

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 13

Pride and Prejudice II: Author Background and Context - I

Hello learners!

Welcome to this lecture. This is the second lecture of the module on *Pride and Prejudice* in the NPTEL course on “The English Novel: Interdisciplinary Approaches.” In the previous lecture, I gave you some theoretical background to understanding the relationship between economic forces and the production and consumption of literary art. I also briefly described some contradictions in the attitudes towards women's fiction as well as the novel as a genre in 18th century England. I briefly mentioned that this was the context and the contradiction to which Jane Austen was responding and I ended by hinting that we would spend some time on Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*, which was published very late in her career, around the year 1818, but which we know from historical record was among the first to be composed. So, *Northanger Abbey* was composed in all likelihood before *Pride and Prejudice* and therefore before we actually begin talking about *Pride and Prejudice*, I want to read out a very long but very important and very influential passage from *Northanger Abbey*. This is a passage in which the narrator is describing the relationship that her protagonist, Catherine Morland, has with another female character named Isabella.

Austen writes, "The progress of the friendship between Catherine and Isabella was quick, as its beginning had been warm, and they passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness, that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given to their friends or themselves. They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm in arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set. If rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up to read novels together".

Now, I want to pause here before continuing, and I want to emphasize the importance of the word novels, and the use that the novels have for these characters, for these individuals, given their circumstances. So, Catherine and Isabella are two young women, and it seems that their life revolves around certain activities, not physical labor. It is not a challenge for survival, but they do have to engage in certain activities that are required based on the expectations from their gender. i.e. they have to perform certain dances, they have to spend some time alone and when they are restricted by the weather, when they are confined to the inner spaces of the home, they read novels. This is an activity that was much frowned upon in Jane Austen's time. And it was particularly dangerous or novels were seen as a corrupting and corruptible genre because they were read by many impressionable minds, that is young women in their free time and this kind of activity, reading fiction was understood to provide a lot of unwanted or dangerous ideas to these women.

So, Jane Austen's narrator is taking a risk, is almost certain of incurring some suspicion, some anger even from her reader, when she describes her protagonist, i.e. Catherine, as someone who spends her free time reading novels. Let's continue and read what Austen writes further. Austen's narrator writes, "Yes, novels- for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine who, if she accidentally takes a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas, if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the"... and so on.

Before moving forward, I want to briefly explicate the intervention that Austen's narrator makes. Now keep in mind that this was not Austen's first published novel, but as I have been mentioning, it was in all likelihood the first book-length work of prose fiction composed by Austen. What is the earliest meta-fictional intervention, Austen's narrator makes? She makes a polemical, a very political comment on the attitudes towards novels in contemporary literary culture. What is that attitude? It's in the very first sentence. The narrator writes that she will not adopt an ungenerous and impolitic custom, common with novel writers.

So, this is a novel, this is the narrator of a novel, but she's different from others like her. How is she different? She's different because she refuses to do something. She refuses to degrade by her contemptuous censure, the very performance to the number of which she is adding. So, in the view of Austen's narrator, other novelists, other narrators are practicing

a hypocritical double standard. What is that double standard? They are publishing novels. They are benefiting by the popularity that the novel as a genre enjoys. On the other hand, they are disavowing their own activity. They are being dishonest about it. How? They are being dishonest because they are criticising, trash-talking and otherwise, downgrading the activity of reading novels. How are they doing that? They join their greatest enemies. Who joins whose enemies? Novelists join the enemies of novelists. That is, novelists echo the criticism, the suspicion and the negativity that others voice about novels. How? They do that by bestowing the harshest epithets on such works and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine.

So, novelists become hypocrites, they practice double standards when they do not describe their protagonists as reading novels, while reading novels. Why is that? So, in the view of Austen's narrator, there is a pattern that exists when characters are described in novels and especially the female protagonists of novels. These protagonists of other novels, whenever they are seen in relation to a novel, if they accidentally pick up a novel, they turn their pages with disgust. So, protagonists, female protagonists of novels published in the same time period as *Northanger Abbey*, they do not enjoy reading novels. If they accidentally pick up a novel, they find its pages insipid, that is, lacking any interest, lacking any taste or vitality, lifeless. They are indifferent to the indifferent content, to the characterless and featureless content. And furthermore, they are not only indifferent, but they react with disgust.

So, this is a problem. The narrator of Jane Austen's first written novel finds this attitude to be hypocritical. Why? It's hypocritical because the least the novelists can do is honestly embrace the popularity that this genre is enjoying and which they are benefiting from. Novelists are the beneficiaries of the great interest in reading fiction. Because people want to read fiction. Novelists have a career. The market gives an opportunity to the novelists to become independent, financially stable and have a career, make a life out of writing. So, this is the contradiction that Jane Austen's narrative identifies and refuses to engage in.

Let's read on. Jane Austen's narrator writes, "Alas, if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom she can expect protection and regard, I cannot approve of it." Let us leave it to the reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another. We are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in the world, no species of composition has been so much. So, the

narrator tightens the screws. The narrator of Jane Austen's first novel describes exactly how wrong, exactly how pernicious are the implications of this double standard and how these double standards are actually detrimental to this professional body of writers. These are writers, who, instead of supporting one another, run down each other's profession. The narrator writes that if we don't support each other, who will do it? Already there are reviewers, already there are those who do not wish for us to have a career. So, there are enemies, there are forces who want to shut down this thriving industry, this thriving activity and culture in which a lot of readers enjoy reading novels by women. Already there are forces trained against this culture and already writers like Jane Austen, for whom her narrator is speaking, already this group is an endangered species.

Jane Austen's narrator writes, "Let us not desert one another, we are an injured body". So, novelists, especially women novelists, should stand up for each other, should stand up for their own institution, like a union. They should support each other. And they can support each other by describing the act of reading novels with more dignity. They can be honest about the pleasures that reading fiction provides. However, instead of doing that, they are doing the exact opposite. That is, they are describing how the act of reading novels is dangerous and generally not something to be desired. Jane Austen's narrator continues that this is a very noble art. The act of writing novels is a noble art and yet it is not respected like it should be.

Her last sentence in this section is, although our productions, that is, although novels have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation, no species of composition has been so much decried. Okay, so how unfair. Jane Austen's narrator continues, from pride, ignorance or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers. And while the abilities of 900th abridger of the history of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope and Prior, with a paper from the spectator and a chapter from Stern are eulogised by a thousand pens, there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and undervaluing the labor of the novelist, and of slighting the performance which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. So, here Jane Austen's narrator gives us a snapshot of the field of literary production as Pierre Bourdieu described and which I discussed in the previous lecture. So, there are different kinds of works being published, different kinds of books being published with which Jane Austen's novel is competing.

What are these books?

It seems there are a lot of anthologies. The narrator refers to volume with some dozen lines of Milton, Pope and Prior and with the paper from the spectator and a chapter from Stern. These are anthologies and you can see from the names of these authors, John Milton, Alexander, Pope, Lawrence Stern, these are all male writers. These are writers who were popular in the 18th century English literary culture. They were seen as important. Reading the works of these male writers, Stern wrote fiction, but Milton and Pope wrote poetry. And the spectator published non-fiction, that is, news, non-fictional prose. None of these constitutes prose fiction by women. That's the one thing that these lines have in common. They are not fictional, they are not by women, and they are not prose. So, it was easy for writers or reviewers or traditional literary authorities to eulogize, that is, to describe, to praise and to generally speak in an edifying manner about this kind of writing. This kind of writing had many virtues from the perspective of the traditional literary establishment. as against this kind of writing, there's something else as well. The 900th abridger of the history of England.

So, many writers, many intellectuals, philosophers, historians, including David Hume, whose work I discussed in the first module, many writers abridged the history of England and published shorter and simpler and easier to read versions of these. Again, this is not prose-fiction. This is non-fictional prose. A lot of this kind of writing seemed to enjoy a great deal of respect. It was easy for publishers, reviewers, etc., to praise the values of this kind of writing.

However, the same reviewers did not find this kind of value in the work of novelists and this is a great crime. This is a source of indignation to Jane Austen's narrator. Why? Because the work of the novelist is complex, difficult, brilliant, intellectually demanding, and also rewarding. It gives great pleasure. It educates and entertains readers. Jane Austen's narrator describes the work of novelists as something that has only genius, wit and taste to recommend them. The word 'only' in this phrase is very important. Jane Austen's narrative writes that novelists have 'only' genius, wit and taste to recommend them. By this, she doesn't mean that genius, wit and taste are perfect. ordinary things or small things or unimportant things due to which their work can be ignored. She uses the word 'only' in an ironic manner. She uses the word 'only' to say that these things are important and yet they are not considered important given the kind of literary culture that exists in England in the late 18th century. There's something about the literary culture which fails to recognise genius, wit and taste when it appears in the work of female novelists.

All right, let's continue, which have only genius wit and taste to recommend them and then she quotes, Jane Austen's narrator quotes some popular things that people frequently say when they are caught with a novel or when they are asked about novels. People say, I am no novel reader. I seldom look into novels. Do not imagine that I often read novels. it is really very well for a novel, such is the common cat i.e. such are the things that people like to say and what are you reading miss, "oh it is only a novel", replies the young lady while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda, or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best-chosen language. Just a quick footnote, when the narrator refers to only Cecilia or Camilla or Belinda, she is referring to some very popular novels of her time. Cecilia refers to the novel *Cecilia* or the *Memoirs of an Heiress*, published 1782 and Camilla refers to *Camilla* or *A Picture of Youth*, published in 1796. Both these novels are by Francis Burney. Belinda refers to the novel *Belinda, A Moral Tale*, published 1801 by the novelist Maria Edgeworth.

These lines that the narrator quotes, they refer to the contradictions that people embody. The contradiction consists of this; People read novels, they enjoy reading novels, but they struggle to disavow them in public. They struggle to find some kind of an intellectual justification for reading them. And therefore, in the absence of such an intellectual justification, they try to make it look like they are not reading novels, that they are not doing this thing with their time. Okay, let's continue. Here is what Austen's narrator says, "Now, had the same young lady been engaged with the volume of *The Spectator*. Instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book and told its name; though the chances must be against her for being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste. The substance of its papers is so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters and topics of conversation, which no longer concern anyone living, and their language. Language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it. So, these are some of the features that Austen identifies, not in novels as they exist, but in the attitudes of the traditional literary establishment towards novels.

Novels are seen as improbable, full of ill-suited or non-representative language and generally unable to represent topics of conversation. So, these are some of the problems

that traditional literary authorities have found with novels and yet, Jane Austen's narrator herself is writing a novel and seems to enjoy writing a novel. And in this novel, there is a character who herself also greatly enjoys reading a novel. So, what is this kind of a novel? Jane Austen's novel, the one from which these quotes are taken, is *Northanger Abbey* and it is frequently read as a critique and as a satire of Gothic novels. Gothic novels frequently feature castles in which single young women are trapped. Often, they are fleeing from creditors and who are often in debt and in these castles, a lot of improbable and strange things happen. A lot of dead bodies are found, ghostly occurrences recur and so on. It is actually not the case that Jane Austen was simply parodying this genre. In fact, it is very much possible that Jane Austen was writing a tribute and an homage to this genre and one can see that there is a great deal of sympathy that the narrator is not simply mocking the writers of novels, and least of all the female writers who produced Gothic novels. In fact, the narrator is engaging in an act of sympathetic imagination.

It is this act of sympathy which I now wish to focus on between Jane Austen and the literary culture of her time. I want to quote from two letters which will give me a sense of how Jane Austen has been read and how I believe Jane Austen should instead be read. This is a letter that Jane Austen wrote to her brother Frank in July 1813, which is very soon after her career as a professional writer had begun. So, she had published two novels, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and this is her reflecting on the financial implications of her publication.

Austen writes to her brother, "you will be glad to hear that every copy of *Sense and Sensibility* is sold, and that it has brought me £140 besides the copyright, if that should ever be of any value. I have now therefore written myself into £250, which only makes me long for more." So, if you read these lines carefully, you'll notice that here is an individual who has absolutely no qualms, absolutely no guilt about being able to earn money from her literary and intellectual labour. And that is a very refreshing and very honest attitude to read about, mainly because she lived in a time, that Jane Austen lived in, a time when the exact opposite was more characteristic of the respectable attitude towards women and profit or women earning money from their intellectual labour. We'll get an example of that in this letter, which is a letter that her brother Henry wrote in his biographical notice, which was published along with the novel *Northanger Abbey*, from which I just read the long quote about the hypocrisy and the guilt and the representation of women reading novels.

This is Henry writing about Jane Austen in the publication of her third novel, that is *Northanger Abbey*. Henry writes, "Neither the hope of fame nor profit mixed with her early

motives.... She could scarcely believe what she termed her great good fortune when *Sense and Sensibility* produced a clear profit of about 150 pounds. Few so gifted were so truly unpretending. She regarded the above sum as a prodigious recompense for that which had cost her nothing. So much did she shrink from notoriety, that no accumulation of fame would have induced her, had she lived, to affix her name to any productions of her pen in public, she turned away from any allusion to the character of an authoress.”

This quote, first of all, smacks of a certain guilt. There's an underlying assumption that Jane Austen, once she became well-known, respected, famous, and more importantly successful, would be seen in a very negative light. That once people came to know that she was not only a good writer, but also a successful writer. She would be seen as something less respectable, that she would lose respect in public view. And her brother, with the best intentions that a brother can have towards his sister, tries to protect her from this kind of public suspicion or public infamy by trying to create the sense that Jane Austen, the individual, wrote out of a purely unmercenary and uneconomic motive, that she wrote because she wanted to write, that she was possessed by some intellectual or some creative inspiration. And these inspirations. these impulses and this desire to write and the undertaking of the intellectual labour that led to her novels had absolutely no economic motives at all.

As we have just seen in the previous letter, that this was far from the case, that Jane Austen was very unlike this kind of disinterested, selfless intellectual or philosophical figure. In fact, financial and economic motives were very much a part of her writerly and intellectual ambition. Today, when we read Jane Austen, we should be mindful of this contradiction and of this very strong pull, very strong cultural force and heritage that would like us to read Jane Austen in the way her brother Henry presents her in this excerpt, which was in fact printed in the 1818 edition of *Northanger Abbey*.

As a writer who had absolutely no desire to earn money or to be famous, we can appreciate that these things, a desire to earn money, a desire to become famous, do not take anything away from the intellectual or formal or literary merits of a writer. However, in Jane Austen's time, it was seen to degrade a writer in some way if there was even a suspicion that she wrote because she needed money or wanted to earn money or wanted to become famous. This contradiction also has the effect of making us see Jane Austen in a very unfair light. A lot of writers want to see Jane Austen as a very domestic writer who simply wanted to describe emotional conflicts between individuals inside families and who had absolutely no desire to earn money or to describe anything of greater public relevance. That also is a

contradiction and in my next lecture I will describe how Jane Austen's focus on a very narrow slice of English history and culture, in fact, has a great public relevance and even while Jane Austen focuses on three or four families, the intellectual scope and the impact of her work goes far beyond these three or four families.

Thank you!