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Austen's Familial Relationships of Parents and Children

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen wrote social novels concerning just three or four families in a country of rural England. She examined in detail their ways of life, their social circle, their individual traits and their behavior towards each other. A study of the family pattern is of paramount importance for the understanding of Jane Austen's novels. In this study of her three most popular works, we shall try and understand the different ways parents and children relate to each other in the then society.

Jane Austen wrote social novels concerning Just three or four families in a country of rural England. She examined in detail their ways of life, their social circle, then individual traits and their behavior towards each other. A study of the family pattern is of paramount importance for the understanding of Jane Austen's novels.

The father, it goes without saying, is the most important figure in the family. Leonie Villard comments.

Nowhere do we find the part played by the father in the family rule so important as in English society, with its hierarchy which lingers on to this day, in spite of the bursting from the bud of a new spirit.[1]

This fact is especially true of the upper classes, where the father is not only the head of the family but also the possessor of the title and property. There he wields the sport of power that a king exercises over his bellowed subjects. Mansfield park is the only novel where the father is rather obnormally conscious of his power and we see that everything gives way whenever he makes it a point exercise his power.

With the law providing for the transfer of estate, as a matter of course, from the eldest son to the eldest, as a matter of course, from the eldest son to the eldest son, sir Thomas is very anxious to secure the future of his other children. He wants his second son, Edmund, to take a place in the world that might befit the younger son of a good family. In order to compensate a little for the injustice of law, which accords nothings to the younger children while the first born inherits both the title and the property, Sir Thomas prepares Edmund for the Church. Edmund would have the advantage of the various 'livings' in the gift of the owner of Mansfield park. After the death of Rev. Mr. Norrie, the 'living' of Mansfield was to be for Edmund and in the event of his uncle's death occurring earlier, it was to be looked after by some friend till Edmund was qualified for orders. But due to the extravagance of Tom, his elder brother, there was a change in the calculated plan of the 'living' of Mansfield park going to Edmund and it went to one Dr. Grant. Though there was another 'family-living' for Edmund, Sir Thomas could not but feel it to be an act of injustice to his younger son and remonstrated with tom about his having upset all his arrangement for ensuring economic security of Edmund:

> 'I blush for you, Tom', said he, in his most dignified manner, I blush for the expedient which I am driven on and I trust I may pity your feelings as a brother on the occasion. You have robbed Edmund for ten, twenty, thirty years, perhaps for life, of more than half the income which ought to be his. It may hereafter be in my power or in yours (I hope it will) to procure him better pie ferments; but it must not be forgotten that no benefit of that sort would have been beyohd his natural claims on us, and that nothing can, in fact, be an equivalent for the certain advantage which he is now obliged to forego through the urgency of your debts.[3]

Sir Thomas Bertram is always conscious of his parental duties and responsibilities. From the very beginning we find him taking care of his children's education and deciding and directing the way they are to be brought up. We know that he was in the habit of visiting his children occasionally in their study room in order to know how they were progressing in their studies. Even after the children are grown up, their father's visit conjures up the memory of the rigorous tests to which he subjected them during the days of their education.[4]

Sir Thomas was excessively painstaking in teaching and training his boys. In spite of all his labour, however, he is sorely disappointed in all his children except Edmund. Jane Austen gives us the reason for the utter failure of sir Thomas's method in the very beginning of the novel. He never knew the heart of his children. In the words of the novelist herself, he "did not know what was wanting, because, though a truly anxious father, he was not outwardly affectionate, and the reserve of his manner repressed all the flow of their spirits before him."[5]

Sir Thomas is all that the head of a family should be. Amid the cares and complacency which his own family suggested, he did not forget his poor relatives. He was generous with the children of his wife's sister, Mrs. Price. An evidence of his generous nature is provided by his act of adopting Mrs. Price's daughter Fanny, to whom he is as kind as to his own children. In spite of all this, however, he is not loved by his children. When he leaves England for Antigua with the probability of nearly a twelve months absence, the Bertrams are not at all

sad at the prospect of such a long period of separation from their father. Jane Austen comments.

> "The Miss Bertrams were much to be pitied on the occasion-not for their sorrow, but for their want of it. Their father was no object of love to them; he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures, and his absence was unhappily most welcome. They were relieved by it from al restraints; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach."[6]

Then there are letters from Antigua, informing the Bertram sisters of the time of sir Thomas's return to Mansfield and they are not at all happy. It was much pleasanter to think of Henry Grawford than of their father; and to think of their father being in England again within a certain period, which these letters obliged them to do, was a most unwelcome exercise.[7] The daughters wished with all their heart that something might happen and their father's return be delayed.

November was the black month fixed for his return. It would hardly be early in November, there were generally delays, a bad passage or something that favourite something which all who shut their eyes while they look, or their understandings while they reason, feel the comfort of it. It would probably be the middle of November at least; the middle of November was three manths off. Three months comprised thirteen weeks. Much might happen in thirteen weeks."[8]

Jane Austen addes:

> "Sir Thomas would have been deeply mortified by a suspicion of half that his daughters felt on the subject of his return."[9]

As Maria and James Rushworth had been engaged during sir Thomas's absence, their marriage was to take place on his return to England. But sir Thomas, in spite of all his goodwill towards Mr. Ruthworth, had expected a very different son-in-law. He soon came to know that Mr. Rushworth was "an inferior young man as ignorant in business as in Books, with opinions in general unfixed, and without seeming much aware of it himself."[10] with this knowledge of Mr. Rushworth, as a truly loving father sir Thomas felt quite worried on his daughter's account. He noticed that:

> "her behavior to Mr. Rushworth was careless and cold. She could not, did not like him. It was his duty, therefore, to speak to his daughter on the subject. He felt that advantageous as the aillance would be and long-s standing and public as the engagement was, her happiness must not be sacrificed to it. Mr. Rushworth had, perhaps, been accepted on too short an acquaintance and on knowing him, maria was repenting."[11]

He approaches maria with an offer to help in securing her release from the connection if she felt apprehensive about the outcome of this marriage, but she turns it down assuring her father of her happiness about the marriage. Sir Thomas has to get reconciled to his daughter's choice of her life partner. We find the girl less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed. She feels that the liberty which his absence had given her has now to become absolutely necessary.[12] with all these feelings, Maria was quite impatient for the marriage. Jane Austen tells use: "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 she was to marry."[13] This marriage, however, was to prove the ruin of maria's life. She eeloped with Henry Crawford and he never married her.

Sir Thomas's second daughter Julia also eloped with Mr. Yates, of whom her father never approved. We know that she did so in order to escape from her father and home. "she had not eloped with any worse feelings than those of selfish alarm. It had appeared to her the only thing to be done. Maria's guilt had induced Julia's folly".[14]

Sir Thomas gradually becomes conscious of serious errors in his own conduct as a parent. As the novelist tells us.

Too late he became aware how unfavourable to the character of any young people must be the totally opposite treatment which maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity. He saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs. Norris by its reverse in himself-clearly saw that he had but increased the evil, by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him, and sending them all for their indulgence to a person who had been able to attach them only by the blindness of her affection and the excess of her praise."[15]

So, Sir Thomas has a painful awareness of his defective handling of his daughter's education. They were taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by a stern sense of duty. Sir Thomas always meant to be good but all his care had been directed to an improvement of his children's understanding and manners and not their disposition. It was not surprising, therefore, that his mode of bringing up his children was found to be seriously faulty.

The father, of course, fails with his children. But the indolent mother is no less responsible for things going wrong with them. The father may not know his children so well as the mother does. He has many other occupations outside the home, but the mother is for a greater part of her time at home and the children are more free with her than they can ever be with the father.

In the case of the Bertrams, however, the mother is completely useless. In the very beginning of the noval Jane Austen tells us:

> To the Education of her daughters lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on the sofa, doing some long piece of needle work, of little use and no beauty; Thinking more of her pug answer to Fanny's doubts and says:

No, my dear, I should not think of missing you, when such an offer as this comes in your way. I could do very well without you, if you were married to a man of such good estate as Mr. Crawford. And you must be aware, Fanny, that it is very young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this.[17]

This in fact, is the only place of advice which lady Bertram ever gives.

In times of distress also Lady Bertram is of no help to her family. When tom, her eldest son, is seriously ill, she is so terribly frightened that she is unable to nurse him. One cannot expect anything from such a mother.

Daughters, in fact, need more of their mother's attention than sons. Sir Thomas, therefore, is not so much disappointed in his sons as in his daughters. Edmund is a son of whom sir Thomas is justly proud. Only Tom causes him some anxiety by his prodigal nature. But is not so very bad. He comes to realize his mistake during his serious illness and is a new man after his recovery and becomes a source of comfort to his father.[18]

With all his defective methods or educating and bringing up his children, sir Thomas might not have been so great a failure if only his wife had fulfilled the role appropriate to a mother.

Mother's importance in the sphere of domestic life cannot be over emphasized. But in Jane Austen's novels almost all mothers are bad except the bead ones. In Pride and Prejudice Mrs. Bennet has the laudable ambition of getting her daughters married advantageously. But this intention, though good in itself, leads only to the humiliation of Elizabeth and Jane on a number of occasions. We find Mrs. Bennet boasting of her daughter's talents and attempting awakward contrivances or ridiculous monoeuvres in her efforts to find husbands for them. We feel that if Jane and Elisabeth had bot been unlike their mother in every way, except in their good looks, they would never have succeeded in finding husbands. All the same, mothers in Jane Austen's novels, In spite of their faults, are generally kind-hearted. Mrs. Ferrars is perhaps is perhaps the sole exception. Edward Ferrars was under the strict discipline of his mother, a proud, domineering woman of the kind sketched in the portrait of Mrs. Churchill in EMMA, and more fully developed, though on different lines, in lady Catherine do Bourgh, she, Edward knew, would have no scruples in disinheriting a son who displeased her.

The novelist also suggests that the mother's love for their children is mostly instinctive. Children, however, after a certain age begin to hunger for a lot more than the instinctive love of the mother, and the mother's failure to meet their demands causes disappointment. Fanny's reaction to her mother's love is precisely of this nature.

Her (fanny's) disappointment in her mother was greater there she had hoped much, and found almost nothing. Every flattering scheme of being of consequence to her soon fell to grounds. Mrs. Price was not unkind, but instead of gaining on her affection and confidence, and becoming more and more dear, her daughter never met with greater kindness from her than on the first day of her arrival. The instinct of nature was soon satisfied and Mrs. Price's attachment had no other source. Her heart and time were alreadye quite full; she had neither leisure nor affection to bestow on Fanny.[19]

Jane Austen's portrayal of mothers in her novels is not very flattering, but then there is no dearth of foolish mothers in the world. Jane Austen felt that a mother who is foolish, vain, and injudicious cannot be a cherished and respected friend of her children, not a prudent and reliable adviser.

Leaving apart sir Thomas, the head of the family is too often keen on enjoying his advantages rather than fulfilling his responsibilities. He is anxious to be recognized as the head of the family, but instead of endeavouring to further the interests of the family and its members, he sees to his own pleasures. As a consequence of his being self-centred, the whole family suffers. Not only is its dignity compromised, but sometimes its material interests are also in serous jeopardy. Fathers who are egoists and reveal such failings of nature as extravagance, are guilty not only towards their nearest and dearest ones but also towards the society.

Though Mr. Bennat is intelligent and perceptive, he fails to exercise his authority as the head of the family. Due to his wife's vanity and folly, his married life is far from happy. Not once in the whole course of the novel do we find him exerting his power to the advantage of his children. He makes no effort to save Lydia from the ruin which is to be the inevitable outsome of her romantic infatuation for wickham. If Darcy had not intervened, and he is almost a stranger to the family Mr. Bennet's indifference to the scandalous affairs would have resulted in disastrous consequences for all his daughters. Of all his children, only Eligabeth, his second and favourite daughter, appears to bear a relationship of sympathetic understanding with her father. They share private intimate jokes from which even the rest of the family are excluded. They are so attached to each other that when Eeligabeth plans to go to Charlotte on a short visit, her "only pain was in leaving her father, who would certainly miss her, and who, when it came to the point, so little liked her going that he told her to write to him, him almost promised to answer her letter."[20] And when Elizabeth married Darcy, "Mr. Bennet, missed his second daughter exceedingly; his affection for her drew him offer from hom than anything else could do. He delighted in going to pemberley especially when he was least expected."[21] IN spite of his love for Elizabeth, however, Mr. Bennet appears to be altogether oblivious of his responsibilities as a father. At no stage in the novel do we find him least worried about the future of his children. If they get suitably married, it is entirely because of the drift of circumstances which turn out to be favourable for them. Their father has no role to play in promoting the match.

Jane Austen emphasizes in all her novels that the parents role is very important in the domestic sphere and it is they who are responsible in the ultimate analysis for their children's success or failure in life. If parents fulfill their duties towards their children, they can create heaven on this earth.

References

1. Villard Leonie, Jane Austen, A French Appreciation, pp.214-215.
2. As he does when on his coming home from Antigua, he finds his house a mess and his children busy rehearing a vulgar play.
3. Austen, Jane : Mansfield Park, p. 22
4. “As he opened the door of fanny’s room and asked if he might come in, the terror of his former occasional visits to that room seemed all renewed, and the poor girl felt as if he were going to examine her again in French and English”. Mansfield park, p. 318.
5. Ibid., p. 18
6. Ibid., pp.
7. Ibid., p.p. 110-111
8. Ibid., pp. 110
9. Ibid., pp. 111
10. Ibid., pp. 203-204
11. Ibid., pp. 204
12. Ibid., pp. 206
13. Ibid., pp.206
14. Ibid., pp.481
15. Ibid., pp.477
16. Ibid., pp. 340
17. “he became what he ought to be-useful to his ther, steady and quite, and not living merely for himself”, Ibid., pp. 476
18. Austen, Jane, Mansfield park. Pp. 4400-401
19. Austen, Jane: Paride and prejudice., pp. 166
20. Ibid., pp.426

