

The novel of manners

The changes in the social hierarchy of English society in the 19th century provided the background for the rise of the novel of manners. Wealth and influence were passing from the aristocracy to the newly successful middle classes, so the standard **markers** for determining an individual's position in society proved increasingly unreliable.

The novel of manners dealt with how these classes behaved in everyday situations,

and described their codes of conduct. The undisputed **master** of the novel of manners was Jane Austen (→ 4.16), whose novels were based on the premise that there is a vital relationship between manners, social behaviour and character. They are usually set in the upper and middle levels of society, generally in the country with few insights into town life. They deal with the codes and conventions of daily behaviour through the description of visits, balls and teas as occasions for meeting. They explore personal relationships, class distinctions and deal with the influence of money and property on the way people treat each other. Their main themes are marriage and the complications of love and friendship. A third-person narrator is employed and dialogue plays a central role, especially as a vehicle for irony. Passions and emotions are not expressed directly but more **subtly** and obliquely.

Marriage

Marriage is all important in Jane Austen's novels. All her novels but for one deal with the theme of marriage.

Marriage was so important in this period because it granted a **social position** to women. If you didn't marry your destiny would be looking after your relatives or looking after your relatives' children, and it was quite frustrating.

According to Jane Austen ideal marriage is not based only on **physical attraction**, but on **mutual comprehension**, that should be reached after overcoming obstacles and clearing misunderstandings.

It took a long to a couple to **get together**.

The idea of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is the one between Elizabeth and Darcy, while the one between Jane and Bingley, and especially between Elizabeth's parents is far from perfect.

The theme of marriage

The traditional values of country families – such as property, decorum, money and marriage – provided the basis of the plots and settings of Jane Austen's novels. They take place in England; there is no Scotland, Wales or Ireland and not even the industrial north of England. Jane Austen writes about the oldest England, based on the possession of land, parks and country houses; in her stories people from different counties get married as a result of the growing social mobility.

The marriage market takes place in London, Bath and some seaside resorts where people used to gather and carry out their business. And it is in these places that all the troubles of Austen's world occur: gossip, flirtations, seductions, adulteries. This happens because the marriage market has also produced a range of villains: unscrupulous relatives, seducers, gamblers and social climbers.

Pride and Prejudice

Mr and Mrs Bennet

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The wit that characterizes Jane Austen is clear from the very first sentence.

The novel starts with a sort of epigram [frase ad effetto] which makes us realize how clever the writer is.