

# THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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**Lecture 15**

**Pride and Prejudice IV: Theme, Form & Style - I**

Hello learners and welcome to the 14th lecture in this NPTEL course titled "The English Novel Interdisciplinary Approaches".

This is our fourth discussion of the novel that we have chosen for analysis, that is Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In the previous lecture, I provided a brief overview of Jane Austen's life and career. I spoke about the lack of opportunity with regards to employment, finance and education that characterise the lives of women and especially women writers like Jane Austen. I also spoke a little bit about how Jane Austen began to achieve the status and the success as a professional writer very late in her life and career. Specifically, I described Jane Austen's publishing career as split in two parts. The first period can be called as the Steventon period in which she wrote a lot of Juvenalia aimed primarily for the entertainment of family members, but also began to compose longer works of fiction, with an eye towards the literary and the publishing market. It is in this Steventon period that the three novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, were composed.

In the second period that is also known as the Chawton period is when Jane Austen begins to solidify her sense of herself as a professional writer. This is the period when novels composed earlier are sold, that is to say marketed and transformed into commodities with a very clear eye towards creating and sustaining a community of readers who will also become a community of book buyers who will sustain the career of the novelist. This is also the period in which Austen composed the novels which are seen as the marker of renewed maturity, complexity and seriousness in the novelist. These are the novels *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. The clear difference between these two categories of novels is not so much that the first category is written by a writer who was writing for her family and the second was a writer who was writing for the market.

That was true. But more importantly, the first set of novels are marked by a somewhat mechanical adherence to established conventions. That is to say, protagonists in novels like *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* seem to follow the plot or the script that was laid down for them by literary conventions.

These literary conventions essentially said that for a woman, the way to prosperity and security and safety is to secure a wealthy husband in marriage. and the protagonists seem to go towards that goal, seem to be moving towards that goal simply as a deterministic machine, they are thinking and feeling. As we will see, Elizabeth Bennet thinks very critically and very honestly about what is the meaning and what is the goal and what is the purpose of marriage? But, nonetheless, there is a sense in which marriage, if secured with all of the critical sensibility, all of the honest and sincere and open-minded thinking, has the potential to secure happiness, lasting happiness for an individual. That assumption is not under question. However, when we come to the later novels or these novels such as *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, even that assumption that a good partner secured not with the empty mechanical or the mercenary goal of wealth or income, but secured with a much more holistic emotional and intellectually thought through process of compatibility and emotional fit between two individuals, even that kind of a marriage may not hold all of the answers or may not be the solution or the key to happiness. In fact, the very question of happiness, what happiness is, how one is to be happy, these questions are expanded and it seems that there are no easy answers to these questions.

So, the later novels take a much more philosophical and much less practical approach to this question of how an individual and especially an unmarried woman, a single woman without the chance of securing great wealth or without a great deal of personal wealth which would give her security in life. How is this individual to secure a sustainable, happy and secure future for herself? There are no easy answers to this question. The best marriage may even fail to secure these goals. So, this is the general intellectual and emotional difference, the difference in the terrain that these two sets of novels occupy. Now, in today's lecture, we will begin reading *Pride and Prejudice* and before I do that, I want to give a sense of how Jane Austen is perceived today.

Jane Austen is a hugely popular writer. In some senses, one of the most popular writers. In fact, Jane Austen is a writer who defines the experience of reading English for many people. And in a country like India, with its long history of colonial rule and with the origins of education, and especially with the origins of English education with colonial rule in India, Jane Austen exemplifies not only the act of reading novels, but the act of reading

itself. There are many individuals who associate reading Jane Austen with being civilized, with learning manners, with learning to write English, and generally with being modern and being everything that a good human being can be. One thinks of the writer Neeraj Choudhury who famously boasted that he went to bed after reading a page of Jane Austen every night. This was not an unheard-of attitude and we know for a fact that Winston Churchill, during the height of the London Blitz, recommended that everyone keep a copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, that they read this novel while the world around them was literally being burned down.

So, there are many instances of people turning towards Jane Austen to find some sort of emotional relief and also different forms of education. So, Jane Austen is hyper-canonical today and that is both a good thing and a bad thing. The forms in which Jane Austen is received today often put the context in which Jane Austen lived and the details of her writing into a kind of obscurity. Today, we or whoever claims to love and admire Jane Austen actually loves and admires their version of Jane Austen, and that is to say, Jane Austen today is handed down to us by a great cultural machinery.

There is a very well-oiled and very well-funded cultural industry that markets Jane Austen as a very readable novelist. What does this industry do? This industry presents Jane Austen as a great chronicler of human psychology. One can look at any number of Jane Austen adaptations that are available to stream on the internet or on the TV or on any video library or a DVD lending store. There are many adaptations of Jane Austen's novels. They are not limited to films or TV shows. There are also adaptations of Jane Austen as more popular forms of genre fiction, such as literature about zombies, films about zombies, and a great deal of fan fiction as well. All of this emerges from the assumption that Jane Austen chronicles human psychology with great detail.

She describes what human beings do, how human beings behave, when they are faced with difficult circumstances. What are these difficult circumstances? The women in Jane Austen's novels, they are not born into money? They face a struggle for survival. That is to say, if they do not secure the hand of a wealthy man in marriage, they will literally be driven to poverty. And in that situation, they will not have any alternative to secure a living for themselves, other than doing some very ill-reputed and immorally perceived professions. Most of Jane Austen's protagonists face a struggle for survival and how they behave in the situation when they are faced with extreme choices, they reveal something universal about human character. This is the manner in which Jane Austen's novels are adapted, circulated, framed and presented to us as highly attractive commodities. There is,

however, something missing when we perceive Jane Austen simply as a chronicler of human psychology.

We miss the fact that it was not just about universal human psychology, but rather the psychology of a very limited and particular set of human beings, human beings who shared the experiences that Jane Austen herself had. She wrote about a small group of people with the hope that when she described their problems, others, even those who did not share those problems, could relate to them and could learn something about their human situation. There is another aspect of the reception of Jane Austen today which deserves mention, and this is a somewhat male chauvinistic idea. The idea is that Jane Austen merely wrote about women and not only did she write about women, she only wrote about a concern that affected women alone. The concern that one needs to secure a wealthy husband for oneself.

This kind of a critique manifests itself in descriptions of her novels as being too monotonous or too similar. More than one critic has said that Jane Austen's novels are all essentially the same. They all describe different combinations and permutations by which a not-so-wealthy woman manages to secure for herself the hand of a wealthy man who also happens to be a good man. This is not true. This is a highly simplistic and exaggerated statement. There is a great deal of variation. There is a great deal of nuance in Jane Austen's novels. In fact, Jane Austen's novels are not about the plot. They are not about what happens in but rather they are about how we learn about what happens.

So, these are certain preoccupations and certain attitudes towards Jane Austen's fiction, which remain popular today despite the great popularity and generally positive reception that she enjoys. Related to this somewhat male chauvinist and misogynist reception that Jane Austen only writes about women and women's concerns about marriage, there is an accusation that Jane Austen's world is insular, that this is a world that does not reflect the political, the geopolitical or the economic or the social contexts of late 18th and early 19th century Europe. One evidence cited by these critiques of Austen's work is that this was the time when the French Revolution occurred. Napoleonic Wars occurred. This was the time when Britain was constantly at war. There were a lot of wartime shortages. There were a lot of financial material problems that people in England faced due to these wars, which are not reflected in the novels. This argument, again, is incorrect. As I mentioned in my previous lecture, Jane Austen was sharply aware of the influence of the wars, how they gave employment to men like her own brothers, and how these wars and the employment they provided to men had an influence on the emotional and matrimonial lives of women who did not go to war.

We will see a very vivid illustration of that in *Pride and Prejudice* through the character of Wickham. The biggest charge, and this is not about Jane Austen as an individual writer, but rather about the genre of romance in general, is that this is a genre that is an escapist form of writing. This is a sort of novel that's written for readers who derive a certain pleasure from escaping from the material and practical concerns of everyday life, and instead they wish to escape and read about the struggles of a small group of women trying to secure the marriage of one of their own or other women.

This charge describes Austen's work as escapist. This again is untrue, it is not correct at all, because through the description of women and their concerns with marriage, Jane Austen's novels describe a great deal of what was unfolding in England, but not only in England, but in Europe in general. So, these are some attitudes with which Jane Austen is received today. And our job in this course, while we discuss *Pride and Prejudice*, will be to go much beyond these attitudes and to show how these are not true and instead these attitudes seek to limit one's appreciation and enjoyment of the novels.

Jane Austen described in a letter that her goal and her ideal subject matter was three or four families in a country village and she described her novels as a kind of miniature artwork. She described her novels as being like two or three inches of ivory on which to work with a fine brush to practice a miniaturist art. She also described how her novels managed to provide a little effect after much labour. So, this vision, this description of herself as both an artist as well as a creative labourer describes how she understood the work of fiction in the time in which she lived. Being a woman and lacking opportunities for professional growth, such as joining the Navy or inheriting businesses or being a clergyman or marrying into wealth like her brother is dead, the only thing left for an intelligent, skilled, creative, but not formally educated woman like herself was to write, write a fiction about the world that she could observe.

Because she lacked formal education, she would not be taken seriously if she decided to write about philosophy or history or literary criticism, the three things that she considered adding to *Pride and Prejudice* in order to make it a much more serious or seriously perceived work. The only thing she could write about was the world that she had observed. And given the lack of opportunities, the lack of agency and the lack of access, the only world she could observe was three or four families in a country village.

However, what was limiting or what seems to be insular or closed or confined in this description, that is three or four families in a country village, is offset and more than

compensated for by the richness and the sophistication with which she describes what she observes about these three or four families. That is to say, she works her fine brush over those two or three inches of ivory with such refinement and with such care and with such sophistication that the effect, even though it is at the end of the day, a description of three or four families, becomes much more than a description of those three or four families. It becomes a description of something resembling the universal human condition.

We will return to this description as we encounter more specific evidence from the novel. But for now, let us keep in mind that the that the insularity or the confinement of what can appear to be a limitation of Jane Austen's novels is in fact the source of their strength and the source of the great power. Because the subject matter is limited from the beginning, the novelist has much greater opportunity to produce, to describe that limited subject matter in such a heightened and refined and creative manner that the final effect, that is to say the novel, which describes these three or four families in a country village becomes something that many more families, in fact hundreds and thousands and millions of other families and readers in many countries and many villages all over the world can read, enjoy, appreciate and relate to. So even though it's about three or four families in a small country village in England, people all over the world can relate to the struggles, the contradictions, the challenges and the joys faced by these three or four families and specifically, the women in these three or four families.

Now, with these words, let us now begin reading the novel and I will read from the first page of *Pride and Prejudice* to help illustrate some of the ideas that we've been discussing so far. This is how *Pride and Prejudice* begins. "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as a rightful property of someone or other of their daughters". So, this is among the most famous, the most cited and most well-known openings in all of literature. So, it is worth spending some time trying to understand how this opening sentence illustrates both the strengths of Jane Austen as a writer as well as reflects the world from which her writing and she herself as a writer emerged. 'It is a truth universally acknowledged', so, it seems here that the novelist is pointing towards an opinion that's held by other people. What about that opinion? Not only do some people hold this opinion, but they also believe that it is not an opinion. It is in fact a truth, that it is a fact that exists, irrespective of what they think. And then what is that truth? The truth or the supposed truth or the truth which is considered

to be a truth is that, 'A single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.' Now the word 'want' here is not a verb, but it is in fact a noun. And want as a noun means is the lack or deficiency. So, this man here possesses a good fortune. That is, he owns a lot of property from which he gets rent, or he has a lot of wealth which he has invested and which yields an annual return of a great deal of income. That he has, but there's something he lacks. It is almost as a consequence of having the first that he lacks the second. What does he lack? He lacks a wife. It is this relationship between the three things, the man possessing fortune, the man lacking a wife and the relationship between the two, lacking a wife, possessing a fortune, being a universal truth that the novelist wants to convey. The novelist is not saying that this is the case. The novelist is simply saying that for a lot of people, this exists as an unexamined truth, that they so strongly believe it to be the case that they have forgotten that it is in fact an opinion.

How do we know this? Because the next sentence makes this clear. 'However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families that he is considered as a rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.' Now, the second sentence describes what is most famously considered to be Jane Austen's strength as a writer, which is irony. Irony is a literary device by which a writer says one thing but actually means the very opposite of what is being said.

Let us try to understand, how irony works by understanding the sentence.

Now, the man possesses a great deal of property. However, when he enters a neighbourhood, the surrounding families, they wish, they try to find a possibility or they hope that through a certain work of fate in the next few months or weeks or in the near future, something will happen so that he, this man, who himself possesses property, will be seen as the property of one of their daughters. Now, what does this mean? It is not that by marrying this wealthy man will become the property of his wife. Rather, this use of property as a metaphor illustrates the lack of agency faced by women. And in fact, it is the desperation and the need to survive produced by this lack of property that these surrounding families in that village begin to see this wealthy man as a potential husband for one of the younger unmarried women or one of their daughters in the village. So, it is the use of property here that illustrates the very opposite of property. It is not that by marrying this wealthy man, these daughters will gain the property that he gains. No, in fact, it is the very opposite.

In fact, in 1753, the Married Women's Property Act was passed, which ensured that women could not own property. So then why is Jane Austen's narrator saying that when a wealthy man moves into a neighbourhood, he is perceived as a rightful property of one of the unmarried daughters in that village? It simply shows how far these unmarried women and their families have been driven, to what kind of desperation they have been driven by the absolute lack of opportunity, by the lack of any agency provided to women, that they begin to see this wealthy man with a predatory gaze. So, this is an indication of how irony works and how Jane Austen describes the economic inequality that was pervasive in 18th and 19th centuries in England.

We will continue our discussion of this opening, which is among the most powerful in all of literature in the next lecture.

Thank you.