



Dysfunctional Motherhood in Jane Austen Novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*

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ABSTRACT

Although Jane Austen's novels end happily with the heroines succeeding in finding suitable partners to establish a perfect family, the family backgrounds of these heroines provide illustrations of dysfunctional motherhood. The focus of this paper is on examining these examples of motherhood in Jane Austen novels with the aim of shedding light on the most deviant mother figures in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Considered against the social and cultural standards of motherhood set by social philosophers and conduct writers in the 18th century, these mother figures portray ineffectual or "bad mothering". Escaping the fallibility and devastating influence of their mothers, the heroines succeed in finding suitable partners and aspire to be worthy future mothers. The study demonstrates the need to make maternity a site of empowerment and encouragement for mothers to provide children with a proper moral education, caring and discipline.

Keywords: Dysfunctional motherhood, Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice.



Introduction:

A mother plays a vital role in the formation of the identity of her children. A good mother can instil in her family sound morals and values that help to establish a good generation. Although Jane Austen's novels end happily with the heroines' succeeding in finding suitable partners, the family backgrounds of these heroines demonstrate examples of bad and insufficient mothering. The aim of this study is to analyze illustrations of dysfunctional motherhood in Jane Austen novels in order to shed light on the most incompetent mother figures in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The choice of these novels, in particular, is determined by the notion that the mothers involved, Mrs Bennet and Mrs Dashwood, different from mothers in Austen's other novels, have quite a physical presence in the heroines' life throughout the action of the story, and they represent the culmination of dysfunctional motherhood in Austen's literary writing.

Literature review:

The treatment of mother figures and family relationships in Austen novels has been the subject of many critical studies and reviews. In her thesis entitled "Paternal Plots and Maternal Perspectives in Austen, Bronte, Eliot and Woolf", Beatrice Hyson Swift (1972) tackles the "absent or devalued mother and the motherless or unmothered daughter [...] in the context of a female subplot existing within, and either supporting or working against, a male-oriented primary plot which focuses on the heroine 's relationship with her father, brother and/or suitors". In her study which concentrates on only one of Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, she adopts a feminist attitude and concentrates on female-male relationships in which the mother's deficiency "functions as a site of contradiction where cultural power and authority are disputed". In his article "The Business of Marrying and Mothering", Lloyd W. Brown examines how marriage became a business in Austen's day and analyzes the economic value of marriage and its impact on family life. He shows how "the very unreality of a happy marriage or of truly humane motherhood becomes a satiric reflection on the very real limitations of society and individuals" (42). His views guide the examination in this study of Mrs Bennet's materialistic obsession with finding husbands for her daughters. The study by Jean Johnson Gandesbery (1976), entitled "Versions of the Mother in the Novels of Jane Austen and George Eliot", describes these mothers as lazy, stupid and social-climbing. It concentrates solely on Austen's mother-figure, Mrs Bennet, to demonstrate her insufficient and destructive role as a mother. In light of all that has been discussed so far, this study aims to analyze some aspects of dysfunctional



motherhood, concentrating on the characters of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Dashwood as inadequate and insufficient examples of motherhood.

Discussion:

Motherhood was integral to the formation of womanhood in Victorian society. As a mother, Queen Victoria "came to represent a kind of femininity which was centred on family, motherhood and respectability ... the very model of marital stability and domestic virtue" (Abrams, 2001). Therefore, society's interest in establishing the notion of an ideal family was inspired by Queen Victoria, "whose public example established high standards for women" (McKnight, 1997, 2), and "the British under Queen Victoria's reign are often thought of as exalting motherhood" (Thaden, 1997, 3-5). Therefore, female fulfilment entails being a good mother who is self-sacrificing and nurturing. It is with the aid of a devoted mother that the family guarantees security, comfort and happiness.

To meet society's standards of ideal motherhood, it is obvious that educating a woman in how to be a good mother constituted a pivotal concern for many historians, scholars and conduct writers in the 18th century who defined the role of a woman in terms of mothering and childcaring. For example, William Cadogan, in his book *An Essay upon Nursing, and the Management of Children, from Their Birth to Three Years of Age* (1748), highlights the need for maternal breastfeeding for the health of the child. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his *Emile or On Education* (1762), thinks that mothers should breastfeed their babies because it strengthens their ties with other members of the family. He proclaims that the "good constitution of children" depends on women. Rousseau is further credited with portraying both "the domestic life and the role of wife and mother as a noble and fulfilling vocation" (as qtd. in Kagan, Ozment, and Turner 1998, 625). Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was very popular in Austen's time as it manifested the ideal of education for the individual. Locke mentions "virtue, wisdom, breeding and learning" as the great aims of education to prepare a woman for motherhood (as qtd. in Devlin 1975, 11). Also, women's magazines at that time, such as *The Lady's Magazine*, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and many others "tended to perpetuate the Victorian ideal of domestic femininity" (Thompson, 1996, 123).

Conduct books explain in detail the clues to correct behaviour for mothers and daughters. On the importance of these books, Mary Poovey, author of *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, postulates:



Conduct material is instructive, not only because it probably served a prescriptive function for mothers and daughters, but also because as products of the everyday discourse of eighteenth-century propriety, the essays are themselves expressions of the implicit values of their culture. Indeed, in many respects this conduct material provides the best access both to the way in which this culture defined female nature and to the ways in which a woman of this period would have experienced the social and psychological dimensions of ideology. (as qtd. in Kirkpatrick, 1994, 198).

To summarize major conduct views in the 18th and 19th centuries, one may conclude that they focus on the importance of the mother's role in educating her children, her responsibility in managing her household and her being a good example of society's ethics and moral values for her children. In this respect, W. A Craik (1969) maintains: "Schooling [for female children] may be solely the mother's business" (51). He adds that "to know all the detailed and various business of household management" is all that is needed for a woman to be "a good head of her household" (1969, 48). Adherence to morality and propriety is an indicator of functional motherhood, as Hannah More holds that "moral excellence is the grand object of education" for women (as qtd. in Monaghan, 1981, 106).

Surprisingly, however, it is rare to find figures of idealized motherhood in the literary writings of many novelists of the 18th and the 19th centuries, including Jane Austen, for example, whose novels portrait images of bad, ineffective and powerless motherhood. This study argues that the mothers in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* present illustrations of poor mothering that fails to measure up to Victorian standards of motherhood.

It might be assumed that the absence of ideal motherhood in her writing can be attributed to the fact that Austen's relationship with her mother was not a perfect one. It is well-known to readers of Austen's biography that Austen herself did not have a good mother. Her relationship with her mother was affected by some family conflicts. Based on Austen biographies, Jan Fergus (2007) claims that "Austen was an embittered, disappointed woman trapped in a thoroughly unpleasant family" (4). Austen's own mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen, is described as "shrewd and acute, high-minded and determined, with a strong sense of humour, and with an energy capable of triumphing over years of indifferent health" (Austen-Leigh et al., 1965, 16). Alison G. Sulloway (1989) postulates that "Austen's increasingly irritated comments about her mother [in her letters] imply that she suffered keenly from the covert maternal jealousy that mothers are often taught to inflict upon their most



intelligent daughters" (92). Another remark, by Reg Wright (1989), asserts that: "There is little to suggest that [Mrs Austen] had a close understanding or relationship with her second daughter, Jane" (6). One may consider that the imperfect relationship between Austen and her mother plays an important role in formulating her views of motherhood. It, also, enables her to create the mother characters of her heroines as dysfunctional and ineffective, failing to provide perfect role models of motherhood.

The following discussion will showcase more thoroughly how Mrs Bennet and Mrs Dashwood are portrayed as imperfect and deviant examples of motherhood.

Although Mrs Dashwood is the most delightful, elegant and affectionate mother to her daughters in most of Austen's novels, she does not represent an adequate or effective image of motherhood. A close analysis of Mrs Dashwood's character will expose evidence of her failures as a mother. From the very beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen highlights the contrast between the reasonable and sensible Elinor and her imprudent and emotional mother:

Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. (*Sense and Sensibility* 6)

Different from her daughter, Elinor, Mrs Dashwood proves to be incompetent in the domestic and financial management of her household. In this respect, Monaghan (1981) states that "Jane Austen reserves some of her sharpest irony in *Sense and Sensibility* for Mrs Dashwood's deficiencies as a household manager" (114). It is only the prudence of her daughter, Elinor, secures a dwelling for the family after the death of the father:

But she could hear of no situation that at once answered her notions of comfort and ease, and suited the prudence of her eldest daughter, whose steadier judgement rejected several houses as too large for their income, which her mother would have approved. (*Sense and Sensibility* 14)

Mrs Dashwood's main faults are her imprudence and excessive sensibility. She has influenced her daughter Marianne to be like her for, as Jane Nardin (1983) postulates, "it is easy to ascribe Marianne's valuing of these qualities [sensibility over sense]



entirely to her reading of sentimental fiction and to overlook her mother's influence on the process" (77).

Like all mothers, Mrs Dashwood desires to see her daughters happily settled with good husbands. However, her excessively romantic nature makes her blindly follow the dictates of feelings rather than reason. Emotional and affectionate, she is unable to judge people correctly. In her first meeting with Edward Ferrars, she blindly decides that he is a suitable partner for Elinor, determining that he "is unlike [for] Fanny ... enough. It implies everything amiable. I love him already" (16). Her rash conclusion is confronted by the sound reasoning of Elinor who decides: "I think you will like him [...] when you know more of him" (16). This impulsive attitude and immature judgement of people and situations mark major flaws in Mrs Dashwood's parental role of mother. For example, her opinion of Willoughby, Marianne's supposed suitor, that "he was as faultless as in Marianne's [opinion]" (43), reflects her naivety and foolishness. Disregarding social decorum, she encourages her daughter to go with Willoughby to Miss Smith's dwelling without a chaperone, an act that defies the social norms of the 18th century and brings shame and disgrace upon the family. Mrs Dashwood fails to act as an authority figure and to impose appropriate discipline on her daughter. The mother's lack of caution and perception makes her incapable of controlling her daughter's conduct. Harping on the same tune, Jane Nardin (1973) argues that "Mrs. Dashwood's disregard of the conventional parental role, her refusal to interfere in any way when Willoughby's behaviour to Marianne begins to seem suspicious, parallels Marianne's disregard of conventional rules and turns out just as badly" (157).

It is only after the disastrous love experiences of Marianne and Elinor that Mrs Dashwood starts to recognize her failure as a mother:

She now found that she had erred in relying on Elinor's representation of herself ... She found that she had been misled by the careful, the considerate attention of her daughter ... She feared that under this persuasion she had been unjust, inattentive, nay, almost unkind to her Elinor; – that Marianne's affliction, because more acknowledged, more immediately before her, had too much engrossed her tenderness, and led her away to forget that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude. (*Sense and Sensibility* 355-6)

Mrs Dashwood finally fathoms the significance of striking a balance between emotion and reason. Her transformation into a prudent and sensible mother enables her to appreciate the virtues of her daughters' partners, Colonel Brandon and Edward



Ferrars. Her development towards becoming a good mother is proved at the end of the novel, as she decides "to remain at [Barton] cottage without attempting a removal to Delaford" (380) to avoid any interference in her daughters' lives after marriage. Thus, Mrs Dashwood's refusal to live in her daughters' neighbourhood expresses the desire of a wise and prudent mother.

From the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs Bennet is described as a woman of "mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper"(5). She foolishly parades her improper behaviour and ignorance till the end of the novel, which causes Maaja A. Stewart (1997) to describe her as "one of the most amusing portraits in literature of the 'awful mother'" (54).

Mrs Bennet's main concern is to get wealthy husbands for her daughters. It was marriage for economic security that all mothers sought for their daughters in the 18th century (Swords, 1988,78). Jane Austen warns against getting married for material security but ignoring aspects of affection and respect, because the choice of a compatible and suitable partner in marriage is pivotal in establishing a good family. For example, the marriage of Mr and Mrs Bennet is not satisfactory since it is devoid of mutual affection and understanding. Contemplating on the nature of the marriage of her parents, Elizabeth realizes:

Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her. (*Pride and Prejudice* 236)

In fact, Mrs Bennet fails not only as a wife but also as a mother. Though her desire to find husbands for her daughters is admirable to some extent, she does not realize that marriage does not rely only on financial security, it also demands mutual affection and respect. This is a flaw in her as a mother who insists on getting her daughters married to men without knowing their characters. This is illustrated by her desire to marry Jane to Bingley without knowing him beforehand, her anger at Elizabeth when she refuses to accept the silly ridiculous person, Mr Collins, and her warm welcome to the evil Wickham despite his bringing disgrace on the family when he eloped with Lydia. Mrs Bennet's insistence on financial reasons for marriage hinders her realizing the importance of finding compatible and suitable marriage partners for her daughters.

Mrs Bennet's irresponsibility is emphasized when she decides to send Jane to Bingley's residence on horseback in rainy weather to ensure a long stay there, thus neglecting her daughter's wellbeing:



Jane was therefore obliged to go on horseback, and her mother attended her to the door with many cheerful prognostics of a bad day! Her hopes were answered. Jane had not been gone long before it rained hard! Her sisters were uneasy for her, but their mother was delighted. The rain continued the whole evening without intermission. Jane could certainly not come back. (*Pride and Prejudice* 30)

Unaware of her indiscretion, Mrs Bennet insists on continuing with her plan of making Bingley become attracted to her daughter, even if at the cost of her daughter's wellbeing.

As a deficient mother, Mrs Bennet does not give her daughters adequate moral education, which results in the improper behaviour of Lydia. Instead of admitting her responsibility for Lydia's disgraceful action, Mrs Bennet directs the blame to everyone around her, claiming that:

"If I had been able," said she, "to carry my point of going to Brighton, with all my family, this would not have happened; but poor dear Lydia had nobody to take care of her. Why did the Forsters ever let her go out of their sight? I am sure there was some great neglect or other on their side, for she is not the kind of girl to do such a thing, if she had been well looked after. I always thought they were very unfit to have the charge of her; but I was over-ruled, as I always am. Poor dear child!" (*Pride and Prejudice* 287)

Austen accentuates the recklessness of Mrs Bennet, who is guilty of "blaming everybody but the person to whose ill judging indulgence the errors of her daughter must be principally owing" (287). On her mother's way of raising Lydia, Elizabeth declares that Lydia "has never been taught to think on serious subjects" (283). This carelessness and inattention on the part of the mother led to the impropriety of her daughter. In fact, Lydia is her mother's favourite, and she is described as "untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless" (315).

Stupid and shallow-minded, Mrs Bennet fails to understand her daughters' personalities and needs. For example, she always refers to Jane as a beauty, saying "I do not like to boast of my own child, but to be sure, Jane- one does not often see anybody better looking" (*Pride and Prejudice* 44). Out of insensitivity, Mrs Bennet keeps hurting Jane's feelings by her continual references to Bingley after his disappearance without making a proposal: "Oh! that my dear mother had more command over herself; she can have no idea of the pain she gives me by her continual reflections on him" (*Pride and Prejudice* 134), Jane sadly remarks. Of Mary, Mrs



Bennet states, "you are a young lady of deep reflection I know, and read great books, and make extracts" (*Pride and Prejudice* 7), failing to understand the pompous style of her daughter. When Mr Gardiner decides to search for Lydia in London after her elopement, Mrs Bennet's main concern is purchasing her daughter wedding clothes. Instead of considering the seriousness of Lydia's improper action, she announces to her other daughters: "How I long to see her! And to see dear Wickham too! But the clothes, the wedding clothes! I will write to my sister Gardiner about them directly [...]. My dear, dear Lydia! - How merry we shall be together when we meet!" (*Pride and Prejudice* 306).

The novel is replete with many examples that illustrate Mrs Bennet's impoliteness and lack of discipline that violate society's decorum. For example, her warm reception of Bingley is contrasted to that of Darcy: "He was received by Mrs Bennet with a degree of civility, which made her two daughters ashamed, especially when contrasted with the cold and ceremonious politeness of her curtsy and address to his friend" (*Pride and Prejudice* 334). She makes awful mistakes, thus setting a poor example for her daughters in terms of proper behaviour and manners.

Unlike Mrs Dashwood, Mrs Bennet's inadequacy as a mother continues till the end of the novel. Her lack of understanding and decency hinders any kind of development in her role as a mother. A clear evaluation of Mrs Bennet is given by Darcy as he writes to Elizabeth about her mother: "The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself " (*Pride and Prejudice* 198).

Austen deliberately presents inadequate mother figures as the antithesis to the characters of the heroines. Therefore, it is through these dysfunctional models of motherhood that the heroines succeed in achieving moral development and enlightenment, at the end of the novel, to enable them to become ideal mothers to their children. Harping on the same tune, Benson (1989) claims "All the heroines have the makings of being better mothers than their own; with the self-knowledge they have achieved in the course of the novels, it is quite likely that they will succeed" (124).

Conclusion:

It is obvious that Mrs Dashwood and Mrs Bennet fail to provide the ideal images of motherhood of Austen's time as they violate the social norms of manners and conduct in the 18th century. It is significant to mention that Austen creates inadequate mother figures to explain to her readers how a good mother should behave. The ideal mother



in the 18th century must take on the responsibility of managing the household effectively, educating her daughters and guiding them in appropriate and accepted moral behaviour. She should understand her daughters' feelings and needs and avoid gratification of excessive emotions. While considering financial aspects in finding husbands for her daughters, a mother should consider closely spouses who are compatible with her daughters.

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