicate and realistic techniques to describe family life, marriage life and love stories she is familiar with. In the United Kingdom, since the end of the 18th century, many outstanding female novelists have continuously emerged. It was not until Jane Austen appeared that the creation of female novels reached the highest achievement.

Jane Austen is not a prolific writer. She has written six novels during her whole life, most of which are based on her own life and love experiences. In those novels, she has created many vivid female characters who have attracted millions of readers through centuries. Those female characters' unique life experiences actually reflect women's status both in marriage and in society in Austen's time.

In the novels by Jane Austen, we can clearly see the awakening female consciousness. Although some people say that the female consciousness in Jane Austen's works is full of contradictions, it cannot be denied that her works actually promote women's self-maturity and perfection at her time. She is an independent female writer who can bravely break the bonds of patriarchal authority. It can be considered as a great progress for women in Britain at that time.

2. JANE AUSTEN'S LIFE AND WORKS

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire, England in 1775 and lived there until the age of 25. Jane Austen's father George Austen was a pastor in Steventon. Jane

Austen has never been married in her life, although she has met several people who admire her very much. She has never left her own family during her whole life. This helps us to better understand her works.

George Austen has six sons and two daughters. His eldest son is named James, and his third son is named Edward. When he was young, he was adopted by a wealthy relative in his mother's family and changed his surname. Edward later inherited a large estate. Jane Austen and her sister lived in Edward's house for a short period of time. George's second son was incapable since he was a child, so everyone rarely mentioned him. Jane's fourth brother, Henry, is slightly older than her, and the two can talk best. Henry was a militia colonel, and later married his widow cousin, so he switched to join a bank in London. Henry once had a prosperous career, but after the death of his wife, he changed his career to become a pastor. Later, the six novels of Jane Austen were published on Henry's charge. After Jane Austen's death, Henry wrote a short biography for her. Jane and her sister Cassandra are also very close. The two often write letters to each other, but these letters have not been passed down. Jane also has two younger brothers, named Francis and Charles, both of whom joined the navy and later became admirals. It can be seen that this family is energetic and kind-hearted, and the family is prosperous and happy.

Jane Austen comes from a well-off family. This family is not particularly wealthy, but it is a well-educated family. She has received proper education during her life. However, girls had no chance to study in public schools at that time. Like most other girls, Jane Austen studies at home for most of the time. When she was nine years old, she and her sister used to enter a school called Reading together, but they didn't study there for a long time. According to Jane, their family loved reading novels, and they are proud of it. Jane Austen began her literary creation at the age of 14, showing an extraordinary

creative genius. After her father retired, their family moved to the seaside resort of Baz, and Jane's vision had been widened. At this time, she began to have experience in love. During this period of time, Jane Austen wrote several novels, but they have never been published. In 1805 her father George died. In the second year, Jane and her two sisters followed their mother live with her brother Francis and his wife.

Jane lived with her family until the age of 42, when she unfortunately died from tuberculosis. After her death, she was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Jane Austen has a high literary talent and published 6 novels in her lifetime, namely *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818). Her works describe and evaluate the rural aristocracy in England at the end of the 18th century, discussing and telling the status of women in marriage and love. These six novels have received extensive attention from readers, researchers and critics for centuries. Until now, researches on Jane Austen's works are still emerging.

3. FEMALE CONSCIOUSNESS REFLECTED IN JANE AUSTEN'S WORKS

In the history of literature, Jane Austen's novels are usually called "novel of manners". The term of "novel of manners" is usually used to refer to those fictions that can precisely describe and recreate the detailed customs, values, etiquette, traditions and mores in a certain social class or during a certain historic era.

"Manners" have a strong power and can control the main characters in the novels. This kind of novel has a strong irony and is usually realistic. Therefore, Jane Austen's novels are completely different from romantic works. Her novels do not follow the gothic medieval thrilling and mysterious route. They adopts an approachable and realistic style, and all the stories are closely related to her personal life background.

3.1. The analysis of *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility is the first novel by Jane Austen, which was published in 1811. The story is about the love story of Elinor Dashwood and Marianne Dashwood, two sisters in a British squire family Dashwood [1]. The title of the novel was originally *Elinor and Marianne*.

The novel compares the love experiences of Elinor and Marianne. It discusses women's issues at the time in a humorous and relaxed way, and also puts forward Jane Austen's views on love and marriage. At that time, the value of people in the patriarchal system was based on people's possession of property. If a person can inherit property, then he will be in a relatively high social status. Women have been in the subordinate position of family and marriage from the very beginning due to the

constraints of the patriarchal system. Against this background, Jane Austen uses the two themes of sense and sensibility to express her views on how women should act in love and marriage. She believes that feelings should be based on sensibility. If women are purely emotional, they may bring great trauma to themselves.

Elinor Dashwood is the first noble female character in Jane Austen's novels. In Jane Austen's time, the only career for women was to pursue marriage. Elinor must try her best to find her ideal destination for marriage. Wealth is also an important factor to consider, but she cannot give up everything in order to pursue wealth.

This novel is Jane Austen's first published novel. Although it is not perfect in many aspects, it has become a typical example of her novels and established the tone of her later creation.

3.2. The analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*

Pride and Prejudice is Jane Austen's masterpiece. The first draft of this novel was completed around 1796, with the original title *First Impressions*. After the work was revised, it was published in 1813 and renamed *Pride and Prejudice*. Based on the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen continues the themes of love and marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. *Pride and Prejudice* is a romance novel, the main line of the story is the emotional development of the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet. At first, she judged a person through the first impression, and she gradually learned to understand the nature of a person, and finally eliminated various misunderstandings and obtained true love [2]. Jane Austen described the etiquette, education, marriage in Britain at that time, which created a certain comic effect for the novel. From the opening of the novel, it can be seen that the novel mainly tells a story with the theme of love and marriage: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife". The tone of this sentence is relaxed and humorous, but it satirizes people's views on marriage at that time very well. It is on this basis that the novel expresses and emphasizes the importance of love in marriage, affirms the right of women to pursue love, and denies the concept of marriage for money and status.

The novel is about the love and marriage experiences of the five daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. The main line of the story is the love between the second daughter Elizabeth and Darcy. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet have five daughters. All of the five girls are at the age when they should get married. None of the five daughters has the right to inherit Mr. Bennet's property, so Mrs. Bennet is busy finding suitable husbands for the daughters every day. When Mrs. Bennet learned that her new neighbour, Bingley, was very rich and had not yet married, she was very excited and tried her best to get her daughters to participate in the dancing party and meet Bingley. Elizabeth thus met Darcy at this party.

Elizabeth took an active attitude in the relationship between Darcy and her. When they met at the party for the

first time, Elizabeth took the initiative to invite Darcy to dance out of her affection for Darcy. But she later became aware of Darcy's arrogant attitude, and she was not in a humble and passive state. She bravely challenged and resisted Darcy's arrogance in her own words, which reflects the equal discourse right of women. Elizabeth abandons the notion of getting married for money and wealth. She pursues marriage for love, and pursues an equal status between men and women. This is also the point of view Jane Austen wants to show and convey to the world through her works. Jane Austen has created an independent, self-respecting, self-reliant and assertive female image in this novel. From Elizabeth we can see that Jane Austen boldly complained and resisted the oppression and discrimination of women by the patriarchal society at that time and tried very hard to express her independent thoughts and ideas to the world.

In the eyes of many readers, Elizabeth is a perfect female image, and she is also Jane Austen's favourite and most satisfying character. Jane Austen once said that Elizabeth is a gratifying character that has never been seen in the work.

Elizabeth is smart, lively, and kind-hearted. At the same time, she is quite rational. She can use wisdom to resolve problems and express her inner heart. This is an independent, confident and individualized female image. From her life experiences, we can already see the awakened female consciousness.

Pride and Prejudice has attracted millions of readers for hundreds of years and has become one of the most popular novels in the history of British literature. With more than 20 million copies sold, this novel has paved the way for many archetypes in modern literature. For more than a century, the novel has been continuously adapted in different forms and put on screens, and has received wide acclaim, which shows the influence of this novel.

3.3. Analysis of other works by Jane Austen

In the novel *Emma*, Jane Austen describes a beautiful landlord lady Emma. She is keen on being a matchmaker, and strives to help women from low social classes and low status around her to seek suitable husbands in the upper class, thereby helping them change their social status and destiny through marriage [3]. In this novel, Emma's efforts are often counterproductive, and many jokes have been made. However, through Emma's story, we can feel the desire of women at that time to pursue self-worth and personal happiness. The story also reflects women's self-esteem and independence.

Emma is a vivid, strong, independent, confident and courageous young female image portrayed by Jane Austen. It is not difficult for us to understand Jane Austen's awakening and comprehension of female consciousness in this novel.

In another novel *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen portrays two female images Isabella and Lucy who are in low social status with meagre wealth [4]. Both of them have been aiming for marrying men in the upper class so as to

improve their social class and social status through marriage. This also reflects the struggle of women to change their own destiny under the specific historical period and historical conditions at that time.

Similar to *Pride and Prejudice*, there are two other novels—*Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. Anne in *Persuasion* [5] and Fanny in *Mansfield Park* [6] both get rid of the concept of marriage for money and social status, and bravely pursue their true love. They are full of beautiful desires and longings for happy love and marriage, and they outline a beautiful love picture, which is also a manifestation of their awakening independent female consciousness.

4. CONCLUSION

Jane Austen lived in a period of rapid development of capitalism in British history. At that time, with the development of the economy and the development of productivity and production relations, the social structure is also changing rapidly. Women have set off a more active struggle for female independence and liberation, and the feminist movement has also flourished. Jane Austen is the first important and influential female writer in the history of British literature. Her works are unconventional, and are very different from the works of traditional male writers' works both in style and theme. Her works show the differences among different social classes in the countryside in Britain and the rural scenery at that time. Those works tell the stories that take place in specific environments, and express women's pursuit of love and marriage from a unique perspective. Through nuanced observations of life, combined with her own experiences and thinking about life, she truly described women's inner feelings and voices, and expressed women's desire to pursue independence and self-worth [7]. In Jane Austen's time, women wanted to pursue personal liberation, which shows the awakening consciousness of female independence. Jane Austen is a unique female writer in a traditional patriarchal society. Through the inner world and emotional experience of the female characters in her works, she describes women's desire for individual independence and freedom of marriage. Her works also truly reflects women's pursuit of true love and their awakening female independent consciousness. Such themes and ideas are also reflected in the other works of Jane Austen.

The six novels written by Jane Austen express and embody the awakening of independent female consciousness. From this point of view, her works are very important in the process of exploring female independence and individual liberation. But at the same time, it is undeniable that due to the limitations of her era and class, Jane Austen's works still have many imperfections in the expression and cognition of female consciousness.

Although Jane Austen's female images have awakened female consciousness and have the personality to pursue self-esteem, self-improvement and self-reliance, all their behaviors have not escaped the narrow scope of love or

marriage. They have not been able to make themselves totally independent. Independent thinking and the pursuit of individual independent identity are placed on a larger and broader social level. The life and destiny of female images in Jane Austen's works have always revolved around themes such as love and marriage. They have not been able to achieve complete independence of women in personality and economy. Therefore, they have not been able to pursue women's independent social and economic status on a larger social level and scope. From this point of view, the female consciousness in Jane Austen's works has obvious limitations. But despite this, her works still attract readers because of their unique charm.

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