



A Comparative Reading of Austin's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*: Richter's Queer Theory

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Abstract

The following research aims to study the concept of homosexuality in Jane Austen's novels *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Two leading heroines, who have associations with power, are selected from the novels. In *Emma*, Emma herself is empowered. She, after the death of her mother, is the mistress of the house and in control of states, other lower social levels, and even some in upper social level. Such control and power are bizarre for a woman of her age, experience, and class. By some critics, she is addressed as homosexual for her behavior. In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth is empowered. Her concerns and morals are, as high as she sees herself, higher than others. What differs in the case studies is the presence or absence of the biological mother in association with power as a binary. The analysis interprets the sexual orientation and rejects the concept of homosexuality according to Richter's Queer Theory.

Keywords: *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, Gender Study, Homosexuality, Jane Austen

1. Introduction

Jane Austin's works are mostly believed to portray life, "She was the founder of the novel which deals with unimportant middleclass people and of which there are many fine examples in latter English fiction." (Wu, 1988, p. 118). Such characteristics are perfectly tangible in works of Austin; her treatment of subjects such as marriage and life and realistic setting in her stories has made a great mixture.

Emma, a heroin described as rich, spoiled, and headstrong, thinks too much of her matchmaking skills and she lacks the wit to foresee what may have come of her over persisting on proving her opinions. She has a destructive effect on Harriet's affairs in story preventing her to enter a relationship. The main plot of the story is moved by Emma's misunderstanding of situations and her insistence on having control over all which makes the structure very close to the comedy of manner.

Pride and Prejudice's main plot of the story advances on the conflicts surrounding Elizabeth Bennett the heroine of the story. Elizabeth's character is mostly concerned with deeper and greater matters: education, concept of marriage in society, and the structure of British society. The plot moves over the fact that the heroine and her lover, Mr. Darcy, are not a great match, the interactions made are the plot of story for such Austin has used the free indirect speech. This research studies the concept of sexual orientation of the two heroines, Emma and Elizabeth Bennet. The presence or absence of biological mother affects such claims.

Homosexuality's literal definition is to be sexually attracted to the same sex. The main discussion in this article is "how tell whether someone is 'really' homosexual or not." (Mcintosh, 2007, p.182) and by what factors they may be misread. These factors are set by society and sociologists. In many studies of sociologists, the main aim is to label people into categories:

The practice of the social labeling of persons as deviant operates in two ways as a mechanism of social control. In the first place it helps to provide a clear-cut, publicized, and recognizable

threshold between permissible and impermissible behavior. This means that people cannot so easily drift into deviant behavior. Their first moves in a deviant direction immediate raise the question of a total move into a deviant role with all the sanctions that this is likely to elicit. Secondly, the labeling serves to segregate the deviants from others and this means that their deviant practices and their self-justifications for these practices are contained within are relatively narrow group. (Mcintosh, 2007, p.183).

The main factor used to create these categories is the binary characteristics of sexuality in an individual. Many theories reject these labeling for one's sexual orientation. The best theory rejecting these labeling is the queer theory.

The queer theory, which its "roots can be found in women's studies, feminist theory, and gay and lesbian studies, as well as postmodern and post-structuralist theories." (Giesecking, 2008, p.2) [4] discusses the fact that sex, gender, and sexuality should not be characterizing and defining for an individual's personality. "In 1991, Teresa de Lauretis used the words "queer theory" to describe a way of thinking that did not use heterosexuality or binary gender constructs as its starting point, but instead argued for a more fluid concept of identity." (Giesecking, 2008, p.2) [4]. The center of the queer theory maybe defined as "Queer theory provides scholars, activists, and others ways of thinking and talking about identity beyond simple binaries." (Giesecking, 2008, p.3) [4].

2. Theoretical Framework

David Richter states that "the gender studies examine is less determined by nature than culture" (Guerin *et al.*, 2011, 275) [5]. Feminism and gender studies share the same grounds to some extents, for both the misreading of a text may lead to a miss understanding of the character. The most common may be pointed as the mistake of homosexuality and the concept of power given to women in feminism the portrayed culture will be studied by a textual analysis, and how the presence or

absence of biological mother, as a possessor of power in Austenian novels may affect the case study.

What here is studied is how power, when associated with females with a male characteristic, rises question regarding the sexuality of the heroines. Yet it is seen only one is studied in this manner, Emma's, and the other heroin, Elizabeth, is never looked at so. This research takes a look on how this binary division of characteristics, affect the characters, and what other elements differ in the taken study cases.

The concept of binary in gender studies was first seen in queer studies, a movement appearing around 1990s, under the influence of queer and woman's studies. The movement is mostly driven from post-structuralism and deconstruction. The main idea was the focus on sexual activities and identity that was considered as norm by the society. Many queer critics, such as Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, and Diana Fuss, took a great interest in breakdown of binary male and female characteristics. David Richter's *Gender Studies and Queer Theory* discusses different factors; however the subject of interest in this paper is the concept of culture affecting homosexuality.

3. Analysis

3.1 The Concept of Homosexuality in Emma's Character

By a close reading of *Emma*, it is understood that the heroine differs greatly from other Austenian characters. She has a great power not over her state but over individuals as well. The homosexual label is only due to the traditional look to the juxtaposing binary of power in the story. This juxtaposition causes a male like personality in Emma. Her controlling manner over Harriet's marriage, which is a result of her power, raises questions regarding her sexual orientation. By the close reading of the quoted lines from the primary source, all of these acquisitions are rejected. A clear example is given in the very first chapter as the novel opens:

The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself: these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. (Austen, 1981, p.1)

Emma is the mistress of the house; as a result she is associated with power, a characteristic which in 18th century is mostly associated with men. Such a juxtaposition of the characteristics, is one of the reasons raising questions about Emma. The writer herself describes Emma's power as a great evil. It is also described as signs of pride and self-centeredness in Emma's character not as a matter of proving her homosexual state.

Another point on which the sexual orientation of Emma is questioned is her insistence on taking over Harriet's affairs and preventing her from entering a relationship with any suitor. Such claims are basically rejected for the fact that Emma's will of controlling Harriet's life is driven from her high self-esteem on matchmaking skills. As the story moves through the story arrived at the climax of the story signs of revelry and jealousy is projected well in the following conversation:

- "I'm delighted to hear you speak so stoutly on the subject replied Emma smiling but you do not mean to deny that there was a time- and not very distanced either- when you gave me reasons to understand that you did clear about him"
- "him! Never, Never. Dear Miss Woodhouse, how could you so mistake me?" (Turning away distressed)

- "Harriet", cried Emma, after a moment pause "what do you mean? Good heaven! What do you mean? Mistake you! Am I to spouse then -?" She could not speak another word her voice was lost; and she sat down, waiting in a great terror till Harriet should answer. (Austen, 1981, p. 351) ^[1].

In this part of conversation it is seen how Emma is stressed and unwilling to believe the fact that Harriet has feelings for Mr. Knightly. She does not even dare to complete her sentence or say her thought out loud. Her surprise and rejection of truth is perfectly seen "Harriet, cried Emma" (Austen, 1981, p.352) ^[1] collecting herself resolutely "let us understand each other now, without the possibility of further mistake. Are you speaking of -Mr. Knightly?" (Austen, 1981, p.352) ^[1] for few parts of conversation Emma unconsciously does not wish to follow Harriet's words. Ongoing in this chapter finally Emma accepts Harriet's statement of love for Mr. Knightly and this acceptance opens a new part of her character; she has deep and great feelings for him:

Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress; she touched, she admitted, she acknowledged the whole truth. (Austen, 1981, p.353) ^[1].

Such deep feeling, of love or jealousy, implies that Emma is a heterosexual individual. The only matter is the power associated with her character, such is created by the 18th century feminist writers in the structure of the story which has caused questions regarding Emma's sexual orientation.

3.2 The Concept of Homosexuality in the Character Elizabeth Bennet

In *pride and prejudice* we see traces of the protagonist in position of power. Elizabeth develops and changes through the story. "Elizabeth is deeply interested in intellectual pursuits yet she has not received a typical female education despite her family's means". (Chang, 2014, p.3) ^[3] In this dialog we see that she believes in herself to be superior to her sister but not in power over her:

- "I was very much flattered by his asking me to dance the second time I did not expect such compliment"
- "Did not you? I did for you. But that is one great difference between us. Compliments always take you by surprise and me never." (Austen, 1995, p. 9) ^[2].

Elizabeth stands on a higher place when it comes to understanding and that is where she differs from Emma. Another matter that differs in the two stories is the presence of biological mother. A characteristic of Jane Austen's novels is the association of power with the leading female character in the story. The presence of a mother in Bennets which declines the power of our protagonist is not forceful and controlling.

This is particularly evident in the portrayal of Mrs. Bennet, especially juxtaposed with her interactions with Mr. Bennet. For example, when Mr. Bennet reacts with a "callous attitude" to Mrs. Bennet's lamentations, Wylie notes how it is impossible for Mr. Bennet to empathize with his wife's concerns, yet Mrs. Bennet is "powerless to do other than suffer and complain and then contend with being construed as 'irrational.'" However, Wylie concludes, this "irrationality functions subversively as a protest against the system that strives to contain [Mrs. Bennet] and all women" (Wylie, 2004, as cited in Haydar, 2014, p. 8)

A tradition in 18th century feminist writings, as it is greatly criticized yet impossible to deny its effectiveness, is the juxtaposing characteristics of male and female, which was used in order to create a semi-equal situation in the story. Here by the presence of the mother, Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth has no controlling voice but is pictured with an empowered manner. A more mature signs of feminism in the form of wit and wisdom in the character are observed. The juxtaposing binary does not cause any questions for two main reasons, first the controlling power is associated with the mother who is perfectly described as a heterosexual individual since she is in a marriage and has children from that very marriage. Second, in the story Elizabeth's Power is witty and intellectual, her "independent behavior sets her apart from the traditional women of Regency England" (Chang, 2014, p.3)^[3]. In no place of the story we see her preventing one from marriage unless she has logic behind it. Such reasoning protects Elizabeth from the same labeling that threatens Emma.

4. Discussion

The concepts of homosexuality in the two heroines are different in nature which is set by the story. The reason for homosexual label is the association of power as a binary opposition used in a juxtaposing manner. Such technique used by Austen caused a homosexual picture in portraying Emma; by the absence of mother as the leading female in the story, she is associated with characteristics considered masculine by the culture in society. Although Emma's powers are mostly over controlling and negative throughout the story yet it does not support the claim of homosexuality.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, although there is a heroine associated with power and knowledge it does not create the forceful controlling environment. Still this is not the reason for the heterosexual reading of Elizabeth; the reason is the presence of a mother. This division between the leading female and power associated female causes a balance and prevents any misunderstandings.

The Austenian heroines are not great for their power but for their wit and true love.

"Austen's heroines will not marry except for love" (Zhoe, 2016, p.3). "There is no doubt that

Austen values these real marriages and despises these marriages convenience" (Zhoe, 2016, p.3) and that is what sets them apart from other writers. What has made Jane Austin a well-known feminist writer is not a single factor of juxtaposing binary or love for marriage but the combination of both.

5. Conclusion

The present paper aimed to study the concept of homosexuality and sexual orientation of chosen characters, Emma and Elizabeth, by employment of queer theory gender studies. Jane Austin's works are greatly influential in gender studies. One of the most common methods used by her is the association of male characteristics by female characters. Since the females characters selected in the study who had no power over their lives, marriages, states, or inheritances, the association of power with these female characters might bring the idea of homosexuality into the minds of critics. Nevertheless such claims are rejected through a closer analytic study of the characters in the story.

Finally, the decline of homosexuality ascribed in the two examined characters were justified by providing extracts from

the stories. The common use of power for female characters in novels, and the presence of a biological mother help denied that idea.

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