

## **Impact of Father-figures in Jane Austen's Novels**

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### **Abstract**

At the onset of " Romantic Age" in the history of English literature Jane Austen stood up as a "Realist" among the novelists. She created a miniature world of her own in her novels; critiquing the lives and norms of the gentry-centric society. In my article I would bring to focus the faulty and heedless role of fathers in Jane Austen's select novels. She portrays such undiscerning and negligent father figures who are least bothered about the correct upbringing of their children. She projects her heroines as stronger and independent figures as compared to their fathers. Most of the young ladies such as Emma, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot sought to fight the troubles in their life, but definitely gave importance to the aspect of moral integrity in pursuing their goals in life. The aim of my article is to ascertain the worth of Austen's heroines despite irresponsible and inadvertent influence of fathers on them. Jane Austen caricatured her heroines in such a way that in spite of several challenges they survived righteously and firmly in the then society. This definitely cites an example for the readers of the present young generation also to follow tradition and culture.

**Keywords:** Realist, culture, negligent, fatherhood, moral integrity, emotional relationship, tradition

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## Introduction

Jane Austen is sensitive of the ethical compulsions of parents towards their children and also the probable dent which has been done by the parental failure in her novels. In the novels of Jane Austen the representations of the family are more pragmatic. The responsibilities of parents and their restraints have an effect on all the heroines of Austen. "The parental oppression is more fierce and intense than any encountered in the Jane Austen novels and there are examples of parents, who implement a kind of subjective control and are authoritarian over their children" (Pollock, 1983). There are parental restraints and the influences of parents' faults are evident in the lives of daughters in Austen's novels. The father-daughter relationship is aloof and devoid of actual warmth. "Austen acknowledges the harm done by parental frustration and the ethical commitments of parents towards their children" (Emsley, 2005). Elizabeth gets disappointed with the way her father has abnegated his paternal duties in *Pride and Prejudice*. She later chooses a husband who will love her for the same reasons her father loves her and someone who is not totally wrapped up in the envelope of satirical distancing. Mr. Price in *Mansfield Park* is a terrible father. This is partly because he ignores his daughter, and partly because he makes her the subject of a crude joke in front of his male friends, which is dreadful. Father figures at places realise their own wrong choice in matrimony by choosing the partner solely on the basis of beauty and not rationally. Parents' discordant marital relations also bridged a gap in their relations with their children. Moreover, due to the social and economic pressures the fathers' who belonged to the landed gentry proved ineffectual.

Mr. Bennet was not a good father as he is irresponsible, though we find his witticism entertaining. It's also observed that Sir Walter Elliot is very cruel and stingy and he thinks about no one but himself. The reason why he likes his eldest daughter Elizabeth is that she is so much like him. In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter cannot be excused for being a detached father on the grounds of his unthinking stupidity or being backed into a corner or giving up in despair on a bad marriage or even the prevailing mores of his society.

In *Northanger Abbey*, General Tilney impels Catherine from his house without providing any adequate endowments. He also did not provide her an escort for her journey of seventy mile, for the only reason that she has no riches of her own. Austen also typically discovers the precise ways in which patriarchal power of women depends on women, who are being deprived of the right to earn or even become heir to their personal wealth. Jane Austen also reminds her readers that the laws and traditions of England may, as Henry Tilney brilliantly proclaims, cover against wife murder and do not offer much more than this negligible protection for a wife. Austen has portrayed General Tilney as the father who controls the household regardless of his lack of admiration and also the emotion that matches

Elizabeth Bennet's appreciation that her father's withdrawal into his library is destructive and selfish.

All these fathers in Austen's novels are in their diverse ways incompetent of supporting their children as they manage the finances of the house. Catherine realizes that General Tilney's greed and coercion resemble that of Fanny Price's recognition that the Bertram family is not only imperfect and stubborn in his verdict but mercenary in his intentions. Sir Walter Elliot is excessively contemptible to afford dinners for his daughters while Mr. Woodhouse rather factually tries to starve his family and guests. Whereas the craving of General Tilney is not alarming and the meals over which he controls are an indication to his children and his guest's dispossession.

General Tilney looks like the fathers of Austen's established literature in his attempts to watch and controls his children as an author would. His characters observe the egotistic Sir Walter and the humorous Mr. Bennet. It is fairly clear that Mr. Bennet efficiently renounce from the one role it is most incumbent on him to execute, that is the role of a father. It is seen that he takes safe haven in scorn just as he takes refuge in his library. These are the gestures of detachment from the crucial customs of society and family.

The role of father-son in *Sense and Sensibility* or *Mansfield Park* emerge to be more dynamic although their force has been seen as deceptive by some critics and consequently even the compassion which is shared by the daughters and fathers begins to take a rain check. Sir Elliot and Mr. Woodhouse are not available as associates for their daughters. The novels of Austen seem unwilling to accept a suitable father daughter bond. As seen in the wit shared by Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet or the soberness shared by Fanny Price and Sir Thomas as a value.

"The father-daughter bond on the other hand with the education of daughters could have grown stronger" (Duckfield, 2015). The financial limitation of the father allowed the daughter to take over his power. The analysis of the writers, demonstrates that some fathers are limited by being younger sons and as fathers of daughters who are rendered thriftily ineffective by required laws and these types of fathers are often frail, imperfect and pathetic.

Ineffective parenting results in characters' wrong decision making in Jane Austen's novels. The author has described Emma's father as being too careless, he was a man who had been a valetudinarian all through his life.

In the early chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*, father figures Mr. Bennet's intelligence seems to be admired and shares his ironic views of the world as does Elizabeth. We gradually see that there is some distance created between Elizabeth and her father. She

later admits that he is wrong in his treatment towards her mother and also feels that he is wrong to let Lydia to go to Brighton. She is also aware that her father can maliciously humiliate her with his ill time gossips. Later on in the novel, the author senses that Mr. Bennet's scorn is disparaging and ruthless and his humor is anti- social.

The readings of *Pride and Prejudice* reveal the emotional aridity, sluggishness and egocentricity of Mr. Bennet who is an enthralling man. Austen has created Mr. Bennet's funniest line, she is quite aware that he was a deeply flawed man. "Unlike the most other characters of the novel, Mr. Bennet has self knowledge" (Dhatwalia, 1998). Mr. Bennet thinks his beloved Lizzy (Elizabeth) might be repeating his own great mistakes in life and begs that she respect her partner in life. Mr. Bennet bounces back and knows that Lizzy who is miserably married would not avert him from seeking his usual consolations. The doors of his emotions open briefly which depict his unhappiness and then he shuts them again.

In Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, the surrendering in regard to fatherhood by Mr. Bennet with a subsequent failure of pressure for Elizabeth, to Mr. Darcy is highlighted. The fall down of a father figure in Jane Austen's novels is portrayed by keeping with his extreme public pressure which keeps hindering. In terms of this double father, the author looks at Elizabeth's continuing depression and her disgrace. Austen tries to show the readers the form of violence against women, who has not been hidden away in the attic.

Mr. Bennet is actually benevolent to the point around inconsistency which seems to manipulate nothing sharper than his sarcasm. In the view of John Locke's prominent content on education, Mr. Bennet has been described just as the modern father and not a terrible one. Mrs. Bennet's aspiration and anticipation is disturbed by Mr. Bennet's behaviour, because in the opening scenes he seems to refuse to meet the new bachelor in the town and creates anxiety. Later Austen makes clear in her novel that Mr. Bennet neglects Lydia, and fails to defend her from devastating male designs.

Emma's father is an ignorant man. His habits of self-centeredness make him to never comprehend what other persons could feel for him which is evident from his dialogue at Coles' dinner party "And no great harm if it does," said Mr. Woodhouse. "The sooner every party breaks up, the better" (Austen, 2012, p.243). Jane Austen actually expects men to pay quite a lot of attention to their relationships. Maria Bertram in *Mansfield Park* seems to have everything a girl could ask for and she urgently wants to escape her father's house and Mr. Rushworth's is a way out. Later when Maria reaches the most interesting age, at which time she is ready to think about marriage and men, her father is called away on business to West Indies for nearly two years. By the time he returns back to Mansfield, Maria is too used to her freedom to be able to stand living under his roof. Anne Elliot's

situation is no less realistic and no less painful than that of Fanny Price's After Anne's mother had died; her father and elder sister were like cold fish, with no affection or respect towards Anne. Their narcissism and egoism made it impossible for them to see any value in a person so different from themselves.

In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas' view of Fanny Price is appreciative. He has raised her and offered her the opportunity to lead a life in an integral family with many benefits. Fanny refuses to marry Mr. Crawford, who is in his eyes is the best match for Fanny. But Sir Thomas is not aware of the events Fanny was able to observe. He thus considers Fanny's response to be obstinate and unappreciative, thus sends her home to her poorer family to let her feel the outcome of her decision. Thus, he deems that the distress of life there will make Fanny to understand Crawford's offer.

Patriarchy suppressed women's freedom in the nineteenth-century English society. They were judged according to their families and husband's status. Women could not assert their independence and they were merely seen as household creatures. The inadequacy in fathers' behaviour towards children was largely due to societal pressures, where women were on margins. The right to property laws were in favour of male members of the family only. Husbands dominated in family matters as a result of which women felt insecure for themselves and for their children's future. That is why, fathers are projected in the novels of Jane Austen as full of idiosyncrasies and lacking in proper behaviour, at some places actually suffering from mental illness. "It was a big challenge for parents to provide proper growth to a large family who were already under pressure due to the prevalent social and economic constraints" (Fass, 1993). Though Jane Austen seeks to project her heroines as self reliant, but they are under some restraints. They sought to secure their life by attaining wealthy husbands. That was the reality of the then society. The economic constraints in Parents' life lead Jane Austen's heroines to choose their partners rationally.

In all the novels studied, human nature in its essence unfolds itself through the most important bonds of family i.e. parents and their children. This close examination of the role of fatherhood definitely suggests that emotional bonding as well as practical consideration in life are essential for a secure and stable relationship between parents and children. As a rationalist, Jane Austen aimed to caricature an array of parental characters in her novels and highlight their positive or flawed roles as a signal to advocate fundamental changes in the nature of various relationships for a successful functioning of society as a whole.

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