

# Aggressive, Wise and Independent Heroines of Jane Austen

## Abstract

Jane Austen appears to be an absolutely distinguished personality as she lived in entire seclusion from the literary world. It is probable that she never was in company with any person whose talents or whose capacity equalled her own. Yet she wrote novels of great worth. She wrote about what she really knew. They are merely men and women, husband and wife, young maidens and idle rich bachelors. There is no scene without a woman present in her novels. She wrote what she really experienced in her life. This article tries to explore the nature and traits of Jane Austen's heroines i.e. Elinor and Marianne of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma of *Emma* who have four admirable qualities: energy, wit, self-confidence and the ability to think for themselves, from the perspective of modern women.

**Keywords:** Heroines, Aggressive, Wise, Independent, Self-Confidence, Modern Women.

## Introduction

Jane Austen's heroines are pivotal characters around whom the plot revolves. It cannot be regarded as untrue if one calls them the very soul of Austen's fiction. Their existence and dominance pervades – right from the beginning to the end. Thus, the female figure in Austen seems as both – narrator and the narrated; the teller and the told. This research paper is a humble attempt to study the nature and traits of Jane Austen's heroines.

Jane Austen is a born story teller and has written for sheer love for writing. She describes vividly and realistically. She is one of the greatest painters of life and manners. Her art in delineating her people, especially the woman is simply wonderful. The major heroines of Jane Austen are aggressive, wise and independent. They have four admirable qualities: energy, wit, self-confidence and the ability to think for themselves. They come before the readers as independent individuals. Elinor and Marianne of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma of *Emma* belong to this category.

## Review of Literature

In the direction of the available literature concerning the heroines of Jane Austen, Claire, Tomalin in "Jane Austen: A Life (1998)" discusses the Elinor as the model of good behaviour. Wright, Andrew H. "Jane Austen's Novels; A study in Structure (1972)" discusses Elinor as sensitive. Howells, William Dean in "Heroines of Fiction (1901)" discusses Emma as officious and self-confident girl. In "If Jane Austen's Heroines Lived in Modern Times, Here's what They'd Be Like" (2014) by Caroline Goldstein says that her heroines are legendary. Although each leading lady represents a Regency-era archetype, their complexity, their realness, has kept them all relevant throughout the rapidly changing times. Rebecca Cairns who claims in her article "13 Things Jane Austen Taught us about Life" (2016), that her heroines are flawed and imperfect yet they teach us how to solve the problems in our lives.

## Objective of the Study

1. To study the nature and traits of Jane Austen's heroines.
2. To analyse whether their characteristics matches with the characteristics of modern women.

## Analysis of the Nature and Traits of Jane Austen's Heroines

Elinor of *Sense and Sensibility* is independent and wise. She possesses strength of understanding, coolness of judgement, excellent heart and independent point of view from the beginning to the end of the novel. Her character is not affected by either pride or prejudices. She is intelligent and takes her own decisions. It is her decision not to live with her brother and sister-in-law Fanny who behaves very badly with her and her family. Fanny does so because she does not like growing attachment



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between Elinor and her brother Edward Ferrars. So they accept a proposal of a small house on a very easy terms belonging to her relation in Devonshire.

Elinor has strength of understanding and different point of view, when Marianne says that Edward should have no taste for drawing. Elinor interprets it differently and says she should not think so. He does not draw himself but he has a great pleasure in seeing the performance of other people and assures her that he is by no means deficient in natural taste.

Elinor's self command is invariable, while leaving Norland or Edward she never appears dejected or melancholy, though she is melancholy at heart. She loves Edward very much and it is difficult for her to leave him. But she never tries to avoid society or appear restless and dissatisfied in it. Edward comes to live at Barton for week, she talks about his present residence, its conveniences etc. His coldness and reserve nature mortifies her severely; she is vexed and half angry, but she avoids every appearance of resentment or displeasure, and treats him as she thinks he ought to be treated from the family connection. When he is leaving Elinor is very sad but she takes interest in the general concerns of the family. By doing this she tries to lessen her own grief. She is just like a modern woman, who has ability to tolerate her personal grief. She is a model of good behaviour. She sometimes tells a lie to confide her own difficulties and sorrows:

Austen sets out to present Elinor as the model of good behaviour, and to back her insistence on the social necessity of discretion and even lying. She speaks of the duty of 'telling lies when politeness required it, and effuses to confide her own difficulties and sorrows even to her much loved sister.<sup>1</sup>

She is a very caring sister. She consoles and cares Marianne when she gets dis-appointment in her love from Willoughby only because of money. Elinor cares her like a mother though she too gets disappointment in love. And when Marianne suffers from putrid fever in Cleveland she nurses her like a perfect nurse day and night. Elinor always has a searching eye for wrong things. She proves herself to be a model of good behaviour, wit, energy and self-Confidence.

Marianne Dashwood, Elinor's sister in *Sense and Sensibility* is in many respects equal to Elinor. Marianne believes in sensibility and is eager in everything.

She was sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting; she was everything but prudent.<sup>2</sup>

Marianne is always fervent in expressing herself and she has a particular choice in a man.

..... I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own.

He must enter into all my feelings, the same books; the same music must charm us both.<sup>(11)</sup>

She further tells her mother,

Mama, the more I know the world; the more I am convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!<sup>(11)</sup>

Marianne is highly romantic by temperament.

She feels strongly and reacts strongly. She is passionately in love with Willoughby. She goes to visit Allenham with Willoughby without informing to her family. Mrs. Jennings makes fun of her. Elinor does not consider her behaviour proper. But Marianne considers her conduct proper and opposes Elinor:-

On the contrary, nothing can be a stronger proof of it, Elinor; for it there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure." ..... If the impertinent remarks of Mrs. Jennings are to be the proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of our lines.<sup>45-46</sup>

She is independent in her thoughts. Her behaviour is not affected by anyone's remark. Willoughby leaves Marianne and she becomes miserable and wretched. But the scene soon shifts to London, where Marianne hopes to renew her attachment to Willoughby. She is, however, not only disappointed but deeply humiliated, for he both ignores her notes to him and behaves coldly towards her when they finally meet. She very boldly asks the reason:

Here is some mistake. I am sure – some dreadful mistakes. What can be the meaning of it? Tell me Willoughby – for Heaven's sake; tell me, what is the matter?<sup>116</sup>

Laurence Lerner discusses the true quality of Marianne as:

The true heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* is Marianne; and her true conquest is not over Colonel Brandon but over the propriety in whose name the author puts her down.<sup>3</sup>

In *Marianne* Jane Austen created the "burning heart of passion"<sup>4</sup> and disapproved of it. After being cured of her romantic illusions, Marianne marries Colonel Brandon who is thoroughly capable of providing her a secure & peaceful life. Marianne is like Elinor, independent in her decisions. She has an ability to overcome her grief and proves herself to be the heroine of the novel. So it can be said that, Elinor and Marianne are the two heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*. Andrew H. Wright agrees to this point and he says:

Elinor and Marianne are in act twin heroines, each embodying a mode of existence which is desirable, but each of which contradicts the other.

And the grand irony is that Elinor and Marianne virtually interchange their positions (though there are many modifications along the way): Marianne, it is quite clear, does gradually acquire sense; but it is also true that Elinor becomes increasingly sensitive as the book progresses.<sup>5</sup>

Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is the heroine who has an extra edge over others due to intelligence. She is one of the most successful characters portrayed by Jane Austen, who may be compared with Shakespeare's heroines. Critics have compared her with Shakespeare's Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*. A fastidious critic like Saintsbury regards her as "one of the finest heroines of nineteenth century literature." and had she been not in print but on the earth, he could have married her". Stevenson wants to bow down on his knees when she spoke, and critic says, "I am meant to fall in love with her and I do" Jane Austen writes herself in praise of Elizabeth.

I must confess, writes Jane Austen of Elizabeth Bennet, "that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least I do not know."<sup>6</sup>

Elizabeth Bennet is the cleverest, wittiest and liveliest and most like the writer herself. In fact she is a unique combination of intelligence and beauty. She is one of the five daughters of the Bennet's. Though from the point of beauty she is decidedly inferior to her elder sister Jane, yet in every other respect she is the best of all. This is not to say, however that Elizabeth is physically unattractive. Her beauty is not of the striking type but which reveals itself to scrutiny. Her most fascinating features are her eyes – so enchanting that the enchantment of Darcy began with his discovery of Elizabeth's eyes. Darcy notices how her face is "rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes."<sup>7</sup> But beauty is not simply the external appearance. Though not tempting yet tolerable outwardly, she possesses the loneliness of mind. Physically she is vital, mentally sane, spiritually and emotionally disciplined and controlled, striking and more delightful is her wit.

Elizabeth has good reason to credit herself with the ability to discern and comprehend people and situations extraordinarily well; she understands her family perfectly, knows William Collins from the first letter he writes, comprehends the merits and deficiencies of the Bingleys' almost at once, appreciates Lady Catherine de Bourgh at first meeting. She properly judges the character of her own sister Lydia, who is a flirt. She wants her father to check her spirit, and says plainly to him that if he would not check her exuberant spirits, she will be beyond the reach of amendment, and she will at sixteen be the most determined flirt that ever made and she will make her family ridiculous. Her father does not mind her and Lydia runs away with

Wickham. Her failures are with 'intricate' people who moreover stand in a relationship of great intimacy to her, Charlotte Lucas, George Wickham and Fitzwilliam Darcy.

She has an ability to take her own decisions. She refuses to dance with Mr. Darcy because he hurts her feelings and says, "Despise me if you dare," he replies in unmistakable accents, "Indeed I do not dare," Darcy requests her to dance, but she is determined.

She refuses to marry her cousin Mr. Collins who has to become the future inheritor of her father's property. Her mother forces her to marry. She refuses him because she knows that he is not the right person for her who can make her happy. She does not want to marry for social status or money. She wants to marry for love.

She refuses Mr. Darcy's proposal of marriage because she hates him deeply and she is prejudiced that he is responsible for ruining her sister's happiness and also responsible for destroying Wickham's future. But this is not the end. Indeed it is the beginning of Elizabeth's very gradual and successful efforts to know him thoroughly. Next day she receives Mr. Darcy's letter in which he explains that he did not know her sister's feeling towards Mr. Bingley and Mr. Wickham was not a man of character who tried to elope his sister Ms Georgiana Darcy. And when she realises her fault; she grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, and absurd.

"How despicably have I acted!" she cried, - "I who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have after disdained the generous candour of my sister; and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind."<sup>171</sup>

Elizabeth appears Jane Austen's prototype but not to all extent. She has certainly given her own gaiety, high spirit and courage, wit and readiness, good sense and right feelings, yet that is not the *ditto* reflection. It is a sort of projection, or identification of author's personality with that of her heroine. She has not copied herself, but she has recreated her personality, which, perhaps, is much livelier than her own of flesh and blood.

Emma is the only heroine who truly merits for the honorary title of the novel. Emma is an officious and self-confident girl but she is faulty. Emma's faults do actually form the whole theme of the story. Emma's chief failing, lies in her crude juvenile confidence of being able to manage the intimate personal affairs of those she loves. Her exertions are never for her own advantage. Emma Woodhouse, the protagonist of *Emma* is young, rich, intelligent, beautiful, charming, perceptive, and gay; but she is vain of her own perceptions, snobbish, dominating, rash, and selfish. She is kind to her father, charitable to the poor, fond of Mr. Knightly, and attached to

'poor Miss Taylor.' But her mis-apprehensions - of Harriet, of Mr Elton, of Jane Fairfax, of Frank Churchill, of Mr. Knightley, and of herself-lead her to develop and encourage a number of situations which, however amusing, clearly display the profound contradictions with are the essence of irony. 'I am going', said Jane Austen in a letter, "to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like."<sup>8</sup>

And we must agree with Howells that "it took supreme courage to portray a girl, meant to win and keep the reader's fancy, with the characteristics frankly ascribed to Emma Woodhouse. . . . An officious and self-confident girl, even if pretty, is not usually one to take the fancy, and yet Emma takes the fancy."<sup>9</sup>

Emma is an ideal but very human heroine with the share of her faults. Emma is "handsome, clever and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition."<sup>10</sup> But she also has the "power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself."<sup>(13)</sup> In other words she is the victim of her own illusion and she is conceited. She believes that she had made a match between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. She desires to fix a match for Mr. Elton, the Vicar. She thinks that she knows all and can manage the lives of other people. She lives in an imaginative world of her own. Andrew H. Wright says that:

Emma is, like all great heroes the victim of her own illusions; she creates a world, but it is not the real world. How deceptive is appearance, and how misleading. One could make the same exclamation about Othello or Lear. Still, it would be a mere oversimplification to say that the book turns on the contrast of appearance to reality; too simple because, though the statement is true, the significance of the novel – as in Shakespeare – lies in the variety of illusions and in the complexity of reality.<sup>11</sup>

She is too much status-conscious. The Coles arranges a dinner party and invites Mr. and Mrs. Weston, Mr. Knightley and several other families. Emma has made up her mind not to accept their invitation as they are socially inferior to her. At the same time she is vexed when she does not receive an invitation. And when she receives the invitation, she accepts it on the advice of Mr. Weston.

She has however, yet to undergo the trials and pains of unrequited love. The revelation of Frank's secret engagement to Jane makes her realise that she has been duped and manipulated by Frank Churchill. This humiliation is however nothing compared to the revelation Harriet makes that she is not in love with Frank Churchill as Emma imagines but with Mr. Knightley. This explodes her last misconception and she realises that "Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself." Finally Emma is in a situation which Knightley has wished for, "Emma in

love and in some doubt of a return." This pain completes the education of Emma as she is now completely aware of the misery she has brought on herself and others by manipulating them to suit her own whims and fancy. Finally she finds her happiness when Mr. Knightley proposes her. She forgives Frank Churchill and goes more than halfway to effect reconciliation with Jane Fairfax. Harriet too finds her happiness with Robert Martin, away from the interference of Emma and Emma also admits her error in misjudging Martin.

Emma is very mature heroine. Her character changes for betterment. Jane Austen traces her development from a rich, snobbish, highhanded girl to a mature, humble and reflective young woman. Emma pays for her delusive self-confidence by truly painful humiliations. Throughout the book we love her for the contradictions in her nature: they are amusing; they are deeply human. The new Emma, the Emma who stands self-revealed, is perhaps no less human and only slightly less amusing but she is more resolved, more composed, more serene.

### Conclusion

Thus, the heroines of this category have some common traits in nature. Elinor is too sensible; Elizabeth nurtures prejudice and Emma is over-confident. But the biggest strength of their character is that they accept their faults, tries to remove and come up with a new personality. They have ability to prove their good traits like, wit, intelligence etc. They never misuse their independence. It is real independence. They behave and react to situations very much like a modern woman. They are imperfect but they know how to tackle with their problems and live life of their choice. Their points of view about their choice in physical appearance of their life partners may differ but all of them want intelligent and sensible life partners who can understand and care for them. All believe that marriage should be based on love. Money is an important thing but to marry only for money is wrong which may spoil their future security and happiness. It shows that they are aggressive, wise and independent in taking important decisions of their life. I am agree with Rebecca Cairns who claims in her article "13 Things Jane Austen Taught us about Life", "It is a truth universally acknowledged that it is a rite of passage in every woman's life to read Jane Austen. Her heroines are flawed and imperfect, teaching us how to solve the problems in our lives as they muddle through their own, and passing on the wisdom of their lessons to us"<sup>12</sup>.

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