

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the motifs of courtship and marriage as experienced by the female characters in the novels published from the end of the 18th century till the second half of the 19th century. These novels include *Evelina* (1778), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). As all these novels are written by female authors, the thesis provides a unique female perspective of the issue. The chosen texts deal with the motifs of courtship and marriage, play with the conventional discourse, and at the same time challenge the established perception of the role of a woman in the process of courting. Besides discussing the novels, I explore also the way the themes of courtship and marriage are presented in the original 18th and 19th century literature. For this purpose, I scrutinized various conduct books and essays of the period.

The first chapter of the thesis is introductory and explains the main ideas and terms used in the thesis. The second chapter focuses on the social background the heroine comes from – her family, character and education. Hence, the role of the family is discussed in reference to the process of courtship. Great attention is given primarily to the role of a father as a possible social guardian and the model of a future husband. The third chapter deals with the motif of courtship itself. I describe the way courting is depicted in the novels and the barriers which are necessary to be overcome in the progress of courting. The courtship is subdivided into three main categories including courtship as seduction, courtship as knowledge and courtship as personal affection. In the fifth chapter, the issue of marriage is scrutinised as the desired goal of successful courtship. I explain the significance and meaning of marriage as perceived in the 18th and 19th centuries and describe various laws and regulations governing the institution of marriage. Consequently, I discuss the issue of matrimony as both a safe harbour for the heroine and a possible threat. The last subchapter analyses the role of women without masculine protection, their social status and social possibilities.

By discussing the issues of courtship and marriage, this thesis hopefully achieves to provide an insightful picture of courtship and marriage as they are represented in the chosen novels. It demonstrates the main trends in the perception of these issues; it shows how some new ideals of courtship and marriage were created and as other notions related to these issues were rejected.

