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“Young ladies are delicate plants”

A comparative analysis of cross-class romance in Romantic and Victorian novels: Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)

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Introduction

Many of the literary works we today recognize as classics were written and published during the 19th century. This is demonstrated in the marketing of the American bookseller, Barnes & Noble’s, range of what they identify as literary classics: *Barnes & Noble Classics* (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). Barnes & Noble define the books on this list as “books that have changed history, inspired Hollywood, and entertained readers for centuries” (Barnes & Noble, n.d.). We find both *Emma* (1815) by Jane Austen and *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë on this list and can therefore define them as classics from the 19th century. Even though they are written during the same century, they were not written during the same literary period; *Emma* was written during the Romantic period, while *Jane Eyre* was written during the Victorian period. Among several other themes and elements, the two books both portray female heroines, social class, character development and cross-class romance. I want to look further into the latter in this comparative analysis of *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. I will use critical material to depict how cross-class romance is portrayed in the two novels, and in that way identify similarities and differences in how cross-class romance is depicted in *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. Among other critical works, I have decided to use Nilay Erdem Ayyildiz’s critical article *From The Bottom To The Top: Class And Gender Struggle In Brontë’s Jane Eyre* (2017) as a central component in the analysis as it discusses both class and gender. I also chose a central critical article for *Emma: The Labor of the Leisured in Emma: Class, Manners, and Austen* (1999) by Jonathan H. Grossman, which points out the workings of class in *Emma*. The critical material I have chosen will be a central asset throughout the analysis, as it will provide the analysis with criticism and arguments to discuss and will work as an advantage to support the arguments I formulate in relation with the my research question.

It will be essential to start off the analysis by explaining what the cross-class romance thematic involves, to give insight into how the theme is portrayed in *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. The analysis will then be followed by an explanation of how cross-class romance is portrayed in *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*, with concrete examples from the novels. To be able to understand

the similarities and/or differences that might occur, it will be central to consider how the novels' literary period may have affected the thematic. The role of social class in the novels, with focus on cross-class romance, will be an essential part of the analysis. Gender will also be a central part of the analysis as both novels are dealing with female heroines. There is a quote in *Emma*, expressing how "Young ladies are delicate plants" (Austen, 2009, p. 273). I would like to practice this quote as a tool to detect how the heroines of *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* are portrayed. Are young ladies of Romantic and Victorian literature portrayed as delicate plants? The goal of this analysis will be to discover whether the heroines of *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* are portrayed as delicate plants or not. I will use concrete examples from each of the novels as well as critical material, to support my arguments. My problem for discussion will therefore be to explore how Emma and Jane are portrayed through connecting this to the cross-class romance thematic in both novels.

Cross-class romance

The term cross-class romance is in a way self-explanatory as it is described as romance crossing classes, namely between two people who belong to different social classes. The perspective on the social classes that existed in the 19th century leads one to thinking that one would choose a spouse from one's own social class – a spouse who was shaped by the same tastes and sensibilities as oneself (Sharot, 2016, p. 1). Even though this was the usual way to choose a spouse, cross-class romance has been a frequent narrative in many novels, movies and tv shows for centuries. Cross-class couples, most often represented by a wealthy man and a working woman, can be found in novels back in the 18th century. This is the reason why these novels were defined as the first modern novels (Sharot, 2016, p. 2). There are also other versions of the classic cross-class romance between the wealthy man and the working woman: homoerotic cross-class relationships between mistress and maid have also been a recurrent theme in literature from the 19th century, though this is not the cross-class romance this analysis will be exploring (Bohata, 2017, p. 341). This comparative analysis will depict how both *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* are novels where cross-class romance is a central theme throughout the story. Even though both novels portray cross-class romance as a dominant theme, this analysis will demonstrate how they differ from each other in the way cross-class romance is depicted in the novels.

Cross-class romance – *Emma* (1815) and *Jane Eyre* (1847)

Romance and love are two central and dominant themes in both novels. The main character's search for love is a reoccurring course of events frequent in novels, however Austen and Brontë have used different strategies in portraying love in their works. Austen's *Emma* points attention to the love life of the people surrounding the main character, of the same name as the novel. She focuses on matching the people around her and expresses what a joy she feels about her "success" in matchmaking: "It is the greatest amusement in the world" (Austen, 2009, p. 13). Her efforts as Cupid leads to several failed attempts of marriage, which is where the cross-class romance shines through. Emma leads Harriet, her dear friend, who is allegedly born outside of marriage into thinking a cross-class marriage is attainable. Critics have described the class system in Jane Austen's literature through "positional class terms ("upper", "middle", and "lower")" (Grossman, 1999, p. 144). Emma's friend Harriet belongs to the lower class, while the spouse Emma wants to match her with belongs to the upper class. The novel reflects on how the upper class "represent the activity of a leisure class engaged in reproducing itself through proper conduct" (Grossman, 1999, p. 157). Grossman's criticism of *Emma* portrays the labor of the leisure class as the "work to embody and reproduce good manners" (Grossman, 1999, p. 157), which is reflected in the portraying of the many leisure class marriages throughout the novel. Grossman emphasizes this by looking at the end of the novel; "This is why at the end of the novel there is not so much a triumph of weddings [...] as a *tour de force* of the business of etiquette" (Grossman, 1999, p. 157).

Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, on the other hand portrays cross-class romance through the love life of the main character. Jane Eyre is an orphan with no prospects of climbing the social ladder, however Jane finds herself in love with the wealthy and mysterious Mr. Rochester. Critics have defined her role as a female orphan equipped with "double disadvantages" (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 146). This is expressed through how women were the ones who suffered the most during the reign of class and gender in the Victorian era, which is the period during which *Jane Eyre* was published (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 146). The Victorian era is characterized by a patriarchal society, which is portrayed to a great extent in *Jane Eyre*, such as through her vicious cousin John Reed who wants to marry her because she is a simple woman familiar to labor (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 146). Despite all this, Jane still manages to marry a wealthy man: Jane and Mr. Rochester belong in entirely different ends of the social ladder, which leads to Jane climbing the social ladder by marrying him. Nilay Erdem Ayyildiz (2017) is one of the critics who have stated how this journey depicts the very fact that Jane Eyre succeeded to

break the boundaries of class and gender as she reaches the top of the ladder after paving her way from the bottom (p. 146).

“Young ladies are delicate plants” – imagery of young ladies

One remarkable dialogue in *Emma* is found in chapter 34, where imagery of plants is used to depict young ladies. This imagery has also been interpreted in the light of botany in D. S. Lynch’s “*Young ladies are delicate plants*”: *Jane Austen and Greenhouse Romanticism* (2010), which points out how the “language of flowers” is used in *Emma* (Lynch, 2010, p. 689). However, this is not the way this quote shall be interpreted in this analysis. The dialogue starts off because the young Jane Fairfax has walked to the post office in the rain, and Mr. Woodhouse is worried for her health and her stockings:

I am very sorry to hear, Miss Fairfax, of your being out this morning in the rain. Young ladies should take care of themselves. – Young ladies are delicate plants. They should take care of their health and their complexion. My dear, did you change your stockings? (Austen, 2009, p. 273).

It is evident how Mr. Woodhouse finds it disturbing how Jane Fairfax walked there herself in the rain. He continues by expressing how “young ladies are very sure to be cared for.” (Austen, 2009, p. 273). Mr. Woodhouse indicates how young ladies should not have to do things such as walking to the post office by themselves and expresses this by using “delicate plants” as an imagery for young ladies. This can be interpreted as a way of denying young ladies their independence, as well as their ability to take care of things themselves. Taking this into consideration, I will also do research on how the heroines of *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* are portrayed.

Young ladies portrayed in Romantic literature – is Emma a delicate plant?

Emma was written during the Romantic period of British literature. The Romantic period is characterized as “a fierce concern with the interpenetration among political structures, literary forms and genres, and individual subjectivity” (Heydt-Stevenson & Sussman, 2010, p. 1). It is evident that individual subjectivity is a central part of the thematic of *Emma* which can be seen through how Austen provides the reader with figurative descriptions of Emma Woodhouse’s life and work and focuses on how Emma views the world through her match-

making-powers. The beginning of the novel indicates how Emma seems to be used to getting everything she wants as she had “lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (Austen, 2009, p. 7). This may also indicate the focus on individual subjectivity, as Emma’s view of the world is the world as a comfortable place where everything goes according to plan. Individual subjectivity is also reflected in the way Emma cognizes love, which is narrated by Emma in chapter 10:

I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's. (Austen, 2009, p. 82).

It is apparent how Emma views love; love equals marriage, which equals not overseeing one’s own life. Emma is determined not to marry as it would disconnect her from the role as the mistress of Hartfield, while she also keeps in mind how important she is to her father. Furthermore, this supports the theory about how Emma uses her influence as a matchmaker on other, instead of searching for love herself. Something which results in the attempts of matching couples across classes, which is where the cross-class romance thematic becomes evident.

Another characteristic of the Romantic era is what critics define as domestic fiction, especially in relation with marriage: “[...] fiction that focuses on achieved female happiness (and the capacity of women to make others happy)” (Heydt-Stevenson & Sussman, 2010, p. 22). *Emma* is believed to be such a novel by some critics: “some novels of this era do offer marriages that affirm a utopian ideal of personal and political fulfilment – such as the unions of *Ivanhoe* and *Rowena* and *Emma* and *Knightley*” (Heydt-Stevenson & Sussman, 2010, p. 22). The reader can see Emma portrayed as young, independent and with “a disposition to think a little too well of herself” (Austen, 2009, p. 7). Even though Emma’s father expresses how “Young ladies are delicate plants” (Austen, 2009, p. 273), Emma is depicted as a strong and independent woman who can take care of herself and is therefore not a delicate plant in need of constant care.

Instead of portraying Emma as a delicate plant, she is rather portrayed as “faultless in spite of all her faults” (Austen, 2009, p. 405). Austen herself have expressed how she wanted to create a female main character that would not become especially popular among the readers: “I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (Bander, 2016, p. 13). Considering this, it can seem like Austen did not want to create a heroine who could be identified as a delicate plant, but rather an independent, snobbish, manipulative and capable main character (Bander, 2016, p. 13). This might be the reason why Emma herself was never a part of any cross-class romance in the novel but rather the characters around her. Emma was not to be liked by the audience and is therefore set to ruin the marriages of those around her. However, critics has, as expressed above, stated that *Emma* is a novel in which a utopian ideal of a marriage is affirmed between Emma and Mr. Knightley – though this does not happen until the end of the novel. Both critics and readers have, in many instances, argued that good novels always end in marriage, which is seen towards the end of *Emma* (Heydt-Stevenson & Sussman, 2010, p. 22). In spite of her faults and her stubbornness, Emma cannot be identified as a delicate plant. She is determined and obstinate, but also makes room for learning from her mistakes towards the end of the novel.

Young ladies portrayed in Victorian literature – is Jane a delicate plant?

Further along, we have *Jane Eyre*, a novel which was written during the Victorian era of British literature. The Victorian novel is characterized by individuals exploring social processes. Charlotte Brontë has in newer times been criticized for portraying this in a certain way, as “her focus on individual interaction obscures the workings of class and gender power.” (Shuttleworth, 1996, p. 2). Brontë certainly focuses on individual interaction in *Jane Eyre*, however critics have stated their concerns towards how this obscure both class and gender. The interesting perspective of the focus on Jane Eyre as the heroine is how the reader gets to explore all social classes through her viewpoint. Jane Eyre paves her way from lower to middle class, and all the way up to upper class. She reaches upper class through her cross-class marriage with Mr. Rochester. Critics may argue for an overshadowing of the workings of class and gender in light of this, but it can also be seen as a more distinctive way of portraying class in a 19th century novel as the reader still gets an insight into the class workings through Brontë’s descriptions of Jane’s journey through the social classes.

Criticism regarding gender representations in *Jane Eyre* can offer more difficulty. Gender power might be partly obscured by the individual focus as both female violence and insanity is represented in *Jane Eyre*, and the novel is therefore strictly focused on the female gender (Shuttleworth, 1996, p. 150). It is moreover possible to recognize variations of how young ladies are portrayed in *Jane Eyre*, ranging from Jane Eyre, an honest and simple girl, all the way to Bertha, who is described as a disturbed and lunatic among others. Insight into the male sex in the novel is also provided, though not with the same focus or variations as with the female sex. Critics argue that *Jane Eyre* offers no reference to gender politics and claim that Brontë focuses more on “the ideological hegemony” of the Victorian period rather than on political domains (Shuttleworth, 1996, p. 150). However, the importance of cross-class romance is a part of the portraying of gender. The novel houses the usual cross-class romance deed explained above: the wealthy man ends up marrying the working girl.

As mentioned above, women were the ones who suffered the most because of the existing class and gender norms in the Victorian era. Despite this, Jane Eyre turns out to be a strong and determined young lady. She expresses how she is free: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you” (Brontë, 2019, p. 247). Jane came to say this after she learns that her beloved Mr. Rochester is already married, and instead of being a polite delicate plant with not much to say, she rather expresses how she is a free human being with her own will to leave. With Jane being the narrator of the novel, the reader gets further insight to her thoughts, and Jane gets the opportunity to explain and narrate her life (Kaplan, 1996, p. 5). Jane not being “a delicate plant” is reflected in the many things she says and expresses throughout the novel, such as for example when she speaks up for herself towards her cruel aunt Mrs. Reed: “People think you a good woman, but you are bad; hard-hearted. *You* are deceitful” (Brontë, 2019, p. 36). As a result of this, Brontë succeeds to draw contrasts between Jane and the other female characters in the novel, which is also a way of portraying Jane as an individual exploring social processes (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 146).

The delicate plants of the Victorian era were female characters who “were beautiful, naïve, submissive and did not even dare to go get over their class and gender boundaries” (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 147). Brontë herself has expressed how Jane Eyre is not such a delicate plant, but instead an interesting, yet simple heroine the audience will develop compassion for. In contrary to what Austen said about her female heroine, Emma, Brontë wanted to create Jane

like this: “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours” (Gaskell, 1997, cited in Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 147). Through matching Jane with the wealthy Mr. Rochester, Brontë succeeds to create a female heroine who is strong and able to break the class barriers that existed in the Victorian era, and in that way sends Jane on a journey through the social classes “from an orphan, lower class girl, then a middle class governess to an upper class woman” (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 147). However, it is evident that the class and gender norms and boundaries bother Jane, as she feels “trapped in a golden cage owned by an upper-class patriarch” (Ayyildiz, 2017, p. 150). This is further emphasized as the upper-class woman, Blanche Ingram, seeks to demonstrate the differences in class between her and Jane. The cross-class romance between Jane and Mr. Rochester evolves despite all this, even though Jane tries to stop herself from pursuing it, as a romantic relationship between a governess and a wealthy man would be odious: “He is not of your order: keep to your caste” (Brontë, 2019, p. 158). In that way, it is evident how Jane could never be categorized as a delicate plant; she crosses the class barriers while being honest and true to herself.

Summary and conclusion

Given the discoveries done as a result of close-reading the two books, it is evident how the depiction of cross-class romance differs from each other. As seen in *Emma*, the cross-class romance thematic does not evolve around her as an individual, but rather as a result of her work of matchmaking in relation with the people around her. This is a contrast to how cross-class romance is portrayed in *Jane Eyre*, where Jane finds herself in the middle of what she presumes is a riotous marriage. The cross-class romance thematic is utilized as a way of representing the boundaries of class and gender that existed in the 19th century, a time which both Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë found themselves working to pave their way in. Both the Romantic and Victorian era of literature were characterized by individual subjectivity and individual exploring of social processes, something which is reflected in the heroines of both novels. The many critics who have studied and discussed the works of class and gender in the novels have provided this analysis with critical points worthy of discussion.

Seeing how the cross-class romance thematic is depicted in both novels, nor Emma or Jane are depicted as delicate plants who take care of themselves and their complexion; they do take care of themselves, but not in a naive and submissive way. Emma does not show any signs of this throughout the whole novel, though she shows signs of humbleness as a result of her

many missteps. Jane, on the other hand, may seem like a delicate plant in the beginning of the novel. Throughout the book, she grows to be a strong woman who has her own will – she is no bird. The delicate plant-imagery is not appropriate for the two heroines as they are both determined, willful and opinionated. They are both shaped in the light of the literary period the novels were written in, however they both strain from the idealistic heroine of the periods. Emma was created to be disliked by everyone except Jane Austen herself, while Jane manages to proceed beyond the class boundaries of society. Both *Emma* and *Jane Eyre* harbor many interesting points which can be discovered through close-reading, something which serves the reader new intentions to be discovered – young ladies are not, necessarily, delicate plants.

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