

Truth, Universality and Narrative in Jane Austen

Literature and the study of it are very important in our society because of what it reveals about different times and different contexts – we can learn a lot about the world that we do not otherwise know by reading a piece of literature, despite the fact that it is fiction. As C.S. Lewis notes: “Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become” (Holmer 1976, p. 32).

Literature is a tool that we can use to understand the world that we live in, and the various people and perspectives that are contained within the world. Literature comes in all different forms, and when studying any particular piece of it, it is worthwhile to understand how the concepts of *truth*, *universality*, and *narrative* work together. This essay will examine Jane Austen’s classic *Pride and Prejudice*, and Austen’s other well-known work, *Sense and Sensibility*, to show the inter-relationship between truth, universality and narrative. From this, it will be clear from the discussion of both novels that truth, universality and narrative are all inherently related in these novels and in others, as the narrative draws on certain truths and universalities to take shape.

Before getting into the specifics of these books, it is necessary that we define these terms to establish the way that they will be used. *Truth* is a concept that we all likely think we know the meaning of, but upon closer inspection it can have varying meanings. For the purposes of this paper we will assume its meaning to be that which is the opposite of false because its assertions can be verified. Despite the ambiguity of this definition, it aptly sums of the essence of this word or concept. It is used in literature

when an author makes representations about something being factual or accurate. It is an objective concept.

Universality, simply stated, refers to something applying in a uniform fashion. It is particularly relevant in literature of the past because studying different pieces of work can reveal universalisms about the period in which the piece of literature is covering. The point of universality in literature is twofold – on the one hand it serves to uncover universal meaning with absolutes, and it develops an objective scale which can be used to criticize work. Universality can reveal the nature of truths.

Generally speaking, *narrative* refers to a story that is developed in a constructive way, such as through literature. The particular narrative is very much linked to the person creating the narrative, in the case of literature that means the author. In other words, a particular narrative is a reflection of a particular point of view. Therefore, it does not need to be true or universal; it just needs to be a reflection of the point of view of the person telling the narrative. Narratives seek to give direction to the reader's course of thought.

Pride and Prejudice is a good example of a book where the interplay between these three concepts can be seen. This book is particularly useful to study because it is classic, but also because it was first published in 1813, almost two centuries ago. It takes place in 19th century England, a society that was quite stratified and where class divisions were a product of family connections and wealth.

There are many truths that are depicted in this novel. It speaks to the context that the book was written in, and from reading it we can come to understand the truth about what life would have been like at that time and place in history. It was a conservative

society where men and women were expected to act in certain ways – men were supposed to be the ones that earned an income, and women were to remain in the domestic sphere. This of course is not how all people lived, as there were women who had to work, and men that did not work, but this is the truth about the standard that the society sought to achieve. As such, the upper-class in England's society lived in this way. Other truths that this book reveals are that men were supposed to gain their status through participation in the military, the church or in a law career, but women were supposed to attain their status through marriage. There were defined gender roles. This is the truth about the way of life in England at the time, and it is revealed in this book.

A reading of this book will highlight that women and men acted in universal ways. For example, it is shown to be universal that women are perceived as being objects that are to be received by men, as the following quote highlights: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (Austen 2001: 3).

It is shown through a reading of this text that all of the people in the story appear to have a universal desire to accomplish the same thing, namely the attainment of a higher class. Because different people have different circumstances and truths – some are servants, others are wealthy, others are pretty – they all go about trying to attain this universal objective in a different way, but they still want to same thing. It shows that universality can reveal the nature of truths.

The narrative that is being put forth in this piece of work is different in that it utilizes conceptions about truth and universality. Austen is trying to put forth a narrative that seeks to deconstruct the truths and universals about the society in which she lives in.

She paints a picture of the England that she knows – that of a society divided by class, gender and ideology – and she intends to depict how flawed it is. She does this by critiquing the class structure and the notion of gender roles. The characters that she develops are able to navigate through the rigid social mores of the time, and ultimately they are successful at either exposing what she believes to be the shortcomings and hypocrisies of her society, or they are successful at overcoming these rigid social barriers which is likely her way of showing that they are nothing more than social constructions which should be unravelled.

It is shown in this novel how important reputation is for women (truth), and that women are expected to conform to a certain set of expectations to maintain and further their reputation (universal). If a woman does something that is not regarded as being socially acceptable, then she runs the risk of having irreparable damage done to her reputation (universal). A good example of this can be seen when Elizabeth gets her skirt muddied as she is walking to Netherfield. A woman like this is not supposed to show herself in this manner; rather she is expected to be well put-together at all times, specifically when she is in public and around others. By highlighting in the novel that Elizabeth manages to get what she wants despite the social blunders she engages in, Austen is promoting a narrative that is shaped through the universals and truths of the time.

Another novel that can be examined to reveal the interplay between truth, universality and narrative is *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen's first novel which was published just two years before *Pride and Prejudice*. The title of the book represents a dichotomy (between "sense" and "sensibility"), and the title alone can speak to the

theme of this paper, as the former is more related to the concept of truth, and the latter is related to the narrative that the author is trying to promote. The older sister in the novel, Elinor, is supposed to be the older and wiser sibling. Elinor is the sibling that reflects the truths of the time. She better represents the ideal that women are supposed to fulfill in the society that they live in. Elinor represents the traditional women, and she speaks to the neo-classical truths that existed in her society for a woman of her standing. She portrays rationality, insight, good judgement, the ability to moderate, and balance. She is representing the truth that the older daughter in her family, and in all families of her time, is supposed to be the more reasonable and mature of the children, as she represents reason and good judgement. Her character reflects conceptions that were universal at the time. In other words, Austen uses the character of Elinor to depict the truth about the universal notions of what an older sister and a responsible woman should act like.

It is clear from both of the novels that Austen penned that she was somewhat at odds with the universalisms of the day. The very fact that Austen was an author in the era that she speaks to the fact that she liked to challenge the universal ideals of her time which were rooted in the truths that women should not be involved in the public domain – including being an author. As such, the character of Marianne, Elinor's thirteen year old sister, represents a more progressive conception of women. In other words, Austen uses the character of Marianne to promote a narrative that women should move beyond the idea of an eighteenth century neo-classical woman. For this reason, Marianne is more of a reflection of a woman that has been increased sensibility and autonomy as a woman. She is more into the idea of romance, she has a more vivid imagination (she does not conform to the prevailing notion in society that women should

not be independent thinkers, but rather accessories to their husband). Overall, she is just a more open and emotional being who is able to express herself. It seems as though the author is creating a contrast between universal conceptions of what her society is like, and what she wishes society was more like. Austen develops the character of Marianne because she wishes that her society was more accepting of women like her, and therefore the narrative that she develops serves to promote the idea that a woman can have the characteristics that Marianne has.

Austen is using the contrast between these characters to show the distinction that exists between different truths in her society, and she highlights the flaws that both characters have as a way of showing the struggle that when endure. Neither of these characters is without her flaws, and therefore her narrative seems to promote a balance between the two – where the characters meet in the middle of their two personalities – it is a balance between passion and reason. In the episode at the end of the novel where Fanny Dashwood has an outbreak, Austen is trying to show that dangers that are inherent for women who adhere too closely to the supposed truths that they are led to believe. By the end of the novel, both of the characters are able to find their own happiness, and this is arguably a product of her challenging the truths and universal ideals that exist in her society. The narrative that she is promoting is one that argues for a balance between sense and sensibility.

It has been shown in this essay that the three concepts introduced all exist in these books, and in all other forms of literature. While they are different, they are all inextricably related, and they draw on each other. Austen's work is useful to examine because of the historical perspective that we now have, and therefore we are able to get a

better indication of how her narrative draws on the truths and universalities that exist in her work. In sum, it is clear from the discussions of both novels that truth, universality and narrative are all inherently related in these novels and in others, as the narrative draws on certain truths and universalities to take shape.

References

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