

On Marriage in Eighteenth-century England

From Two English Novels

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Abstract: Both *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Sense and Sensibility* deal with marriages in eighteenth-century England. This paper discusses the situation of marriage in that period reflected in these two literature works. It also explores people's general ideas and attitudes towards marriage, especially the marriage of women of lower social status. By analyzing the marriages demonstrated in these two novels the author made a conclusion that the primary purpose of marriage of the 18th century was financial gain, and that marriage for women at that time was a necessity rather than a choice.

Keywords: English news, eighteenth-century England, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Sense and Sensibility*, Social Status

The Vicar of Wakefield is the only novel written by Oliver Goldsmith, which gives the audience a vivid description of people's attitudes and views towards marriage in eighteenth-century England through the life of a vicar. Published in 1766, the novel reveals marriage situations and the prospects of young ladies through marriage. Shortly after Goldsmith, a remarkable woman writer Jane Austen also tells her marriage stories from a feminine point of view. Her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, presents us with a vivid and realistic description of marriage and family life at the end of the eighteenth-century and the beginning of the nineteenth-century. Though published in 1811, the novel was written sometime between 1795 and 1796. Two sisters' experiences and emotional sufferings are displayed in the novel, and their different attitudes towards affection and marriage lead to different rewards. From these two novels, we may learn the true situation of marriage in eighteenth-century England, as well as general ideas and attitudes towards marriage and women's lower social position.

The topic of love and marriage is discussed in many literary works. Due to different values, social customs and different positions of women, writers may portray different ideas about love and marriage, therefore, many fictions are the result of reflection and exploration with respect to this question. *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *Sense and Sensibility* both focus on domestic family life. After reading these two novels, we may have a clear idea about the relationship amongst money, love and marriage. Today it is still meaningful and significant to ask and probe the following questions:

What should people marry for? For love or for fortune? How can people realize personal happiness? Through sense or through sensibility?

First, let's have a general idea about the situation of marriage in eighteenth-century England and the attitude towards marriage; eighteenth-century England witnessed the Industrial Revolution that brought technical innovations to the society. The rapid growth of industry and commerce influenced the way of social life as a whole, and it is no doubt that the socio-economic condition also influences marriage. The representative writers of English literature in eighteenth-century have criticized different aspects of contemporary England, discussed social problems and even touched upon morality and private life. Their works mainly display the lives of the middle class and the poor.

In eighteenth-century, the basis of marriage is financial support. A happy marriage must contain comfortable incomes or fortunes. In other words, an eligible husband for a young lady should possess a certain social position and enough fortune whether through legal inheritance or through his own career and vice versa. An eligible wife for a young man should also possess certain social status and an adequate sum of money. It is a fact that all parents want their children to marry well. In order to win such prosperous husbands, the whole family will try best to capture the love of men by using all kinds of skills and arts. It is also a fact that for men, that marrying a girl of large estate will bring pleasure and luxury. Even today, financial security is very important in marriage. It still has universal meaning to explore questions concerning money in marriage.

Unlike young ladies, whose marriage is a necessity rather than a choice, men have more freedom to decide when and whom they marry. For a poor or middle class woman, who does

not have a large fortune, her life totally depends on her future husband. What she can do is to cultivate herself to be gentle and elegant, waiting to be found by a gentleman. A good marriage for a woman is like a safe shelter that can provide not only bread but also a good reputation. But even for women who have money, marriage is necessary to secure their social positions and ensure financial stability for the future.

A detailed description of the general view of marriage can be found in *The Vicar of Wakefield*. In order to win the love of Squire Thornhill, who is believed to be a rich landlord, Mrs. Primrose invents a thousand schemes to entrap him and uses every art to magnify the merit of her daughter Olivia:

If the cakes at tea short and crisp, they are made by Olivia; if the gooseberry wine was well knit, the gooseberries were of her gathering; it was her fingers which gave the pickles their peculiar green; and in the composition of a pudding, it was her judgment that mixed the ingredients. (Goldsmith, 2004, pp.49)

This poor mother also thinks out a cunning way to bid both stand up to see who is taller by saying that she thinks the Squire and Olivia extremely of a size. Even a limner is used to perform her scheme. What's more, in order to force the Squire to make a public declaration that he loves Olivia, Mrs. Primrose tries every effort to induce him to a proposal of marriage by "pretending to ask his advice in the choice of an husband for her eldest daughter" (Goldsmith,2004, pp.51) and even by "terrifying him with a rival" (Goldsmith,2004,pp.51).

It is the same in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, where fortune also values most. Once Lucy Steele, Edward Ferrars' former fiancée, finds that Edward loses the eldest son's right to inherit a large fortune, she immediately breaks her attachment to Edward and designs to win the favor of Robert Ferrars and marries him. Another example is Willoughby, whose actions and words show his affection and love for Marianne, but unexpectedly deserts Marianne and marries Miss Grey, who has fifty thousand pounds. Marianne, a girl of excessive emotion, loves Willoughby strongly and nearly destroys herself when she learns of her own wretched situation. At last, she accepts Colonel Brandon's offer of marriage after disliking him for so long and is expected to love him as much as she ever loved Willoughby. One of the reasons for Marianne to accept Brandon can be seen in that Brandon is a good-hearted gentleman, an ideal husband and has a good reputation and considerable income. Fortune is also the reason

why Mrs. Ferrars wants her son Edward to marry Miss Morton, who has thirty thousand pounds.

From the above examples, we may see clearly that many people look for a marriage of fortune rather than a marriage of love. Squire Thornhill is interested in marrying Miss Wilmot. He says openly, “It was her fortune, not her the person, that induced me to wish for this match, and possessed of the one, let who will take the other” (Goldsmith, 2004, pp.120).

Besides these people who marry for fortune, there are some who marry for love, though it is doubtful whether they will be happy or not without the support of money.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the marriage between Elinor and Edward is believed to be a happy one, but would they be happy enough without the approbation of Mrs. Ferrars and her money? In *The Vicar of Wakefield* Sophia marries Mr. Burchell, “who first appears to be a broken-down gentleman, kind-hearted but somewhat eccentric ... then he makes it known to the Primrose family that he is no other than Sir William Thornhill” (Liu, 1993, pp.222), a man with a large fortune. I doubt that Mrs. Primrose will give her consent to the marriage if Mr. Burchell remains what he is like at the beginning of the novel.

In eighteenth-century England, true love is not impossible to be found. For example, Arabella Wilmot loves George Primrose no matter whether he is poor or rich - her sincere passion could be considered to be very moving. Sir William Thornhill’s love for poor girl Sophia is also sincere, though we must remember that the financial security of both couples at last has turned out to be already guaranteed. So there is another question to ask: if not, would their marriages be happy?

Having discussed several marriages in eighteenth-century England, we may have a general idea about it. When a poor girl chooses a husband, fortune is what her family values most, for she has to live on, as well as depend on, her husband. When a man chooses a wife, he is quite constrained by social conventions as well, but comparatively he may have more freedom; if he is rich, he can marry his beloved one according to his own will like Sir William Thornhill and Colonel Brandon; if he is poor and his heart happens to be set on a girl with a large fortune, which is worth celebrating, a good example is George Primrose; but if his beloved girl is also poor, he may desert her and marry one who has money, as we have a good example in

Willoughby. However, he may also choose that poor girl as his wife if he is willing to build himself up from nothing. Edward Ferrars, deserted by his mother, set us an example of this. On the whole, one's financial condition is the fundamental factor in marriage.

Another important factor people value highly is whether it is a legal union or not. What people want is a legal union by a true minister; as to whether the legal union is happy or not, it is out of their consideration. Olivia is seduced and married to the cold, hard-hearted villain Squire Thornhill. She is then abandoned and told that the marriage is a false union, which humiliates her family and makes her suffer great affliction and to the extent that she almost collapses. But, when the marriage is proved to be lawful by Mr. Jenkinson, who brings a true license and a true priest to marry them instead of procuring the squire a false license and a false priest, Olivia is proved to be the Squire's lawfully wedded wife. Upon hearing the truth, "happiness was expanded upon every face, and even Olivia's cheek seemed flushed with pleasure" (Goldsmith, 2004, pp.123), the girl is thus restored to her reputation. Her rapture is sufficient enough to stop the progress of decay and restore former health and vivacity. It is very surprising to me that Olivia and her relations do not care about the Squire's cruelty and villainy - what they need is just a lawful marriage.

Although there are a lot of similarities in attitudes towards marriage in these two novels, a great difference can also be seen in them. *The Vicar of Wakefield* is regarded as a sentimental novel while *Sense and Sensibility*, which focuses on the manners of genteel society, is considered a beginning of the realistic novel. Oliver Goldsmith describes two sentimental couples: George and Arabella, and Mr. Burchell and Sophia. They marry for love and passion, which are the basis of their emotions and morals. What they follow is passion rather than reason. To them, passion is an important thing to be considered in marriage. However, we should bear in mind that the financial problem for them has already been solved. Otherwise, their marriages cannot have taken place. On the contrary, in the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, excessive passions should be controlled and governed. What the author encourages is sense and reason. The excessive display of passions and emotions is not approved by society. Elinor, an ideal character portrayed by Austen, is entirely sensitive and prudent. She restrains and tempers her emotion with good sense and careful judgment. She always appears calm and gentle. She seldom exposes her real emotion to others. Even when she knows that her heart

Edward has already had a secret engagement with another woman, she exerts herself not to express her agony and misery, yet even Elinor once demonstrates the depth of her sensibility to Edward by bursting into tears, which makes Edward propose to her finally. She is set up as a model of moderation and is so different from her sister Marianne, who is very emotional and never moderate. Marianne is very imprudent to show her excessive sensibility and violent emotions with Willoughby. Her excessive passion puts her in danger of destruction. Fortunately she learns to govern herself and gets a good end. In this novel, women should be prudent and sensible, and should exert and control themselves. If they do not follow the rule of society, sooner or later they will be punished, just as Marianne is. We need to face sense and sensibility rightly and consider them carefully even today.

Today it still has universal meaning to explore the question of marriage, whether we should marry for love or for money. Should we do things with sense or sensibility? Perhaps the best way is to combine them together. We cannot be too sensible, nor can we be excessively passionate. Elinor, a woman of sense, marries on the basis of sensibility, while Marianne, a woman of excessive emotion, learns to discover moderation and marries on the basis of sense at last. From the novel, we may draw a conclusion that people in eighteenth-century England emphasize sensible marriages, and excessive emotion should be avoided. Perhaps to the author, an ideal marriage should be of sense mixed with sensibility, just like Edward and Elinor.

Finally, Let us have a look at women's position in eighteenth-century England. Women's social position in genteel society is mainly decided by their marriage. As they have no way to earn their living, they can only depend on their husbands. In a family, it is always the male who is in charge of the family economy. The property of most rich families is usually bequeathed to the eldest son, who is the legal inheritor. The daughter of the family can only get a dowry that must be handed over to her husband after marriage. Moreover, the amount of dowry will affect her position in the family. Besides fortune, there is another point that can explain woman's social position. In eighteenth-century England, women are rejected by colleges and are limited at their home. If they want to be respected and accepted by the society, they must have an excellent understanding of music, drawing, singing and dancing. Their speech and behavior, manner and appearance must adapt to the rules and principles of society. What women care most about is whether their elegance and gentle disposition can enable them

to win a good husband or not. Because family properties will only be passed to men, women are destined to be in unfavorable positions. As a result, they are in a subordinate status. Living in such a world, how could women win their personal happiness by way of marriage?

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