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Jane Austen's Characters Revolutionary or
Sentimental?

An Analysis of *Sense and Sensibility*,
Pride and Prejudice and *Emma*

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Chapter 1

An Historical Introduction to the Eighteenth Century

The Eighteenth century was a period often referred to as “The Enlightenment” or “the Age of Reason”; however, this term has been long disputed among critics. During this century, the word used to define the Enlightenment was the German word *Aufklärung*. This term was firstly adopted to define the long-lasting controversies between Protestants and Catholics but with time this opposition morphed into a constant debate between philosophy and science.¹ Only later, the terms *Enlightenment*, *Illuminismo* or *Lumières* were used to describe the development of these revolutionary tendencies.

According to Roy Porter (the most important scholar of the Enlightenment and the one who proposed to call the Eighteenth century the Enlightenment), the terminology employed to describe this age acquired different shades of meaning. At first, this period was considered full of “shallow and pretentious intellectualism, unreasonable contempt for authority and tradition”.² Later, it became the age of philosophers as critics fighting against modern problems afflicting society. This period had already proven to be multifaceted and difficult to classify, so writers tried to clarify whether there was a unified Enlightenment or a diversified multiplicity of it. And the answers provided were often in contrast with one another.

In his work *Barbarism and Religion* (1999), J.G.A Pocock affirms that there were, in reality, many Enlightenments, formed by the national views on theology and ecclesiastical histories. Since there were many of them, Pocock defines them as a family of Enlightenments. This plurality brought the attention to a possible English Enlightenment, because many critics and scholars had believed that the Enlightenment was born in England and later developed in the Continent, especially in France. However, the Italian critic Franco Venturi thinks differently. He affirmed that, in his opinion, the Enlightenment was one and unified, and consequently there was no English Enlightenment. What he provided as evidence was that England never had what he defined as “*les philosophes*”. There were no prominent *philosophes* until Bentham and the Philosophical Radicals, a group of thinkers among which there were Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine and John Toland. What made them

¹ Jonathan Israel, ‘J. G. A. Pocock and the “Language of Enlightenment” in his *Barbarism and Religion*’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 77 (2016), 107-127 (pp. 123-124).

² *Ibid*, p. 124.

distinguishable from the other British philosophers was their philosophical and irreligious radicalism which was commonly promoted in France and Italy by Helvetius, Diderot and Mazzei.³

As seen, the definition of the Enlightenment was not always shared, even in the Eighteenth century. Some philosophers had their own version of it: David Hume thought of it as a matter of emancipation from religious bigotry, whereas for Richard Price it represented the pathway to political liberty picked out by Providence. As William Hazlitt wrote, for some people Enlightenment meant reason and consequentially the expression of their own opinion.⁴ Expressing an opinion could also mean expressing contradictions. While some philosophers fought for the approbation of different causes (such as freedom for mankind or women's rights), they simultaneously embraced some which almost went against what they were fighting for. An example of such contradiction could be Jeremy Bentham⁵, who was against the criminalisation of homosexuality but at the same time proposed the practice of castration of rapists, or of tattooing criminals.

Despite contradictions and difficulties in giving an accurate definition, many writers tended to distinguish the Enlightenment developed in France from the one developed in England. They provided evidence about what Pocock defines as the multiplicity of Enlightenments. In England, the Enlightenment was associated with “the expression of new mental and moral values, new canons of taste, styles of sociability and views of human nature”.⁶ Also, it presented very different characteristics from the Parisian one: the English philosophers would spend hours in smoky and crowded coffee houses, discussing relevant topics. However, unlike the French philosophers, who professed slogans of freedom and revolution, English ones were not so radical. Yet, thinkers from all Europe looked at England as the cradle of modernity and freedom: English philosophers were appreciated and respected by society, something unimaginable in France, where they were persecuted because of their ideas.

In the Continent, the Englishmen were a source of inspiration because they represented the pragmatic and enlightened use of reason: throughout the centuries they were able to limit the kingly powers by instituting a Parliament to prevent the king to commit unlawful actions

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London: Penguin UK, 2001), p. xvi.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.16.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 13.

and to allow revolutionary actions. In conclusion, Enlightenment is still difficult to classify, but it could be generally divided into two distinct faces: one revolutionary but still conservative block in conflict with a more democratic and republican revolutionary tendency.⁷

Towards the end of this century, England witnessed a rapid change and many new ideas came to life: many of them were essential for the development of the first Industrial Revolution, which interested Britain between 1760 and 1830. Despite those indicative dates, this phenomenon blossomed in the following decades expanding all over Europe.

This revolution saw the expansion of innovations in disparate fields, from the technological, to the socioeconomic and cultural. Technological innovations included the use of natural energy sources like coal and fuel, combining them with kinetic energy giving as a result the invention of the steam engine. Thanks to this contrivance the amount of time employed in work was drastically diminished and handwork was no longer necessary. Electricity and the spinning jenny, invented in 1770, brought important changes in the transportation system with steam locomotives, automobiles, airplanes, telegraphs, radios as well as steamboats. The application of science to the industry system allowed factories to develop a mass production of goods. Socioeconomic changes depended also on the agricultural development that made food's provisions for a larger population possible, the diminishing of non-enclosed land, the consequent expansion of industrial production and international trade, the rise of a new social class and the acquisition of new skills by workers, who then evolved from machine operators to craftsmen.⁸

From 1760 to 1830 Britain was ruled by king George III, whose name also gave this period the epithet of "Georgian Era".⁹ This uncertainty about dates was caused by the inclusion of the Regency era into the Georgian one. He reigned for almost sixty years, until his deteriorated health became madness. As a consequence, his son, the Prince of Wales, was proclaimed king until 1837. Throughout his reign, King George had to face political instability as well as religious conflicts, which he inherited when he became king. Some of the most important events during his reign were the Seven Years War (1756-1763), the Declaration of Independence of the American colonies (1776), the French Revolution (1789) followed by the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). All these conflicts ended in victory, but one. The Declaration

⁷ Israel, 'J. G. A. Pocock and the "Language of Enlightenment" in his *Barbarism and Religion*', p.126.

⁸ See Encyclopaedia Britannica, '*Industrial Revolution*', online < <https://www.britannica.com/event/Industrial-Revolution>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

⁹ It includes the reigns of King George I (1714-1727), King George II (1727-1760), King George III (1760-1820) and King George IV (1820-1830). Online < <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians/> > [accessed 17.09.2021]

of Independence marked an important milestone in American history, showing that the colonies did not accept Britain's tyranny and its decision to tax tea. This political protest ended with chests of tea sunken in Boston harbour and was later referred to as the Boston Tea Party.¹⁰ This event only added tension between England and America, reaching its climax with the Declaration of Independence.

While this unstable situation was occupying the international scene, major changes were making England a modernised country. The start of the first Industrial Revolution marked the exponential growth of textile as well as iron industries. At the beginning of the century, textile production had not been mechanised yet and cotton was hand worked by cottagers. With the employment of some life-changing innovations, such as the spinning jenny and the flying shuttle, the production of cotton-based items grew faster. Furthermore, iron industry saw the replacement of wood and other biofuels with coal, which was easier to get and abundant in mines. Only towards the end of the Eighteenth century coal would be replaced by the steam engine, which rendered the production smoother and faster. Also, the high demand for goods brought factories to mass production, which consequently accelerated the urbanisation of cities. To be able to deliver raw materials and connect fast growing cities, the transport network grew exponentially too: canals and roads were built anew and journeys which before took weeks, now took just a couple of days.¹¹

However, this positive economic growth of the country also had some downsides: this heavy urbanisation and industrialisation of cities brought people to migrate from rural areas to more developed ones, leaving the countryside nearly deserted and forcing people to live in overcrowded and unwholesome spaces in towns and cities. This sudden and fast urbanisation created a sharp contrast between the luxurious middle and upper classes houses and the dirty slums where the working classes lived.

In fact, wealthy people usually lived in the suburbs, residential areas in the periphery of the city where they owned big houses, usually with a couple of servants at their service. The fanciest houses had some additional comforts, which at the time were considered very luxurious: gas lamps, flushing toilets and indoor bathrooms. Candle light still remained the

¹⁰ History.com Editors, 'Boston Tea Party', *History*, (2009), < <https://www.history.com/topics/american-revolution/boston-tea-party> > [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹¹ Matthew White, 'The Industrial Revolution', *The British Library*, (2009), < <https://www.bl.uk/georgian-britain/articles/the-industrial-revolution> > [accessed 29.09.2021]

most used source of light.¹² People living in rich houses also used to decorate them following the latest trends: flower wallpaper, heavy curtains, paintings and ornamental objects brought back from the colonies.

Slums increased and brought about degraded areas in the city where the poorer classes lived. Those houses were overcrowded, there was no running water and sanitary conditions were non-existent. The extreme conditions of un-healthiness, disorder, poverty and overcrowding led the English government to finally sign the Public Health Act in 1848. With the introduction of this Act, water supplies and sewages were introduced and hygienic conditions slightly improved. Industrial centres became very tempting for people living in the rural areas nearby and this brought massive migrations from rural to urban spaces.

In order to resolve the overcrowding of buildings, nothing could be done in the immediate, but slowly new buildings were erected and this implemented also the urban space of the city. Many of these buildings were built with a specific style called the Georgian style. This architecture became typical during the reigns of King George I to George IV and it looked back at the symmetry and features of the classic Greeks and Romans buildings. Usually, the exterior of these buildings was simple, a façade made of bricks and with numerous symmetric windows. It was only later, during the Regency, that the front would become more decorated, with the addition of columns, arches and pediments.¹³

1.1. Society and Social Class Division

The Eighteenth-century British society was based on a hierarchical structure in which social class and gender prevailed over other aspects like religion and race, which constituted a person's identity. The ideal behind this division could be found in the gender ideology of "separate spheres" where the differentiation between men and women was biologically based. Women were seen as frail and prudish, in opposition with the strength of men.

Man and women had to perform very clear and defined tasks: on the one hand, high class women were tasked with the organisation and administration of the house as well as with the education of the children. Before becoming a wife, a young lady was brought up to be the perfect wife for her future husband: faithfulness, prudishness and obedience were traits men

¹² The National Archives, 'Victorian Homes: Was There Much Difference Between Rich and Poor Houses?', *The National Archives*, < <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/resources/victorian-homes/>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹³ Kirstin Hohenadel, 'What is Georgian Architecture?', *The Spruce*, < <https://www.thespruce.com/georgian-architecture-4846979>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

searched in a wife. Their only physical task was reproduction. Despite being considered as the weaker sex, women's behaviour was part of the overall external appearance of the family in society. English families followed the model based on a large family, yet this model was not for everyone. Being numerous in the household could be a problem for those social classes with unstable wages and living in poor economic conditions.

Karl Ittmann¹⁴ points out that having a large family, in this case taking as an example the city of Bradford which was under heavy industrialisation in the late Eighteenth and Nineteenth century. He argues that one of the many problems with a large number of children in English households was the lack of fertility control. For people belonging to the middle and lower classes, with unstable wages or in economic difficulty, having many children was a problem. For the working classes it could mean unstable wages due to unemployment, major probability of spreading diseases in the house, whereas for middle class people a high number of children could damage the education and their access to it.¹⁵ Only in the 1870s, family regulations were extensively applied to both middle and working classes. At first this decision was not seen in a positive light because it went against the basic tasks of a woman: being a mother and a loving wife to their husband. Also, many novels depicted the traditional large family with an uncountable number of children. Already in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) there is a reflection about the Eighteenth family regulations with the description of a couple, Sir and Lady Eliot, who had children who were born at a distance in time. This because they decided to practice abstinence between one birth and the next. Being a mother required spending time at home, however, this situation did not include working women, since they were confined in factories, working long hours to earn enough to barely survive and they did not have the luxury to stay at home. On the other hand, men were the *pater familias*, the heads of the family, responsible for the protection and sustainment of every family member. They also needed to be actively engaged in society, intellectually or politically.

The English society was also formed by those people who did not exactly belong to the before mentioned social classes but had a prominent role nonetheless: prostitutes, known also under different appellatives like streetwalkers or whores. The term had a different meaning in the Nineteenth century and was widely used to define a person who lived with another man outside of marriage, a woman with an illegitimate child, a woman who sold her body both for

¹⁴ Karl Ittmann, *Work, Gender and Family in Victorian England* (London: MacMillan Press Ltd,1995).

¹⁵ Lynne Vallone, 'Fertility, Childhood and Death in The Victorian Family', *Victorian Literature and Culture* Cambridge University Press, 28 (2000), 217-226 (p. 218).

money and for pleasure.¹⁶ They were social outcasts, but they also represented the means of sexually transmitted diseases: rich men usually paid for their services, consequentially bringing home syphilis and other diseases, infecting their wives.

Generally speaking, the Eighteenth-century English society was heavily stratified in social classes: the aristocracy, the middle classes and the working classes. This social structure was encouraged by the Industrial Revolution, which made the differences between these classes even more evident. In fact, during that time, the growth and development of new, big factories in the cities allowed the upper classes to expand their income: they were, in fact, the owners of these massive buildings in which the lower classes worked. The division between the rich and the poor was filled with the presence of a new rising class, a class of people who were neither rich nor poor. In fact, their income was sufficient for the family to have a dignified standard of life. At the top of the pyramid, there was the aristocracy, formed by the ancient families who were part of the House of Lords and whose income was entirely based on ancient money. At that time the importance of titles and ancient money was diminishing also because of the rising of another class, which brought new values and new perspectives in society. In the middle, there was a new class called middling sort, which was at its turn divided into many different classes. They were formed by bankers, rich merchants and shopkeepers. Their wealth was based on money earned through work, which represented the opposition between aristocratic money and middle-class money. The rising of this class started at the end of the Seventeenth century, but only during the Eighteenth century the middling sort started to become relevant when bankers and international merchants acquired a more relevant place both in society and in politics. Their rising was associated with the growth of towns and the consequent development of industrialised towns.¹⁷ Beneath these rising classes, there was the working class. This social class was formed by the rest of the population, poor people and workers whose life conditions were not optimal and unhealthy.

¹⁶ Judith Flanders, 'Prostitution', *The British Library* (2014), < <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/prostitution>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹⁷ W.A. Speck, 'Social Structure, Class and Gender, 1770-1832', in *Oxford Handbook of the 18th Century Novel*, Ed. Alan Downie (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016), p. 341.

1.2. Patriarchy

Despite the stratified social structure, the English society followed the values of patriarchy. Inequality between males and females remained a problem in this century of ground-breaking changes. Patriarchy is an ideology, usually referred to institutions, societies, or organisations where power, social control, material wealth and social status are predominantly associated with males rather than females.¹⁸ The inheritance of the family's properties went through the male line, leaving female members with a yearly pension. If a family had a male heir, the inheritance would pass directly on them, but if there were no male heirs, the inheritance would pass on to the next male relative of the family. However, to avoid such a process, daughters were subjected to marriages arranged by the fathers, who would choose a suitable partner to reinforced family connections and their social position.

Despite being cut out of the inheritance, women were the most important means of the safeguard of the family social position and its improvement. The prospect of marriage was an important aspect for people belonging to higher classes. During the Eighteenth century there still was the belief of marriage as a business, where wealth had the utmost importance and happiness came after. But things were bound to change since more and more marriages started to be celebrated because of love. Nevertheless, the aristocracy saw marriages as the opportunity to strengthen their social connections with other powerful families and provide a continuity of the family legacy with the birth of an heir for the family estates.

Women who were born in rich families were subjected to the decisional power of the father and once a suitable match was found, they would become subjected to their husband's decisions. This subdued status was connected to the principle according to which they could not have a separate source of income (unless specified in a specific contract)¹⁹. Matchmaking was a family business and parents were charged with the research of suitable partners for their daughters to marry. Opposed to popular belief, finding a match was not easy: during the Eighteenth century Britain was not an overcrowded nation and because of the numerous wars and consequent deaths, most of the male population was abroad fighting. Furthermore, working men were not entitled to marry until after their apprentice contract had expired. This made the search for a potential husband even harder. The only occasion for young women to be shown off and secure themselves a suitable partner was during the London Season. This event was one

¹⁸ Michael R. Hill, 'Patriarchy', *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*, 2 (2009), 628-633 (pp. 628-629).

¹⁹ Roy Adkin, Lesley Adkin, *Eavesdropping on Jane Austen's England: How Our Ancestors Lived Two Centuries Ago* (London: Little Brown Book Group, 2013), p. 4.

of the most awaited social events, where people had the opportunity to set their eyes on possible matches and expand their social connections. The Season usually began after Easter or as late as March, a time when families would spend more time in the countryside. It usually coincided with some other events, equally important: the sitting of Parliament and the Annual Royal Exhibition of Art, which marked the official start of the season.

The activities available during the season were balls, concerts, private parties and sporting events.²⁰ In fact, the main action took place at balls, where young ladies were introduced to society and ready to find a possible suitor. This obsession to marry daughters to possible suitors would become heightened during the Season because the prospect of ladies staying unmarried was dreadful. As Jane Austen stated in a letter addressed to her niece Fanny Price in 1817: “Single ladies have a dreadful propensity for being poor which is one very strong argument in favour of matrimony”.²¹ This harsh remark was based on evidence: an unmarried woman would soon become a burden to her family because of her economic dependency on the male members of the family. The only prospect for these women was to become employed in houses as maids or to hope for a place in the family home depending on the wealth of the family. Patriarchy was not the only element that excluded women from having a role in society. As mentioned in the previous section, women had power on their house, on the servants and on the organization of parties. They also had a strong influence on the education of their children. Every decision in the house had to be checked by the mistress of the house.

This traditional view of the woman allowed them a lot of free time in the house, which was filled in with reading, embroidery and playing instruments such as the piano. However, reading became one of the most popular hobbies among them. Even if women could not attend university or play an active part in society outside their house, they slowly became the majority of the reading public in England.

Reading became a very popular hobby for both men and women. Starting from the end of the Eighteenth century, literature witnessed an unexpected growth. Writers and philosophers started to arrange meetings in coffee houses or in literary circles to debate about different topics related to society, science, literature and commerce. This opportunity for debate led to the publication of pamphlets, reviews or books where enlightened ideas came to life. Although women were not allowed in this type of establishment, in the following years they would

²⁰ Michelle Jean Hoppe, ‘The London Season’, online < <http://www.literary-liaisons.com/article024.html>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

²¹ Jane Austen, *Lettere*, trad. Giuseppe Ierolli, 2010, L.153, pp. 681-685.

become more independent, attending coffeehouses and later, some of the most influential women in society would establish their own literary circle: The Bluestocking Circle.

1.3. Gendered Literature and Female Writers

The Eighteenth century saw the rise of two opposing literary currents, namely Classicism and Romanticism, occupying respectively the first and the last part of the century. In the first part of the century, the novel was considered as the preferred form of writing and it still kept some of the features which were already present in previous centuries. The plot of the classic novel was taken from mythology or the tradition of the Middle Ages, so there was no original material employed in those stories. Then, the use of time and space was still undefined: there was no exact time nor defined place to be used as a background for the main story. Overall, the attitude towards time was very similar to the one used during the Renaissance and even earlier: time consisted of a sequence of actions set in a very abstract continuum of time and space, and allowed very little importance to time as a factor in human relationships.²² Despite these choices, novelists chose to use prose as the most effective style to describe events. Still, at the beginning of the century, writers decided to describe everyday life events trying to be as close as possible to reality. This thread was further developed in the following decades and by the second half of the century Realism became even more detailed than it was just fifty years before. This form of faithfulness to reality was called formal Realism because, although the described events were detailed and as close as possible to reality, the term Realism was not referring to any special literary doctrine, but only to a set of narrative procedures which were commonly found together in novels.²³

In the last decade of the Eighteen century, the novel underwent another transformation in form and plot. The Romantic influence in literature started as an insurrection against the principles of Classicism and its birth corresponded with the publication of *The Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798, whose work professed a striking opposite view on the Eighteenth-century poetics and aestheticism. While Classicism preferred simplicity, harmony, perfectionist tendencies, as well as the revival of the ancient Greeks and Romans forms of literature such as drama, Romanticism displayed as main features the desire of people to look back at the ancient past and its major historical events and their desire to be considered a hero. For them the past represented an example of greatness and perfection, something to look up to,

²² Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), p. 20.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 28.

and the melancholy rising from it was often portrayed in Europeans works such as *The Sufferings of the Young Werther* (1774), by Goethe, or the Italian *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (1802), by Ugo Foscolo. All the characters show the distinctive Romantic traits: despair, aching for the past and the inadequacy of living in their present time. This uneasiness was the subject of Hegel's studies, which stated that melancholy and aching for the past were reactions coming from sensitive and emotional people living in a historically quiet period. In fact, after the French Revolution there were not any major historical events, except for the Congress of Wien, in which the political borders of Europe were redefined.

During the Romantic period, the writing of novels continued, even though Romanticism was mainly known for other types of productions such as poetry, mainly graveyard poetry, and painting. Nonetheless, there were a few novelists actively writing during Romanticism: Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen, among the most important ones. They played a relevant role in the development of the Nineteenth-century novel because the former was the inventor of the historical novel, which he published in 1814 and was entitled *Waverley*; the latter brought some innovations in the narrative form, mainly concerning the development of the stream of consciousness. Their narrative was influenced by some of the aforementioned features of Romanticism, especially the detailed characterization of the main protagonists, which was a perfect representation of the Romantic spirit.

The novel became then one of the most important and appreciated genres in literature. However, a distinction between novel and romance is necessary, since they tend to be mixed up. In her work *The Progress of Romance* (1785), the English novelist Clara Reeve expresses a clarification concerning these two terms in a dialogue between three different characters. With the term romance, she defines a story which is "wild, extravagant, fabulous [...] all those kind of stories that are built upon fiction and have no foundation in truth".²⁴ Based on the assumption that both romance and novel are created starting from History, Reeve states that romance is more focused on the production of works based on extravagant, heroic adventures, whereas the novel has a more moderate and realistic narration. There are many reasons why the novel became one of the most spread genres to be read by people: with the diffusion of newspapers and reviews, more and more people had access to printed materials. In addition to this, the novels circulating during the Eighteenth century were starting to become more focused on the

²⁴ Clara Reeve, *The progress of Romance, Through Themes, Countries, and Manners; with Remarks on The Good and Bad Effects of It on Them Respectively; in a Course of Evening Conversations*, ed. W. Keymer, Colchester (London: Pater Noster Row, 1785), p. 6.

individual and his life. What really changed was, firstly, the choice of common characters instead of aristocratic ones, and secondly, the adventures of these people were not as unbelievable and epic as they were before. Realism, achieved through detailed descriptions of both setting and time, made the story appear believable and real so that the reading public could better identify itself with these characters. The focus on the main character consisted in the concept of personal identity existing through time and being changed by experiences. This meant the use of past experiences as the cause of present action, which consequentially singled out this new form of the novel compared to previous fiction. New features appeared too, such as the stream of consciousness, which gave access to the character's mind through a direct quotation of what was occurring in the individual's mind.²⁵ The novel became a "full and authentic report of human experience"²⁶ which goal was to satisfy the reader with a detailed account of time, space and characters.

However, among all these reasons about why the novel became relevant, there are others that are worth mentioning. In his *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century*²⁷(1904), Leslie Stephen affirms that the expansion of the reading public plays a fundamental role in the rise of the novel. Despite the high rate of illiteracy dominating society, the expansion of the novel continued. Publishing became a profitable profession, and the high demand for books flourished in the development of circulating libraries. The term was invented in 1742²⁸ and it designed a type of library open to the public in exchange for a small fee as a subscription to the service. It was a good deal for those people who could not afford to buy books. Usually, these libraries offered a wide range of literature, but novels were the most attractive genre for readers.

Another reason why novels were so popular could be related to the role of women who belonged to the upper and the middle classes: they did not have an active role in society and consequentially led a more sedentary life, which left them with plenty of free time to read. Even though women formed most of the reading public, their contribution to literature was not considered excellent enough to gain recognition by the patriarchal system of the English society. Critics defined female fiction as "such poor and insignificant productions".²⁹ The

²⁵ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 28.

²⁷ Leslie Stephen, *English Literature and Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth and Co. 1904).

²⁸ Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* p. 39.

²⁹ Laura L. Runge, 'Gendered Strategies in the Criticism of Early Fiction', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 (1995), 363-378 (pp. 365-366).

association of women and fiction was encouraged by publishers just for selling purposes but this also made further steps in the transformation of fiction into a feminine writing genre. In the first novels written by women, the heroine was a woman and this created a sort of bond between her and the reader.³⁰

Female writing in the Eighteenth century was controversial for two reasons: firstly, it was considered inferior to male writing and secondly, it was restricted to domestic affairs. The praise these authoresses excited were based formally on compliments on their overall amateurish work. This lack of consideration for their work prevented female writers to be considered as fully-fledged authors. This situation laid the foundations for gendered literature, a type of literature divided between sexes where literary genres belonged to a specific sex. Male authors were often identified with epic, tragedy and comedy genres, which in the past were very successful, whereas female authors belonged to fiction, where they could not grant any inspiration from the ancient tradition of literature because fiction was, for most critics, inferior to drama or epic. In addition to these reasons, men had a wider and better education compared to women, so they could enjoy the reading of wonderful and famous ancient writings in the original language, whereas women had access to them only through translations. This meant that they could not have access to the real and more “authentic” experience of the original reading. In fact, critics affirmed that “Female novelists conformed to the standards of modestly written, pleasing tales of domestic harmony, while male authors strove for original plots and intellectual challenges”.³¹ Women were associated with love poetry, pastorals, social letters and fiction. Despite being a feminine genre, the critic on fiction was prevalently male, since women were prevented to be praised as writers of regard. This male critic vision could appear to the modern reader as misogynist and done purposefully to deny women their literary achievement. For men, there were not any problems because their sex was representative of their role both in society and in their profession as writers.³² It can be said that gender ideology interferes with the establishment of female writing as worthy of recognition not only in the aforementioned genres but especially in the development of novel writing.

This hard reality on female writers could be better explained with the introduction to the Bluestocking Circle. This circle, created during the 1750s, was a group of conservative writers, mainly female (although men were not excluded either) belonging to the literary,

³⁰ *Ibidem.*

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 375.

³² *Ibid*, p. 372.

political and intellectual sphere. One of the aims of the group was to make women's voices heard in a period where male domination was strong in society and monopolising in professions.³³ The three founding members of this circle were Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Vasey and Frances Boscawen. Other relevant writers who later became part of it and gave their contribution to it were Catherine Talbot, Elizabeth Carter and Hester Chapone.

Elizabeth Montagu was a noblewoman married to the mathematician Edward Montagu. In her teenage years, she came into contact with many influential people she met at the Duchess of Portland's³⁴ salon. There she was fascinated by this community of people who shared an interest in history, literature and self-intellectual improvement. This pushed her to become a *salonnière* helped by her love for parties and her vivacious spirit, and she gradually earned the nickname of "Queen of the Bluestocking". Her skills as hostess granted her the organisation of many meetings of the Bluestocking circle in almost all of her properties in London as well as in the north of England. Her greatest achievements in literature were two writings: the first was a contribution she made to Mr Lyttleton work *Dialogues of the Dead* published in 1760. The work was a collection of dialogues between representatives of the ancient and modern world, highlighting the contrasts between modern and ancient philosophies. The second was her own work entitled *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* published in 1769. This work, firstly published anonymously, defended Shakespeare from the accusations made by Voltaire where he stated that the playwright was illiterate and incapable to follow the classical dramatic form.³⁵

The second founding member, Elizabeth Vasey, was often credited to have given the name to the group. It all came from an accident that involved Vasey and Mr. Benjamin Stillingfleet. She invited him to a meeting of the circle but instead of coming with the formal black stockings required for the event, he came with a more informal blue pair.³⁶ Opposed to her friend Montagu, Vasey wrote less frequently and never published her writings, limiting her mansions to hosting meetings for the circle.

³³ Unknown, 'Fanny Boscawen and the Bluestocking society', *National Trust*, <<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hatchlands-park/features/fanny-boscawen-and-the-bluestocking-society>> [accessed 29.09.2021]

³⁴ Margaret Cavendish Bentinck, also known as the Duchess of Portland (1715-1785). She was a collector and a natural historian. She presided over a group of intellectual women in her estate in Buckinghamshire.

³⁵ Digital Humanities Team Swansea Univeristy, 'Elizabeth Montagu Biography', *Emco.com* <<http://emco.swansea.ac.uk/montagu/bio/>> [accessed 29.09.2021]

³⁶ Unknown, 'Elizabeth Vasey', *Brooklyn Museum* <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/elizabeth_vesey> [accessed 29.09.2021]

A similar path was chosen by Frances (Fanny) Boscawen. She was born in a wealthy family and during her lifetime she was respected as a writer and as an intellectual. Her taste in judging literature was appreciated and admired by her peers. Because of her skills as a *salonnière*, she was known as “La Sevigne d’Angleterre”: her salons in England were as famous as those of Madame de Sevigne in France. Because of her wealthy social position, Fanny never felt the need to publish anything she wrote. However, her letters represented a precious treasure for her correspondents, who appreciated them for their writing quality and spontaneous, careless tone.³⁷ As hostesses, these women created a strong network of friendships that they exploited to offer mutual support and intellectual encouragement to its members.

In the Bluestocking Circle novels did not appear straight away. At first, letters were the main form of literary production. In the long-lasting letter exchange between many of the hostesses of the circle, the main topic was the discussion of their social position and they also shared a very personal vision of their life with one another. Letters were not the only means they employed to enter society. Some of their writings, mainly essays and novels, became the reflection of their fame in that same society that deemed women unfit to write and be an active part of it. These writings, at the time more or less feminine, made the first steps toward the active involvement of women in society matters. In their epistolary exchanges, Montagu and Vasey praised their ability to make politicians abandon their political background and allow them to be “pure and simple” men, like Habermas defined them, talking and debating in their rooms.³⁸

From the beginning of the Bluestocking movement, no woman was participating in political activities even though there was evidence in those letters that some political events were discussed as spectators and not as a party involved. Because of this estrangement from politics, these well-educated women started to patronise and promote, as well as discuss, works written by fellow women. Among the most important titles, there were Elizabeth Carter’s translation entitled *Works of Epictetus* (1758), Catherine Talbot’s *Reflections on the Seven Days of the Week* (1770), Hester Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1773) and the later work by Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792).

³⁷ Kathleen Keown, ‘Fanny Boscawen: The Unpublished Bluestocking’, *National Trust* < <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/hatchlands-park/features/fanny-boscawen-the-unpublished-bluestocking>. > [accessed 29.09.2021]

³⁸ Harriet Guest, ‘Bluestocking Feminism’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 65 (2002), 59-80 (p. 64).

This gendered distinction between men and women started to be more evident in the 1770s when during a correspondence between Carter and Montagu, the first wrote that during a meeting “men ranged themselves on one side of the room, where they talked their own talk, and left us poor ladies to twirl our shuttles and amuse one another”.³⁹ In her letter, she expresses this division as “if the two sexes were engaged in a state of war”.⁴⁰ The impression she describes to her fellow friend is that receiving literary information is easier with politicians, whereas scholars and writers tend to exclude women from their debates. The reason behind this distinction was based on the role these men had: politicians were at ease in discussing with women about literature because they considered this topic purely human and far from the political meaning it could gain when discussed with other men.

In the 1790s the Bluestocking Circle had come a long way: the feminine approach to the world of letters and the political detachment of its members were replaced with a more open discussion on politics. In fact, the speeches of Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay on the French Revolution marked the first steps this group of well-educated women took to speak about politics, regardless of their gender.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 76.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

Chapter 2

Jane Austen's Life

Everything known about Jane Austen's life comes from what remains from the correspondence she kept with her sister Cassandra, and the memoir her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh wrote.⁴¹ The rich bundle of letters Jane wrote in her lifetime was partly destroyed by Cassandra and much later by one of Jane's nieces. However, what many critics and relatives agree on is that Jane Austen's life was "not by any means a life of event".⁴²

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire, in December 1775 and was the daughter of a clergyman. In all her biographies the description of her persona is always contradictory, but the most recurrent description affirms that she was tall and thin, with curly dark hair and expressive hazel eyes. Her face was round and her cheeks full, almost doll-like. Her nephew James Edward and a childhood friend described her as a very attractive person. Others, like her aunt Philadelphia Walter, defined her as not very pretty.⁴³

She was the seventh of eight children: six boys and two girls. The eldest brother, James, was involved in writing since a young age and was probably the figure at which Jane looked as an inspiration when writing. He was well informed in English literature and wrote very fluently in both prose and verse. The next brother was less-known and was called George. Not much is known about this brother. What we know is that George was taken care of in a nearby village, under the care of an uncle because he suffered from backwardness⁴⁴ which could probably be related to the absence of language since Jane, in one of her letters, talked of having used the sign language with him. The third brother, Edward, got adopted by a member of the Austen family, called Mr Knight. Despite being away from the original family in his childhood, he was a stable presence in the family in his adult years. The next brother in line was Henry, a constant presence in Jane's life. He was the one talking to editors about his sister's books and publications. The younger brothers Francis and Charles were mariners, who inspired Jane in the characterisation of seamen in her novels. They both spent part of their life at sea and were

⁴¹ James Edward Austen-Leigh, Giuseppe Ierolli, *Ricordo Di Jane Austen e Altri Ricordi Familiari*, ed. Giuseppe Ierolli (Roma: Elliot Edizioni, 2011).

⁴² Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 4.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 110-113.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7.

not much present in Jane's life. Then there was her sister Cassandra, older than her by just two years. She was Jane's long-life companion and confidant.⁴⁵

Jane was born in the English countryside, in the parish of Steventon. When she was born, the family house was already crawling with children of all ages. As her brothers and sister did before her, she was breast-fed for the first months and then sent to a cottage until she reached a manageable age to be taken back to the parsonage. This process was very common during the Eighteenth century, but Jane felt to protect herself and therefore she was afraid to express her emotions. In fact, in her adult life, she would never display affection for any of her siblings except for her sister Cassandra, who acted as a second mother to her.

At the age of seven, Jane insisted to be sent to school with Cassandra, despite her young age. They were sent to a boarding school run by a Mrs Crawley, a distant relative of the Austens. Girls boarding schools were quite common in the Eighteenth century but many of them did not possess a sufficient amount of money to be properly run and so the girls were forced to sleep in overcrowded rooms, to share beds and to be famished. Jane's years in boarding school were dreadful because she was a country girl educated in a town school where strict rules unknown to country people were applied, and as a consequence, she felt trapped. Later in her adult years, she would define boarding schools as "places for torment for pupils and teachers alike."⁴⁶ After a year at Mrs Crawley's boarding school, Jane and Cassandra returned home just to be sent away the following year to Madame La Tournelle's school where they were taught spelling, dance, needlework, probably some piano and French. However, 1786 marks the end of Jane's formal education. Those school years were interspersed by periods of homestay where the Austen children set theatrical performances up for the family. Every Austen child had a part in them and this artistic side of the family was shared by every member. Jane's first inspiration for writing came indeed from these representations.

In her school years, Jane learned a little French, but her ability in this foreign language probably came not from her education at Madame La Tournelle's but more precisely from her cousin Eliza. Since leaving England years before, cousin Eliza married a French *Compte* and spoke his language fluently. During her visits to the Austen family, she brought some French books as presents to her cousins Jane and Cassandra. The book Jane received was entitled *L'Ami des Enfants* (1770) by Arnaud Berquin and was fundamental for her first attempts at writing theatre. In fact, her first pieces turned out as farces or burlesque plays.

⁴⁵ Austen-Leigh, Ierolli, *Ricordo Di Jane Austen e Altri Ricordi Familiari*, pp. 18-21.

⁴⁶ Tomalin, *Jane Austen*, p. 39.

Already at the age of sixteen, Jane Austen displayed a prodigious writing style. Between the age of twelve and eighteen, she actively wrote a wide range of works. She then copied them down in three journals given to her by her father: they would be known as the *Juvenilia* (1787-1793). Some of the most important early writings are *Love and Friendship*, written in 1790 and dedicated to her cousin Eliza, as a symbol of the deep affection she felt for her in their younger years; *History of England*, written in 1791, illustrated by her sister Cassandra, to whom the manuscript was dedicated (the only one with modern illustrations); *Lesley Castle* (1793) and dedicated it to her brother Henry. What was recurrent in these early works was their dedicated to family members.⁴⁷

Among the early activity of writing and her admirable style, Jane's life passed quietly in Steventon. However, three episodes disrupted her quiet living. When she was just sixteen, she witnessed many changes in her family: two of her brothers got engaged and then married. Engagements and marriages were quite common, but one of them distressed her: the engagement of her sister Cassandra to a young clergyman called Tom Fawley. Their situation in the courting sphere was, however, rather uncommon: he did not have enough money to marry Cassandra straight away and she did not have any dote, so, unlike other couples, they got stuck into a long-lasting courtship. Their marriage never took place since Fawley died unexpectedly of yellow fever in the West Indies. After this sad event, Cassandra never married and shared all her life with her sister. Jane's love life was just as unfortunate as her sister's: still a teenager she met a young gentleman during one of her countryside summer tours with her family. The gentleman's name was Thomas Lefroy and he was practising to become a barrister. There are not any complete letters or clear accounts on this love affair, but there must have been something more than friendship between them. Many critics have speculated about a real interest between the two and also a possible marriage proposal. The same Lefroy, in his older days, confessed to a nephew his feelings for the young writer. Sadly, many things were against this union: firstly, they belonged to different social classes; secondly, they were both raised with the bad habit of sacrificing their desires and choices for family approval. There was an additional reason against them: Jane was a poor country girl with no money for her dote and he was an Irish and Huguenot by origins, which meant that he needed to be careful with his decisions in England. After a meeting with the two Austen sisters, Lefroy promised to see them again, but that never happened. After 1795, Jane Austen would never see this man again.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 67-68.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 120-122.

This encounter was rather formative in Jane's life: it gave her writing a deeper insight into what an array of feelings and emotions love can cause in a person. Years later, Jane received her only marriage proposal from a man called Harris Bigg-Wither. At first, she accepted his proposal, but she then refused him because despite his perfect social position and relations, he was not able to touch her heart and excite in her any strong feelings such as love.⁴⁹

The following years were characterised by many members of the Austen family getting married and having children, compelling Jane's to often pay visits and making her daydream about a family all hers. From letters and other accounts, she travelled a few times to Kent and then visited the thermal town of Bath which was also the residential town of her aunt and uncle Leigh-Perrot.

In the Eighteenth century, Bath was one of the largest cities in England. The presence of a thermal spa made the city one of the most renowned spa towns in England and it attracted wealthy people from all over the country. The city was often described as a place for dissipation and amusement where wealthy people would spend their stay. The knowledge Austen had of Bath came from personal experience. She spent some weeks in Bath when she visited her aunt and uncle and later, in 1801, she moved to the thermal town with her family. Jane Austen already had the opportunity to spend some time in the nearby area of Bath, including Bristol, another town port. Her knowledge of the latter came from her staying in Clifton, a suburb of the city of Bristol.

When her parents decided to move to Bath, the news was rather distressing for Jane. This was so traumatising for her that she stopped writing for several years. The years spent in Bath were characterised by additional travelling and a sequence of deaths in her family: firstly, the death of young Hastings, cousin Eliza's son and then Jane's father. The loss of her father caused a precarious economic situation in the family because Jane, her mother and her sister Cassandra did not have a stable income anymore. Her brothers were kind enough to give them some money, but it was not enough.

However, in 1808, Jane was thirty-three and still a maiden. Her time was continuously spent between her brother's families and their babies. Her financial situation was still unstable since she was depending on other people's money and because of this, she moved again with Cassandra and her mother to Chawton cottage to be near her relatives. There she had the opportunity to start writing again, more inspired than ever. Although Jane was inspired to write

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 182-184.

again, she still chose to share a room with her sister as she did in Steventon when she was a child. This is a curious aspect because usually a writer needs quiet and a comfortable atmosphere when writing but possibly this did not bother her.

In 1810 there was the publication of *Sense and Sensibility*, her first novel to be printed. This was a very important and proud moment in Jane Austen's career. The first edition came out with the note "printed by the author", which meant that the author would pay for both printing and some advertising. Two years later, in 1812, the publisher Egerton printed *Pride and Prejudice* with another note "from the author of *Sense and Sensibility*" which was previously addressed to "a Lady A-".⁵⁰ The next work ready for publication was *Mansfield Park*, printed in May 1814, but at the same time, the manuscript of *Emma* was already taking its shape. Her works were genuinely appreciated by the reading public but also by the Prince Regent to whom the first edition of *Emma* is dedicated.⁵¹

The year 1816 was difficult for the Austens, being marked by many economic problems such as the unemployment of Charles and the failure of Edward's business. Austen then started to feel unwell and went to Cheltenham to try the beneficial effects of its waters. Despite her beliefs, she was still suffering from back pains. It was not clear what afflicted her because in some letters she mentioned that her illness was once bile and another time it changed in rheumatism.⁵² By March 1816 she was feeling too unwell to write or to go for a walk and by the end of April, her condition worsened enough to confine her to bed. Her precarious health worried James and his wife, who proposed to her to be accompanied to Winchester and be seen by a doctor there. In a letter, he wrote to his son at Oxford that "we can no longer flatter ourselves with the least hope of having your dear valuable Aunt Jane restored to us [...] Mr Lyford has candidly told us that her case is desperate."⁵³ Just a few days later she had a seizure, derived from her unknown illness, and in the early morning of July 18th 1817, she was dead. She was buried in Winchester Cathedral where the black marble of her tombstone recites:

In Memory of
JANE AUSTEN
Youngest daughter of the late
Rev GEORGE AUSTEN,
formerly Rector of Steventon in this County

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 221.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 250.

⁵² *Ibid*, pp. 264.

⁵³ *Ibid*, pp. 270.

*she departed this Life on the 18th of July 1817,
aged 41, after a long illness supported with
the patience and the hopes of a Christian.
The benevolence of her heart,
the sweetness of her temper, and
the extraordinary endowments of her mind
obtained the regard of all who knew her and
the warmest love of her intimate connections.
Their grief is in proportion to their affection
they know their loss to be irreparable.
but in their deepest affliction they are consoled
by a firm though humble hope that her charity,
devotion, faith and purity have rendered
her soul acceptable in the sight of her
REDEEMER.⁵⁴*

2.2. Jane Austen's Style

Austen developed her writing style since she was a teenager. Her father was the first to support her, giving her papers and notebooks in which she could write. However, the Austens were gifted with good writing: the mother, Mrs Cassandra Austen, excelled in writing verses, a feature she passed onto Jane; the eldest brother James wrote prologues for the family theatricals and later became one of the writers of *The Loiterer*; and then there was Jane, gifted both in prose and in verse. Already at an early age, Jane got access to her father's library, the same place where she found inspiration from. Books provided her with a wide range of writing techniques that she took and transformed until they were hers.

As this chapter will show, her writing is realistic, but Jane Austen did not copy from reality, instead, she looked around and took up aspects or peculiar traits belonging to a person and mixed them with fiction. In her novels, she only describes elements she is familiar with and which she knows in detail. This descriptive choice renders her fiction realistic in depicting people, lifestyles, manners and geography.

Already in her early works called *Juvenilia*, Austen showed a hint of the writing style which characterised her mature writing. They are a collection of manuscript pages she wrote from when she was twelve to eighteen years old, copied randomly in three notebooks entitled

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 275-276.

Volume the First, Volume the Second and *Volume the Third*. This collection has been described by scholar Richard Jenkins as “light, boisterous and anarchic”.⁵⁵ These works represent the vision of a teenage Jane Austen discovering the world: she wrote them for fun, for her family and they were not meant for publication. In them she mocks some of the most fashionable genres of contemporary literature, dismissing always fainting female characters and too exuberant charming princes.

The *Juvenilia* mark her first steps in the literary world, forming at the same time part of her style. As a teenager, she already knew which features of other writers’ styles she wanted to keep and which to discard. Among the writers, she admired Samuel Richardson, mentioned by many members of Austen’s family as her favourite. From him, she kept his ability to create and preserve the consistency of his characters.⁵⁶ However, she eagerly read other writers such as William Cowper, Henry Fielding, Laurence Sterne and William Shakespeare. Surprisingly, there is never a direct mention of female writers who inspired her. However, one of Jane’s brothers affirmed that she was deeply inspired by Charlotte Lennox, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth and Charlotte Smith, all of which were actively engaged in the *Bluestocking Circle* (see paragraph 1.3.).

In her teens, Jane admired especially Charlotte Smith, whose style and picturesque scenery heavily enchanted and influenced her. Her writing style has been analysed and studied by many critics and they all have concluded that her style is condensed and well thought out. Indeed, some of the features she employed when writing make it the result of an attentive choice of the author.

2.2.1. Economy of Art and Apophysis

When referring to Jane Austen’s writing style a few adjectives come to mind: detailed, short, satiric, measured. Some of these adjectives may seem to disagree with one another. Nevertheless, Austen’s writing style is a balanced mixture of them all. Indeed, critics agree to define Austen’s style as similar to Flemish painting, because of the careful attention she pays to details. George Henry Lewes was the first to define Austen’s writing “economy of art”⁵⁷ because of her ability to isolate and exclude what she needs from her writings.

⁵⁵ Silvia Ogier, ‘*Juvenilia: Le Allegre Scorrubande Letterarie Di Una Ragazzina Ribelle Di Nome Jane Austen*’, online <https://www.unteconjaneausten.com/juvenilia-scorribande-letterarie-ragazzina-ribelle-jane-austen/> > [accessed 29.09.2021]

⁵⁶ Anna Toner, *Jane Austen’s Style: Narrative Economy and The Novel’s Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.5.

In a series of letters defined as “art of fiction” addressed to her niece Anna, Austen describes the problem and the importance of details. For her, what is essential is the ability to find a balance between what can be included in a text and the sufficient amount of detail needed to arise interest in the reader. This balance touches her to the core because she was a fervent writer of letters, in which she lingered on details of everyday life. However, she knew when to stop and avoid boredom. To avoid these dangers, Austen used condensation in most of her works present in *Volume the First* of her *Juvenilia*: in it, some of the texts are the result of extreme shrinking. For example, she was able to transform a six-volume novel into just a few manuscript pages.

Being able to condensate the most important facts or events happening in a text, brought her to focus on places and people instead of adding redundant and boring adjectives to describe what was happening. During the Eighteenth century, novels were usually published in multiple volumes because of their length, a practice existing since the Seventeenth century. Their multi-volume size is due to a narrative loaded with detailed descriptions of places, people and events, bordering prolixity and boredom.

In order to understand her decision of shrinking and cutting lengthy novels to just a few pages, it is necessary to analyse her *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters* (1816).⁵⁸ In it, Austen describes how she views the structure of a novel. Firstly, she stresses her distaste of episodic and desultory novels because of their variety of characters as well as subplots.⁵⁹ In her novels, Austen keeps the narration relatively shorter than the typical Seventeenth and Eighteenth century multi-volume novels. This brings the attention back to the aforementioned focal point in her writing style: the balance of detail to avoid boredom. Most of Austen’s novels, before being published, undergo intensive trimming and cutting. This allows the final product to have just a single plot with emphasis on a singular relevant character.⁶⁰

Her works lack the presence of a “labyrinthine nexus of events, an imbroglio of accidents, an atmosphere of mystery”⁶¹ which could make them slow and prolix. But what distinguishes her is her artist-like construction of the process of a story. In her early writings, the debate on long or short novels was still fervent, especially in *Northanger Abbey*, where she

⁵⁸ Jane Austen, *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). The work was written in May 1816 but the first completed edition was published in 1926.

⁵⁹ Toner, *Jane Austen’s Style*, p. 54.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

makes her characters speak about some novels and their perception of them.⁶² Still, she adds the right amount of detail until “her novel is a little living world”.⁶³

Austen’s economy of art is deeply embedded in her description of places and her use of language expressions. When describing places, Austen chooses to make her characters enter and exit very narrow spaces, which is reflected in the contraction of her entire writing style. Her descriptions are full of adjectives such as ‘little’ and ‘small’, ‘tiny’ or ‘narrow’, often in opposition to each other. Some critics have tried to find a reason behind this tendency of reducing both the length of texts and the size of settings. Critic Brigid Brophy affirms that the shrinking of size is connected with Austen’s personal experience during her life. It can be due to the feeling of the decline of her maternal ancestry, which is believed to be of high social status, and her lifelong monetary instability.⁶⁴ Moreover, her being keen on setting some of her characters’ stories in tiny houses compared to their wealth is visible in the Dashwoods of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) who are forced to leave their house because of their precarious situation after the death of Mr Dashwood; and Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (1814) who goes back and forth from the spacious house of Mansfield to the cramped spaces in Portsmouth.

The second dimension in which Jane Austen applies her economy of art is expression. Already in her *Juvenilia*, Austen exploits a rhetoric figure called apophasis. This figure of speech is very efficient but at the same time, it is also a paradox: its function is to mention an object by stating that it will not be mentioned.⁶⁵ In doing so, the denial intensifies the object and provides its description. This stylistic device became fashionable during the Eighteenth century, when authors used the cliché of inexpressibility, where their characters were not able to express feelings and emotions with words.

This well-known inexpressibility is translated in Austen’s novels with apophasis. The rhetorical figure to ironically express silence. With it, the author can address moral or delicate political themes without giving away to the reader her point of view on them. Usually, in Austen’s novels, apophasis is used in the description of love scenes: when her characters finally find one another, she allows them their intimacy, forbidding both the reader and the narrator to

⁶² Cfr. Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* in *The Complete Novels* (Penguin-Random House, New York, 2020), ch. 5.

⁶³ Toner, *Jane Austen’s Style*, p. 5.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 21-22.

⁶⁵ Collins English Dictionary, *Apophasis*, online

<[https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/apophasis#:~:text=\(%C9%99%CB%88p%C9%92f%C9%99s%C9%AAs%20\).it%20will%20not%20be%20mentioned](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/apophasis#:~:text=(%C9%99%CB%88p%C9%92f%C9%99s%C9%AAs%20).it%20will%20not%20be%20mentioned) > [accessed 29.09.2021]

access the scene. This figure of speech is extensively used by Austen in her first three novels to mark ironic and comic scenes, but later in her mature works it develops and transforms.

Apophysis creates a juxtaposition between what the character denies wanting to say and what in reality he does by extensively reporting it. This rhetorical figure makes the entire scene ironic and comic. A few examples can be found in *Pride and Prejudice*, such as when Elizabeth receives her first marriage proposal from Darcy. The narrator tells us that “Elizabeth’s astonishment was beyond expression. She stared, coloured, doubted, and was silent”.⁶⁶ Here the narrator first affirms that no word can describe what the young lady is feeling in that moment, but then proceeds to list all the actions and feelings she is experiencing, consequently creating a comic outcome for the entire scene. Also, in this example, it is possible to see how Austen puts together, in a climax, the actions which characterise Elizabeth’s feelings. The use of a triplet of adjectives is meant to expand the narration and identify the fragmentary and accumulative process of emerging emotion, as to fill the gap created by the inexpressibility of them. In addition to this, the triplet of adjectives creates a bridge between the narrator’s view and the heroine’s.⁶⁷

However, by the time Austen started working on *Emma*, the use of apophysis was already mixed with free indirect speech to create a meeting point between absurd or indulgent attempts to give voice to extreme emotions and avoid clichés of the inexpressibility of feelings. Together, free indirect speech and apophysis give life to a more complex narrative strategy that voices but also leaves unvoiced. Because of this contradiction, the reader is invited to scrutinise how this “silence-non silence” reacts with the character’s emotions.

2.2.2. Free Indirect Speech

Another linguistic device used extensively by Austen is free indirect speech. Compared to direct speech, where the speech is not framed by inverted commas, the indirect one arises when the narrative seems to take on the voice of a character. The innovation in the latter one is that there is no intervention by the narrator when reporting events. Moreover, the use of free indirect speech renders Austen’s characters more complex in their characterization, especially in their psychological dimension. In fact, they have been described as ‘round characters’ which means that they are depicted in detail, not only physically, but also mentally. They appear as real

⁶⁶ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* in *The Complete Novels* (Penguin- Random House, New York, 2020), p. 211.

⁶⁷ Toner, *Jane Austen’s Style*, p. 124.

people on paper and not just as invented characters belonging to a novel. They also have deep feelings and active minds, making them more shaped than any traditional character.

The use of the indirect speech causes a lack of subplots because the narrator assigns the narration to other characters. In doing this, there are less chances for the reader to get lost in the story's development. However, the lack of subplots or labyrinthine intrigues does not exclude a wide set of characters in the storyline. In all of Austen's novels, every character is essential to the development of the story. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), every character has a function in the story, none of them is disposable. What Austen does is to single out an emerging character, who will become the protagonist of the story, but this character is presented among others and singled out only through free indirect discourse. In 1816, Walter Scott published his opinion on Austen's use of characters in the *Quarterly Review*.⁶⁸ What he liked the most was her ability to connect events to characters, since they were all happening to the same person. In this, Austen is in sharp contrast with Fielding, whose distinctive trait was to produce a type of fiction rather disconnected in events. Richard Whately, a critic, has defined Austen's novel form as "nearly faultless; they do not consist [...] of a string of unconnected events [...] but have all that compactness of plan and unity of action".⁶⁹ In general, Austen's novel structure can be described as well-devised, with a compact and well-connected plot, where characters are designed to perform actions essential to the development of the story.

2.2.3 The Picturesque

Austen's detailed writing was influenced by the picturesque, an aesthetic theory coming from Charlotte Smith, which developed in the Eighteenth century. In her works, Smith provides long, detailed picturesque descriptions of the landscapes she used as settings. This movement combines a new vision of intuitive perception of landscapes, where characters are not merely subjected to nature, but their vision becomes part of the kinetic of the narrative.

Moreover, picturesque objects belonging to landscapes are a mixture of what Burke defined as beautiful and sublime. A beautiful object such as a smooth hill, or a straight hedgerow cannot be part of the picturesque on its own. The same can be said of sublime objects such as rough, irregular, dark objects. Sublimity alone cannot make an object picturesque, but there must be some degree of beauty in it. Usually in picturesque descriptions, the object

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 74-75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 76.

presents a sharp contrast to its sublime traits: a mountain scene can be described as dark and massive, but it is usually softened by an iridescent colour attributed to the mountains.⁷⁰

At first, the picturesque is associated with travels, where the character judges the landscape while travelling. The description of the view is based on the character's visual qualities or deficiencies. When searching the landscape for details, the traveller is immersed in a strong feeling experience, which can be either positive or negative.

The use of picturesque is highly employed by Austen in her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, especially when she makes Elizabeth Bennet describe what she sees while travelling with her aunt and uncle on their tour of the Peak District.⁷¹ Using feelings and imagination are two subjective actions the viewer does when looking at something picturesque. They come from the sublimity of objects and even when the sublime is substituted by the more common and mundane view, the power of imagination is still working, rendering it more similar to the sublime one seen before.⁷² Austen exploits these descriptions and stretches them to the utmost realistic possibilities to enrich her novels and allow the characters to express what they are viewing along with their feelings.

2.3. Geography

Geography in Jane Austen's novels is important, but critics have observed that she does not spend much time describing her settings in detail. The realism of Jane Austen is based on the topographical description of places she has visited in her life because, in her opinion, a good novelist should make the background recognisable to the reader. In some of the letters addressed to her niece Anna, she remarks the relevant position of settings. What she affirms is that in a novel an author should only talk about places they know to avoid incongruences. Her niece was working on a novel and turned to her aunt for advice. The girl's idea was to set her story in Ireland but her aunt dissuaded her. This hazardous choice could ruin her work because the young writer did not know anything related to manners nor culture in Ireland. What Austen was telling her niece was to be authentic. For her, the relationship between a character's behaviour and a place was an important feature.

⁷⁰ Charles Kostelnick 'From Picturesque View to Picturesque Vision: William Gilpin and Ann Radcliffe', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 18 (1985), pp. 31-48 (p. 33).

⁷¹ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ch. 42.

⁷² Kostelnick 'From Picturesque View to Picturesque Vision', p.37.

Jane Austen wrote in a period called “the golden age of the country house”⁷³, a period in which people belonging to the middle classes were enthusiastic to spend more time in rural areas in the countryside. It is not by chance that the main setting of her novels is the countryside. In most of her novels’ plots, Austen distinguishes some central buildings, usually the houses of rich people, as pivotal in the story making, and opposes them to the cottages of the parsonage. This distinction is essential to delineate the social classes in which she is interested to write about: the middle classes and the decaying aristocracy. Indeed, most of her characters belong to the rising middle classes, even though some of them are less rich than others. The settings Austen chooses for these buildings are the South West area of London, in the countryside, and the developing cities of Bristol and Bath. But as seen before, Austen’s main focus is on characters, not on landscapes. Despite the secondary role given to them, landscapes are not mere background decorations but they represent the social, economic and intellectual realities of the characters.

In *Pride and Prejudice* settings are associated with their correspondent characters: Netherfield with Mr Bingley, Rosings with Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Pemberley with Mr Darcy. Each of these residences perfectly embodies its master’s personality. In fact, Mr Bingley’s house is rented and it reflects his social position as new rich; Rosings instead represents Lady Catherine’s husband who created this opulent and massive building which matches the snobbish attitude of the Lady. Opposed to them, Pemberley, the ancestral home of Mr Darcy, is misinterpreted as its master. From the outside it can appear as similar as Lady Catherine’s house, but on the inside it is elegant and agreeable as the man who inhabits it. In fact, Pemberley’s true nature is casually discovered by Elizabeth, during a tour of the place with her aunt and uncle. While visiting the place, she understands that her sour feelings for Darcy made her unable to see the beauty of the house.⁷⁴

Buildings are not the only subjects Austen describes. She also provides descriptions of other places she is well informed about such as the cities of Bath and Bristol. The former is the setting of two of her novels: *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*; the latter is represented as background in *Emma* and it appears again in *Northanger Abbey*. In the Eighteenth century, Bath had become one of the largest cities in England and the presence of a thermal spa made the city one of the most renowned spa towns, attracting wealthy people from all over the country. The

⁷³ David Herbert, ‘Place and Society in Jane Austen’s England’, *Geography*, 76 (1991), pp. 193-208 (p. 197).

⁷⁴ Charles J. McCann, ‘Setting and Character in *Pride and Prejudice*’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 19 (1964), pp. 65-75 (p. 71).

city acquired then the reputation of a place where amusement, marriage contracts and social mingling took place. It became a place of dissipation and entertainment. Touring the countryside was a common practice in the Eighteenth century and Austen spent some weeks in Bath, to visit her aunt and uncle and then moved to this thermal town with her family in 1801.

In the nearby area of Bath, another town was in full development: Bristol. Austen knew this city well because she once stayed in Clifton, a suburban area of Bristol. This city appears many times in the novel *Emma* where many of the characters are connected to the city's main occupation: trade. In the Eighteenth century, Bristol evolved into one of the most important ports of the Atlantic for commerce and slave trade. The slaves coming from the English colonies of Virginia and the Caribbean were an essential part of the merchants' trade job. Alongside slaves, imported goods like tobacco, sugar and chocolate arrived in England. Because of this variegated trade Bristol became one of the richest cities in Britain. It is possible to assume that Austen knew of this mercantile side of the city and decided to use it as part of the plot for her novels. The accuracy of the author in depicting the Marine and the mercantile class derives from her brothers' career: Charles and Francis were enrolled in the navy so Austen has a first-hand experience with this world.

Another town that can compete with Bath's reputation is Brighton, often mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice*. Despite not being a concrete setting in the narration, there are numerous references to this seaside town. At the time in which the novel was published, Brighton was known for being another place where dissipation reigned. This negative reputation of the town was enhanced by the behaviour of the Prince Regent who led his extravagant and inappropriate life there. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Brighton is depicted as a place where a young lady can find a husband but it also represents the place where Lydia Bennet elopes with Wickham. Like Bath, Brighton too represents an ambivalent setting where good and bad events could happen.

Among these countryside settings, Austen adds a bit of city life by mentioning at least in every novel the city of London. The description of the city is never detailed nor offers the reader a precise mapping of it, however, specific streets or squares in London are mentioned, especially the places where some characters happen to spend a good part of the year.⁷⁵

The following image provides a clear map containing all the settings of Austen's novels. What emerges from it is that the author used indeed only places she knew about or where she has lived.

⁷⁵ Cfr. novels *Sense and Sensibility*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion* and *Emma*.



Figure 2. Jane Austen's England. Places mentioned in the novels are identified with counties shaded. (Charles Herbert, *Places and society in Jane Austen's England*, 1991).

2.3.1 Steventon Neighbourhood

Austen's characters are created from a mixture of features belonging to people she knew, visited or lived near. During her years at Steventon, some of the families living in the surrounding area offered her plenty of behavioural and physical traits from which she drew her characters. Then she combined those elements with gossip, excerpts of conversations and fiction. Each of her characters is rounded, which means that it is extensively developed both mentally and physically and possesses a personal voice that offers the reader a wide range of perspectives on various topics in the narrative.

When still at Steventon, Austen met different respectable families, which created a shifting, diverse, eccentric environment from which to take inspiration. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine, who is an avid reader of Gothic novels, imagines dreadful events happening in the Abbey. These events may have been inspired to Austen by the eccentric life of Lord Portsmouth. This man had a very tumultuous life and there were whispers about his wicked desire of making his servants perform fake funerals for him and his pleasure in beating them.

After the end of his first marriage with an old lady, he decided to marry a young woman, Mary-Ann Hanson. After their marriage, the new Countess dismissed the servants and installed a regime of terror, where Lord Portsmouth was regularly beaten into submission.⁷⁶ In some of her letters, Austen affirms to have spoken with this man and to her, he seemed kind and polite. However, there is no certainty about how much of this story people knew about, but surely, Lord Portsmouth's family did its best to hide this sinister side of the story.

The next family Austen could have used as inspiration was the numerous Terry family. They were an old well-established family in the county, with thirteen children. Their description as 'noisy' in Austen's letters may have given form to the Musgrove family members in *Persuasion*.⁷⁷

Another character coming from Austen's pen is Mr Darcy, probably inspired by William Chute. When Austen was fourteen, she heard some gossips about this single gentleman who would become the next owner of The Vyne, a beautiful Tudor house in the nearby area of Basingstoke. His status as bachelor, with a fine estate and decent money, remembers the opening scene of *Pride and Prejudice* when the narrator affirms that "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife."⁷⁸ Probably, because of his unmarried status, many families with daughters thought Mr Chute in want of a wife and as the good author Austen already was, she took this gossip and years later used it as writing material. Mr Chute's family also provided Austen with ideas for another character: Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*. Since Mr and Mrs Chute were not blessed with children, they adopted the child of one of Mr Chute's cousins. The idea behind this adoption was to cheer Mrs Chute and the child, named Caroline Wiggett, lived with them for years before contacts with her family were established again. There are parallels between this story and Fanny Price's characterization.⁷⁹

These people were just providing materials to Jane Austen to create her own characters. She did not take existing people from reality and transposed them directly to a page. None of her characters is directly amenable to a real existing person because they are the result of a combination of traits, either physical or temperamental.

⁷⁶ Tomalin, *Jane Austen*, pp. 87-91.

⁷⁷ Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, in *Letters*, 1884, L. 13.

⁷⁸ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, p. 1.

⁷⁹ Tomalin, *Jane Austen*, pp. 98-99.

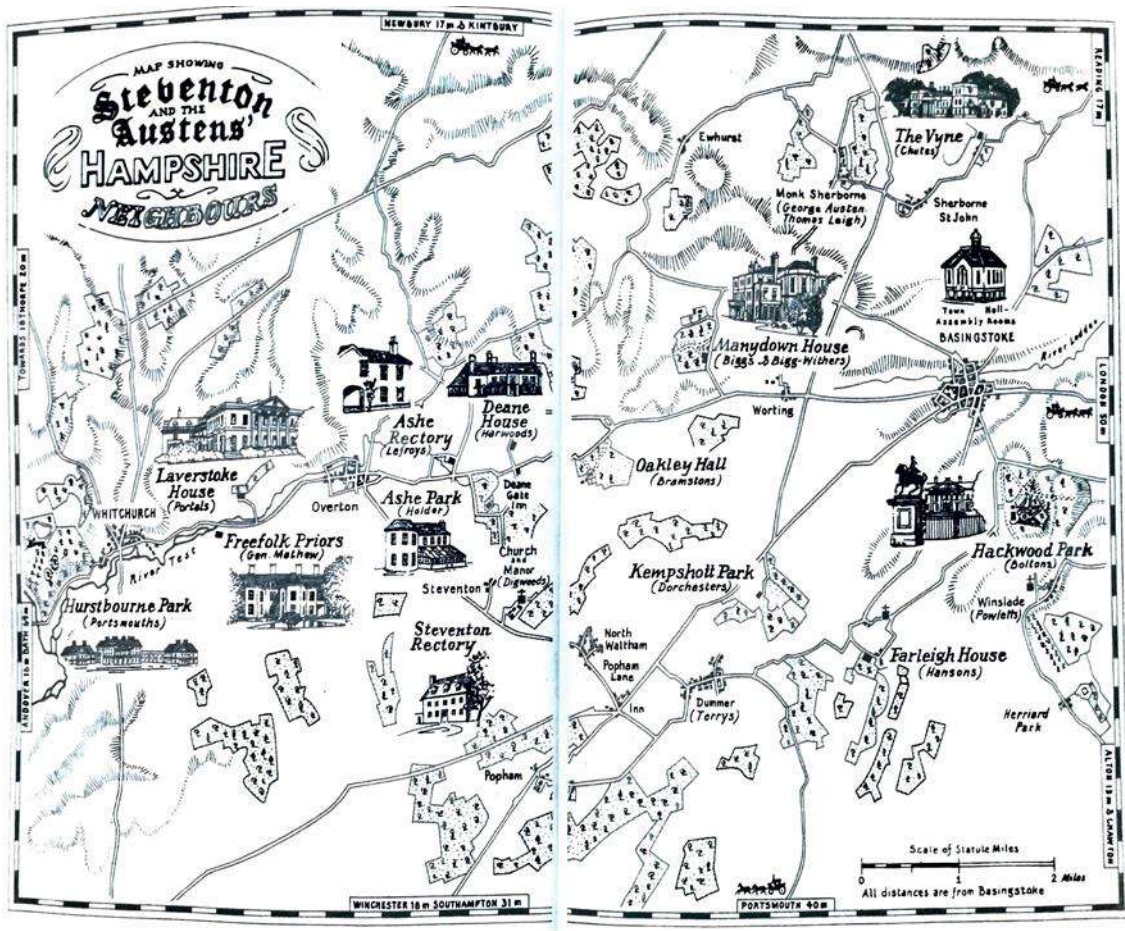


Figure 3 Map of Steventon's neighbourhood, Claire Tomalin "Jane Austen: a Life", Penguin Books, 2012.

2.4. Themes

All of Jane Austen's novels have themes in common that reflect the society and the time during which they are written. Marriage, money, social conventions and morality are the most important ones. These themes also represent the key point in the novel of manners, a definition conventionally applied to Austen's novels. She portrays many detailed descriptions of customs, values and society. This classification as novels of manners includes the introduction of the characters with their social status and titles which brings along a set of manners attached to it. Usually, this type of novel focuses on the exploration of personal relationships, class distinction and their consequential effects on the characters and their behaviour.

Manners are indeed a language of gestures because words can become gestures too when used to sustain rapport. In this case, manners become 'speech of acts' or 'performative utterances' as writer Martin Price affirms in his essay *Manners, Morals and Jane Austen*

(1975).⁸⁰ Some examples of manners during the Eighteenth century could be polite questions that expect no answer, following the social protocol by distancing feelings and formalising conduct, paying duties to the host and guests etc. In her novels, Austen's interest is not limited to good manners, but it is extended to all kinds of them, such as boorish, insolent, pompous or graceful. However, manners change quite fast and living up to these changes is not easy for people. In fact, manners risk to become ambiguous and supple. Their outcome to others is variegated because it can express comic incongruity, a failure to realise intention or it can signify someone's expression of distaste and anger.

The critic David Lodge provides a division of this social code into two sub-codes: the first code is an order of social or secular value whereas the second code is more moral and spiritual. With the former code Lodge describes what is right, harmonious and agreeable; with the former, conscience, duty, vice and evil are contemplated. These two codes overlap with one another because they mainly represent the mingling of the individual to the group and at the same time its chance to go against it.⁸¹ Being polite and respectful of all social conventions is important for an individual of the upper classes, but personal morality is too. Sometimes these two can clash together because an individual's desire to respect himself can be stronger than social conventions. Consequently, this can be perceived by the Eighteenth-century society as rebellious behaviour or as the rejection of social rules. Austen's characters experience this inner conflict about what they truly desire and what society expects from them. An example of this personal conflict can be seen in marriages, where the individual's desires are not taken into account and what prevails is the expectation of the society on younger members of the family.

As mentioned earlier, marriage is a business matter in the Eighteenth century. There are also books written about its importance and how a woman should behave before, during and after she is promised to a man. Most of the rules about conduct and marriage have a religious background, but Jane Austen strengthens the economic side of this practice. It is a truth universally acknowledged that marriages at that time are not based on love and that the match should bring to both families involved some benefits such as enriching the families and strengthen their social connections. As a business, marriage needs to follow some rituals and social conventions before ending with the official union between the two lovers. Firstly, people belonging to the upper classes never married below their social class, which means that rich

⁸⁰ Martin Price, 'Manners, Morals, and Jane Austen', in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), pp. 261-280 (pp. 266-267).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p. 268.

people always marry rich people, in order to strengthen their social connections and find suitable partners. Marriages with people belonging to the lower classes are seen as unacceptable because poor people are not bringing any benefits to the union. The right age at which girls were considered 'out' in society and ready to be courted by men was between the age of fifteen and nineteen. During this period, they could be courted by men, usually older than them and at the same time be analysed by the family of the girl. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney affirms an important truth on marriages: "man has the advantage of choice, women only the power of refusal"⁸². In fact, young women were introduced to possible suitors at public events because almost every step from the beginning of courting to the proposal was semi-public. Courting especially was public because the two parties were never left alone. Then, after some time, the man would propose to the woman and if she accepted, the suitor would then ask for permission from the father. Once the father agreed, the contract of marriage was considered concluded. After the marriage, there was little chance to get a divorce, and even though there was a chance, that inevitably meant scandal.

However, what emerges from Jane Austen's novels, is that true love in the end always triumphs, even though it is not always easy. In *Pride and Prejudice* there is a close focus on the courting between Jane Bennet and Mr Bingley. Throughout the story the reader discovers that their union is opposed by some characters because of different reasons such as Jane's family, her upbringing and her lack of emotions. Her family represents a problem because of the coquettish behaviour of her sisters as well as her lack of a dote. Having a dote meant being rich and having the guarantee that the girl was pure. Then, the young girl's upbringing is not conventional as stated by Lady Catherine during a meal with Elizabeth at Rosings.⁸³ Mrs Bennett never employed a governess for her daughters' education and they never developed abilities in the conventional pastimes such as painting or embroidering. Also, when Elizabeth receives her marriage proposal from Mr Darcy, everything related to her inferior origins and family's embarrassing behaviour is mentioned. Despite that, Mr Darcy still wants to marry her.⁸⁴ In the end, marrying in the Eighteenth century was not an easy task and people's feelings were not considered at all.

⁸² Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ch.10.

⁸³ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ch. 29.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, ch.33.

Chapter 3

Elinor and Marianne: Two Representations of Sensibility

The main objective of the following chapters is to analyse Austen's female protagonists in her novels and discuss whether they are just different representations of the submissive woman or if they represent the first steps into a revolution of gender, where women start to assert their independence from men in society. This analysis uses as evidence some extracts belonging to three novels written by Jane Austen: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Emma* (1817).

Sense and Sensibility started to be written by Jane Austen around 1795, but it was then extensively revised before its publication in 1811. The title of the work initially was *Elinor and Marianne*, later changed into *Sense and Sensibility* by the editor. Already by the title, it is possible to assume that the two protagonists represent the opposition of these traits in their persona. Already by the descriptions of the two sisters at the beginning of the novel, it comes out that Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are two completely different people: the former represents common sense, compassion and caring for other people; the latter is dominated by a strong temperament and impulsivity. These traits are in contrast with one another, but they are essential for the development of the story and the consequent transformation of these two women.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne, are designed to represent one sense and the other sensibility, but as it turns out, these qualities which seem firstly very different, disclose instead some similarities. In the plot, the two sisters are faced with the reality of the Eighteenth century: finding a husband and undergoing the process of courting. However, the two sisters act in very different ways, one hiding her emotions and behaving exactly as a woman should do in that century, while the other gives in to her emotions, not caring about others' expectations. Their attitude will bring their experiences down two different paths, but in the process, these two ladies will undergo a profound change in their behaviour.

Elinor, with her reserved character, embodies the typical Georgian lady, who can control her emotions and disclose them in the right place and in the right way. Marianne instead, lives dominated by her emotions, uncaring of others. However, after the disastrous events of her love life, she finally understands her mistakes caused by her strongly emotional personality.

These two characters can be seen as representations of the debate on sensibility and indifference often treated by Jane Austen in her early novels. The concept of sensibility was associated with women and the display of emotions, since the genteel sex was thought to be more delicate and sensible. However, this association soon became out-fashioned and women were reproached for their excessive sensibility, which started to be perceived as ridiculous.⁸⁵ On the opposite, showing no emotion at all was considered offensive.

During the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, the term sensibility had some similarities with another word: sensible. The latter word was to be intended as “having the power of perceiving by the senses... being easily or strongly affected”.⁸⁶ This definition shows how sense and sensibility have some traits in common and they also define a very subtle line between reason and emotions. Elinor and Marianne will indeed demonstrate that despite being opposite in their characters, they are still very similar: the former learning that showing sensibility is not a weakness and the latter understanding that she needs to act in a more reasonable way.

The novel itself has been at the centre of numerous debates concerning Elinor and Marianne and their connection with sense and sensibility. This novel has been considered austere because of the formal structure it presents and also because it talks about the control and the regulation against the threat of romantic individualism.⁸⁷ A major focus has been made by critics on how and when these two sisters show their emotions. The narrator tells the reader that both sisters have strong emotions, but they have very different ways of demonstrating and concealing them to others.

3.1. Elinor Dashwood

In Chapter 1, Elinor and her sister Marianne are described by the narrator, who, already at the beginning, marks their difference in character:

Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs Dashwood which must generally

⁸⁵ Ashly Bennett, ‘Shame and Sensibility: Jane Austen’s Humiliated Heroines’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 54 (2015), 377-400 (p. 379).

⁸⁶ Erica Canicatti, *Perception of Sensibility in Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility* (Masters’ Thesis, Stony Brook University, 2020), p. 2.

⁸⁷ Susan Morgan, ‘Polite Lies: The Veiled Heroine of Sense and Sensibility’, *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 2 (1976), 188-205 (p. 188).

have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart; —her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught.⁸⁸

In this extract, Elinor is described as the most reasonable member of her family. At only nineteen she is wise and poised and her character is very influential on her mother, who is instead more similar to Marianne. Her control over her strong feelings allows her to be perceived as a quiet person, who knows how to avoid appearing impulsive and disagreeable to others. This description also provides another piece of information about this young lady's qualities: she is very attentive and observant. These qualities give her the ability to ponder people's character, especially how they present themselves, how they act and if they are hiding something from other people. When Elinor meets Edward Ferrars, at first she defines him as not very handsome or striking in his appearance, but after some meetings with him, her opinion changes and she thinks him almost beautiful.

What matters the most to Elinor is not the physical appearance of a person, but its substance and education, elements that are not taken into account by her sister Marianne. Because of her quiet character, Elinor has the chance to listen to people's gossip when they visit and she can classify these people based on what they discuss. For example, when she is invited with Marianne to spend the winter in London as Mrs Jennings's guests, she has plenty of occasions to listen to conversations and to draw her conclusions on some of the other characters. Also, because she is often silent and agreeable, many characters such as Colonel Brandon, a man in his mid-thirties and Lucy Steele, a beautiful but sly young lady, feel entrusted by her to reveal their secrets and feelings.

During her stay in London, Elinor witnesses many scandalous and heart-breaking events, which touch her family and close relations. The city becomes the place where scandals, secrets and deception dictate the everyday life of many characters. These events also increase the strength of Elinor and Marianne's feelings: the former becomes the recipient of a secret concerning Lucy Steele and Edward whereas the latter has her heart broken by the man she loves. When the news of the imminent marriage of John Willoughby to a young lady comes to their residence, Marianne is shocked and becomes depressed. Opposite to her, Elinor hides her feelings to the rest of the people in the house and becomes the bearer of bad news to her sister,

⁸⁸ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, in *The Complete Novels* (Penguin-Random House, New York, 2020), p. 5; hereafter quoted as SAS.

firstly preparing her to receive them and later by telling her what she has listened to in the most sensitive way possible. Despite her delicacy, Marianne's mood does not improve and Elinor needs to provide the other ladies with excuses for her younger sister.

What is striking in this character, is her strength in controlling her emotions in such difficult situations. Towards the end of her stay in London, Elinor is cunningly trapped by Willoughby who wants to expose to her his reasons for the reproachable behaviour he had with Marianne. At first, she is horrified by his presence in her house, but upon hearing the purpose of the young man, her rationality prevails and she allows him to speak:

Elinor startling back with a look of horror at the sight of him, obeyed the first impulse of her heart in turning instantly to quit the room and her hand was already on the lock, when its action was suspended by his [Willoughby] hastily advancing [...]. She heisted; she knew not what to do. [...] but she had promised to hear him and her curiosity no less than her honour was engaged. After a moment's recollection, therefore, concluding that prudence required dispatch, and that her acquiescence would best promote it, she walked silently towards the table and sat down. (*SAS, P. 172*)

This passage marks the strength Elinor possesses in containing strong emotions such as rage and disgust she feels for that man. What makes her collect herself, is the partial interest she has in listening to what made him act the way he did with Marianne and then disappear for months without a word. During the storytelling, she experiences a wide range of emotions since the narrator affirms that "Elinor's heart, which had undergone many changes in the course of this extraordinary conversation was now softened again".⁸⁹ After this encounter, she has the responsibility of whether or not to tell Marianne about this encounter. In the end, she will resolutely wait longer before disclosing the truth to her sister.

Another character who actively threatens Elinor's countenance is Lucy Steele. This young woman is described as ambivalent because her attitude changes depending on the characters who are speaking to her. Mrs Jennings for example, describes her as a well-behaved lady, beautiful and deserving, whereas Elinor despises her because of her artificial manners and her bluntness which is often offensive. The two get acquainted in London, where they meet frequently since Lucy is Mrs Jennings' cousin.

With Lucy, Elinor has a hard time controlling her emotions. Her bluntness is offensive towards the guests of the house, but it seems that for her, what she is doing is socially

⁸⁹ *SAS*, p. 177.

acceptable. In addition to this, when Lucy decides to entrust Elinor with one of her secrets, she seems to do it on purpose. When talking with Elinor, Lucy often asks questions about her relations with Edward Ferrars, seemingly trying to understand how much she has had the pleasure to discover about the man. Then, unexpectedly, Lucy discloses a secret she has been keeping for some years: her secret engagement to Edward Ferrars. Since Elinor believed she and Edward had something, this news comes as a dagger for her. Moreover, the insistent chatting of Lucy about this topic when they are together makes Elinor suffer and consequently, controlling her emotions in order not to give away her feelings becomes complicated. The only thing she can do is to answer Lucy's questions and remarks with civility, making the atmosphere less heavy. Her polite lies are the only weapon she can use to conceal her feelings on the matter. The attachment she felt for Edward seemed real, but with Lucy's secret, she feels it is all lost. In addition to this, she promised not to tell anyone about the secret engagement, so despite her uncomfortable situation and the promise she made, she is prevented to talk about it with other people. Although she is involved in these events, she puts on a brave face for her sister and acts as calmly and happily as possible, fulfilling her role as Marianne's guardian.

At the end of the novel, things go back to normal and intrigues are broken. In the following passage, Elinor is visited by Edward and she listens to what happened to his engagement and supposed marriage. Eventually, Elinor can live her happy ending as Edward's wife.

“Perhaps you do not know—you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to—to the youngest—to Miss Lucy Steele.” His words were echoed with unspeakable astonishment by all but Elinor, who sat with her head leaning over her work, in a state of such agitation as made her hardly know where she was.

“Yes,” said he, “they were married last week, and are now at Dawlish.” Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease. (SAS, p.196)

Here Elinor cannot resist the power of her feelings and hurries out of the room. Finally, after many delays and obstacles, her lover is free from an unwanted engagement and can be with her. Her reasonable side is muted by passions, which, for once, are openly shown. In the novel her character changes, passing from reasonable to emotional. The balance that characterised her at the beginning of the story is broken, due to the events that disrupted her life in just a few months.

Emotionally, Elinor grows up but still keeps her role as her sister's guide. Shielding emotions is something that people do when they do not want to be questioned about their life, but in this case, it is connected with social conventions. As stated earlier, a woman could not be transparent or too direct in her gestures or emotions, because that would mean a lack of modesty.

3.2. *Marianne Dashwood*

Despite being just sixteen, Marianne has a strong character dominated by emotions. The narrator of the novel defines Marianne and her mother as people who “gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future”.⁹⁰ The power of these emotions is perceived throughout the novel, where Marianne is blinded by them and consequently is not able to see what she is going through. Her emotional character is in strong opposition to Elinor's who is described by her younger sister as ‘cold’. However, this is not true because Elinor is disciplined in her emotions and follows the social conventions required by women of her time. Being able to collect themselves as well as not to show too openly their emotions was considered to be decorum. In this case, Marianne decides to defy these social rules and to be dominated by her emotions even while in public.

In the first chapters, Marianne and her mother are defined as two women who can be possessed by their emotions very deeply. For them what is important is to feel, even in excess. Elinor instead condemns their behaviour because, especially for Marianne, the openness of feelings can cause her to become the victim of someone's bad intentions. This is exactly what happens next: Marianne's naiveté combined with her sensible disposition make her a victim of a one-sided love story with Willoughby. Even before meeting him, Marianne has clear ideas about what kind of man she wants to marry and the qualities she would like to find in a man are the complete opposite of what her sister looks for. While Elinor wants a man who is just and respectable, Marianne desires a beautiful and rich man as this passage states:

“Marianne; do you disapprove your sister's choice?”

“Perhaps,” said Marianne, “I may consider it with some surprise. Edward is very amiable, and I love him tenderly. But yet—he is not the kind of young man—there is something wanting—his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister. His eyes want all that spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence. And besides all this, I am afraid, Mama, he has no real taste. Music seems scarcely to attract him, and though he admires

⁹⁰ SAS, p. 5.

Elinor's drawings very much, it is not the admiration of a person who can understand their worth. It is evident, in spite of his frequent attention to her while she draws, that in fact he knows nothing of the matter. He admires as a lover, not as connoisseur. To satisfy me, those characters must be united. I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feelings; the same books, the same music must charm us both.” (SAS, pp. 10-11)

This extract perfectly represents Marianne’s character. What she desires, is a man who is her exact copy in tastes and pastimes. Also, what counts for her is how a man presents himself and Edward, in her opinion, lacks beauty and grace, elements she desired to find in a suitable match. Her impulsiveness is highlighted by the fact that Elinor reassures her mother and sister that Edward can be loved with time because of his protective shell which shields his real emotions, but Marianne is not convinced by this because for her that man is exactly as he appears: reserved and not handsome at all. Also, upon the casual meeting with Willoughby, when Marianne sprains her ankle, the effect this man has on Marianne and her family is rather striking compared to the impression made by Edward:

[...] Had he been even old, ugly, and vulgar, the gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but the influence of youth, beauty, and elegance, gave an interest to the action which came home to her feelings.

[...] His name, he replied, was Willoughby, and his present home was at Allenham, from whence he hoped she would allow him the honour of calling tomorrow to enquire after Miss Dashwood. (SAS, p. 24)

Willoughby’s physical appearance is a fundamental trait for Marianne and her mother, who are more superficial than Elinor. His beauty is referred to as uncommon, which implies that he is very handsome and his manners are direct and clear, qualities that target the ladies’ attentions straight away, putting in the background the unexpected intrusion in their house without an invitation. Willoughby will often be described with adjectives such as ‘charming’ and ‘beautiful’ and because of his behaviour, which is charming for most people, Marianne and her mother will not see that he is just planning to occupy his time in the country with a girl who demonstrates affection and interest in him. Only Elinor doubts his behaviour and urges her sister to be more reasonable and considerate instead of just openly showing her strong feelings for him.

Marianne's goal is to get to know if this man is respectable, rich and has good property, all things which were considered important at the time for a suitable match. However, it is considered impolite to ask these questions straight away. Elinor, by inquiring about the man's properties or native place, is just being polite and trying to understand what kind of man he is. The difference between the two sisters here is the directness they display: Marianne is too direct whereas Elinor is rather indirect in expressing what she wants to know. Also, when Willoughby calls on Barton Cottage after Marianne's accident to inquire how she is doing, the narrator gives Marianne's point of view on her feelings toward the young man:

From Willoughby their expression was at first held back, by the embarrassment which the remembrance of his assistance created. But when this passed away, when her spirits became collected, when she saw that to the perfect good-breeding of the gentleman, he united frankness and vivacity, and above all, when she heard him declare, that of music and dancing he was passionately fond, she gave him such a look of approbation as secured the largest share of his discourse to herself for the rest of his stay.

It was only necessary to mention any favourite amusement to engage her to talk. She could not be silent when such points were introduced, and she had neither shyness nor reserve in their discussion. (SAS, p.27)

Marianne's disposition of having powerful feelings brings her to destruction. As Hannah More states in her work *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799)⁹¹: "For young women of affections warm, but not carefully disciplined, are in danger of incurring an unnatural irritability, and while their happiness falls a victim to the excess of uncontrolled feelings, they are liable at the same time to indulge a vanity of all others the most preposterous, that of being vain of their very defect".⁹² With this quotation, Hannah More expresses what happens to young women who are not able to collect their emotions in an appropriate way, which is to fall prey to their imagination and their desires.

Marianne, blinded by her love for Willoughby, does not see that she is just a toy in his hands and when she discovers that he is engaged to Miss Grey and will be soon married to her, the strength and depth of her feelings for him will make her the shadow of the lively girl she once was. She becomes apathetic and avoids any contact with everyone else in the house. She desires to receive clear reasons for her former lover's behaviour and when she meets him casually at a ball in London, she affronts him, uncaring of her indecorous attitude. Elinor

⁹¹ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education; With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent Among Women of Rank and Fortune*, T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, (London, 1799).

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 176.

reprimands her because she is showing her feelings too much in public, but nothing is more shameful than being the object of gossip in a big town like London as the girl who has been seduced and then abandoned by a man. Only months later, after she has recovered from her illness, Marianne receives her explanations. However, by that time, she has already changed and matured:

“My illness has made me think— It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection. [...] I considered the past: I saw in my own behaviour, since the beginning of our acquaintance with him last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave. [...] I did not know my danger till the danger was removed [...]. Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. Every body seemed injured by me.” (SAS, p. 188)

Marianne had time to think about what happened to her and now, after these heart-breaking events, she can see how her emotions prevailed on reason and landed her in misery. Her conviction of Willoughby's feelings for her made her blind and she could not understand his real motives and consequent disappearance. Her sensibility prevailed on reason and caused her to risk her possibilities of marriage. Being seduced and then abandoned is not well seen in the early Nineteenth century-society because modesty and virtue can be compromised and consequently ruin a lady's life forever. Also, her insistence on receiving an explanation on what happened between her and Willoughby has caused her to appear desperate in front of other people, especially in public, putting at risk her family's reputation.

3.3. Characters' Analysis

Elinor and Marianne belong to the early writing period of Austen's career. Despite not displaying a roundness similar to the heroines of the following novels, they already show a peculiar depth in their emotions and their mind's organization. What is remarkable in them, is that their wholeness is described through their filtered eyes and emotions. They are fictional characters placed in a real background and a real historic period, subjected to social conventions which mark their belonging to a specific social class, namely the middle class. This could lead the reader to think that they are realistic characters, but here realism is used in a very unclear way, especially in the portrayal of the two sisters. Despite being the opposite of one another, the world seen through their eyes is not always the real one: Marianne sees and feels things

intensely, which may bring the reader to consider her vision as the true one since Elinor is too rational and the deep analysis of what happens around her may alter how things really are. However, each sister filters the reality they are living in and the truer vision of the world is up to the reader's interpretation

Their personality shifts during the novel and changes the two sisters in different ways: Elinor has learned to find a compromise between sense and sensibility, concluding that showing emotions is decorous if done in the right way as well as accepting that on some occasions there is no possibility of concealing them because of their intensity. The subtle line between being sensible and prudish without being cold and indifferent is very tricky to define. Here, showing emotions is not a sign of frailty as Elinor thinks, but just the personal expression of someone's emotional state. Marianne, instead, has learned how to control her sensibility, achieving, in the end, some sense. However, the balance between her sense and sensibility is not fair since she still favours sensibility. Opposite to her sister, Marianne needs to learn how to show her emotions without embarrassing her family or making outbursts in public, damaging her reputation. Despite being so different, the two sisters have both achieved the same goal in the end: their transformation into multifaceted characters where sense and sensibility can coexist in balanced harmony.

In the literary field, the Dashwood sisters have been interpreted in many ways: one of the first interpretations of them is that they can be considered as different outcomes of two contrasting literary movements of the Eighteenth century: Classicism and Romanticism.⁹³ Elinor, with her strong orientation towards duty, professes moral exertion and reason, thus representing the ideals of the former movement. By being the most reasonable and neutral character in the plot, uses reason and evidence to reinforce her decisions. In a broader sense, Elinor represents Christian tradition where men's nature is fallible and thus feelings are too unstable for her to be reliable. In the end, Elinor expresses a form of happiness shouting it out, but even though she displays some emotion, she never lets it leak out in public. She also shows all the appreciated traits of the Enlightenment: observation, reason and self-awareness. Observation is thus an important trait because thanks to that, Elinor can read people and understand their true selves when they communicate with other characters. But her acuteness in observation is enhanced in her drawings, which are faithful to reality and very accurate. At that time, drawing was considered an ability that young ladies had to possess, as a sign of their

⁹³ On this see Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1983), p. 187.

good education. Here, drawing is connected with Elinor's ability to observe and be an impartial observer throughout the entire story. Not by chance, Elinor is the most reliable and wise member of her family. Moreover, she possesses another important quality: she is sympathetic. In opposition to her sister, Elinor is rather tolerant of others, especially in the novel, since many characters such as Lucy and Mrs Jennings always test her patience and countenance, but she never loses her coolness.

Marianne instead, gives full expression to the cult of sensibility, which bloomed in the late Eighteenth century. This cult embraced imagination, feelings and excess, all elements belonging to Marianne's characterisation. Compared to her sister, Marianne is her polar opposite. She possesses no tolerance for others since she wants them all to conform to her feelings. If someone does not share the intensity of her emotions or does not appear as she wants them to be, they automatically become disagreeable, without taste nor elegance. Moreover, she is often under the power of imagination, which distorts most of her experiences and consequentially, she cannot really grasp people's essence without being fooled and almost brought to ruin.⁹⁴

In this novel, Austen employs two sisters living in a secure and settled world, in this case the patriarchal home, and brings them into a more stratified but fluid one, namely society. Elinor and Marianne can experience first-hand what social mobility is. The delicate stratification which composes their society is challenged by the change of one's social status. However, changing status does not always mean becoming part of a higher social class. A false step can ruin someone's reputation forever and Marianne knows it very well since she risks both her family and her own reputation. In fact, while in society, the Dashwood sisters have the possibility to experience first-hand how delicate and how valued one's status is. Every change of status brings consequences for the individual, either good or bad. Marianne is the one being more affected by these changes: she starts as an unmarried and emotional young woman, becoming later engaged, or this is what she thinks since there was never a formal engagement between Willoughby and herself, and ends almost falling in disgrace. This unclear situation with Willoughby brings her social status in jeopardy because, as it is later discovered, he has stipulated a new engagement with a rich heiress. This is the worse situation a young lady like Marianne would like to find herself in. Her reputation is at stake because she is believed to be a good-for-nothing type of woman when instead she has been played by Willoughby. Her dream

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 187-188.

of being married to a respectable man goes up in smoke. The final and long-lasting change she undergoes is to become engaged to Colonel Brandon, a man who has proven himself worthy and respectable. With him, she can have a quiet and happy life in his parish, where her social position makes her the patroness of the village. This public role gives the reader a sense of power because Marianne is not just a wife who spends her days in the house. She has many duties to attend to, such as the benefits of her village, where she can demonstrate that she is a powerful woman who is able to help people. She has gained an active and relevant role in society as she has always dreamt of.

Another interpretation shared by critics is that between Elinor and Marianne, the former is the character readers should learn from.⁹⁵ The eldest sister represents the character the reader should aspire to be: balanced and reasonable, whereas Marianne, with her strong feelings and inconsiderate actions, represents the wrong direction and the consequences it brings with. Elinor is the one who tries to keep in check her sister's emotional outbursts and to preserve their position in society. What is remarkable about the eldest sister, is that her point of view is the most recurrent in the narration, even though the voice speaking is not hers, but it belongs to an unnamed external narrator. This voice gradually adopts Elinor's point of view on things, even though it is not always her perspective that is adopted in the story. In the beginning, the narrative focus is on Marianne and her love interest, but then, after the disappearance of Willoughby, the reader sees the events from Elinor's eyes and the perception of Marianne is marginal throughout her illness. This shift of focus allows Elinor to shine as a character and to make a sharp contrast with the excessive behaviour of her sister.

Austen has structured the novel and consequently the two sisters, in a way where they could be both appreciated by the reading public, without giving full access to their minds. This shifting of consciousness from one sister to the other keeps the readers' idea of the two protagonists rather balanced. Otherwise Elinor would have been pinpointed as frigid and her feelings too fake to be believed, whereas Marianne would have received an excessive amount of sympathy and the didactic aim of the novel forgotten.⁹⁶

The dichotomy present in the two sisters' characterisation can lead the reader to think that the main theme revolves around sense and sensibility, but in reality, what comes out in the end, is that the two sisters are instead two different representations of sensibility. In fact, what Austen does, is to demonstrate that these two sisters represent sensibility, especially Elinor, but

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 196.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

they can still have moral conduct expected by their society. Despite the numerous adventures, Elinor and Marianne are still dependent on their husbands and the closure of the novel, with marriage, still represents tradition. Their economic status is unstable since the beginning because of their house being inherited by Mr Dashwood's son and in the end, the two sisters will be dependent on their husbands' fortunes. As women of their time, they could not own anything and they passed from their father's dependency to their husband's. Because of this, the freedom they seem to have while being preoccupied with their love stories is not maintained in the end. Also, with Marianne, there is the possible outcome that her marriage is not entirely based on love, but mutual respect. With this, her marriage can still be considered as an arranged marriage and thus not based on freedom. This allows modern readers to consider *Sense and Sensibility* still a traditional and conservative book. Despite this, Austen will use this traditional structure with marriage at the end for all her heroines but she will gradually evolve them, making them more independent and emancipated from male dominance.

The main theme of the novel, sensibility opposed to sense, is connected to the Eighteenth century belief that body and mind together produce passions. But if these passions are not controlled, they can have dangerous consequences to the individual such as mental breakdowns or physical pain. However, this vision changed in the Nineteenth century when male writers started to associate sensibility with over-taxed nerves or female hysteria.⁹⁷ Austen however, uses Elinor and Marianne as balanced characters, where sense and sensibility are not positive or negative, but the moderated amount each of them has allows them to be balanced and neutral characters. The fact of having two characters where sensibility is used to describe their difference is dependent on the common belief that women have a frailer disposition and thus being more susceptible to emotions. But what makes it even more complicated is the real nature of the cult of sensibility. This cult grew together with the rise of the middle classes and, at the end of the 1770s, it was associated with the revolutionary beliefs of the French Revolution and thus considered dangerous. Sensibility was thus considered a form of radicalism.⁹⁸ This dangerous form of radicalism is present in the two sisters, especially in Marianne. Her sensibility is so deep that the heartbreak she experiences after Willoughby's treason, is so strong and unexpected, that her illness almost makes her crazy. Not by chance, *Sense and Sensibility* is full of references to medicine and most of the diseases mentioned by Austen in her novels

⁹⁷ María Teresa González Mínguez, 'Jane Austen's Concerns with Health and Moral Thoughts, The Dashwood Sisters and The Successful Regulation of Sense and Sensibility', *The Grove, Working Papers on English Studies*, 26 (2019), p. 28.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 30.

belong to the era she lived in. Some of those illnesses are presented subtly by the author also in her other novels: Marianne suffers from hysteria, Emma is depressed and Mrs Bennet has problems with her nerves, just to name a few.⁹⁹

Elinor, on the other side, is more controlled, even though she still feels grief. She is able to exert the type of mental exercise that many critics and philosophers of that time believed beneficial to avoid all those hysteric feminine outbursts. She is so engulfed in her sister's heartbreak that she does not pay much attention to her feelings, thus reducing the mental impact those could have on her. Because of this and her inner strength, Elinor does not end up like her sister, paralyzed in her mind because of this shocking desertion. What Elinor's experiences is hard on her in equal measure, but if analysed, what she experiences is the decision of letting the man she loves almost get married to another woman. What she could have done, if this happened, would have been to love a married man and risk adultery. Even though she does not risk as much as Marianne does by getting sick, both sisters display psychological traits that are retraceable back to their social and economic conditions of life: the properties they lost after their father's death and their consequent moving into a less sumptuous cottage cause a sort of trauma in them. On one hand, Marianne's strong feelings and deep emotional involvement in everything she experiences can be a consequence of the impoverishment of her family. On the other hand, Elinor's rigour and restrained behaviour are due to her inner desire to improve her social status. Despite not being so evident, those traits are what characterises these two young ladies.

In remarking Elinor's centrality in the novel, Austen makes clear that having sensible characters is part of someone's being, but reason should not be left aside. There must be a balance of both elements, otherwise the unfair balance could have disastrous consequences on the individual such as suicide. Because of acute sensibility, the Eighteenth century was a period loaded with suicide for these sensible and frail people, who would often try and take their life because of unrequited love.¹⁰⁰ The tax of suicides was also partially caused by the sentimental novels written at the time, where the sensibility of characters or their hyper-sensitive personalities would end up dead just because they deemed themselves not meant for this cruel and materialistic world.

Overall, this novel is the first one to be published and still shows some uncertainty in structure and form. As stated earlier, the original form was epistolary but later Austen opted for

⁹⁹ On this see González Mínguez, *Jane Austen's Concerns with Health and Moral Thoughts*, p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 35.

the narrative form. In addition to this, she was not even sure which between sense and sensibility should prevail. This uncertainty about sense and sensibility is also caused by the continuous contrast between the two sisters, which causes the impossibility to focus on just one character and thus the author cannot create a heroine with a good heart and a sound heart.¹⁰¹ As early fictional characters, Elinor and Marianne already display some of the characteristics that would later be deeply explored in other heroines, such as focussing on the heroine's mind and her reactions to specific critical situations where morality is challenged. With them, Austen makes the first steps towards a new direction, where women, either real or fictional, move towards freedom, albeit gradually and with some difficulty.

¹⁰¹ Kirkham, *Jane Austen*, p. 87.

Chapter 4

Elizabeth Bennet: First Steps as a Feminist Character

This novel's title at the beginning was *First Impressions*, but when it was published, the editor decided to change it to *Pride and Prejudice*. Since it was published after *Sense and Sensibility*, the decision to use another antithesis in the title can be related to the first novel's success. The official publication of the novel occurred in 1813, in three hardcover volumes and because of its popularity, a second edition soon followed in the same year. In terms of content, some critics affirm that *Pride and Prejudice*, in its early form, could have been inspired by the brief romance Jane Austen had with Tom Lefroy, a young barrister. In this novel, Austen uses as intrigue the laboured love story of two people belonging to different social classes to underline the intricate social conventions present in her society. In particular, the two social classes referred to in the novel are the aristocracy and the middling sort. In fact, the English society was heavily stratified in the late Eighteenth century and the line between high social classes and middle ones was very thin. However, in *Pride and Prejudice*, these differences are marked by the conversations between characters belonging to the two aforementioned classes.

The protagonist is Elizabeth Bennet, the second of Mr and Mrs Bennet's five daughters. Her family belongs to the middling sort and they have the privilege of having some comforts, such as a couple of servants in their household. Compared to her sisters, Lizzy portrays a strong female character who speaks out her values and her ideas which are often in contrast with the costumes of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, where women were seen as frail, hypersensitive creatures whose only worth was in their marriage prospects. Instead, Elizabeth is portrayed in a very unconventional way, being a feminist and expressing her ideas freely and with knowledge to support them.¹⁰² Despite these amiable qualities, Elizabeth's sharp tongue can lead her to hasty conclusions and misunderstandings. This is indeed one of the central points in the plot, when Elizabeth's hasty conclusions lead her astray about Mr Darcy's real character and intentions.

Her desire for freedom in making choices is against the social conventions of the time she is living in: the patriarchal society imposes male control on female members, with consequent reduction of freedom on their part. Also, the only worth women had during that

¹⁰² Eliana Berger, 'Multi-Dimensional Feminism: Elizabeth Bennet and the Representation of Women in the Media', 2017, < <https://digitalcommons.ithaca.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1023&context=whalen> > [accessed 29.09.2021]

time was their marriageability and the social connections they could bring to their families. Elizabeth's feminist attitude is present from the start of the novel, despite being not too obvious. What marks her unusual and strong-headed personality is the reaction to other's characters. Already in Chapter 3, during the first ball at Meryton, Elizabeth has a rather unpleasant encounter with the haughty and mysterious Mr Darcy, who attends the event with a group of friends, the Bingleys. During the ball, Mr Bingley urges Darcy to seek an introduction to Elizabeth, who is one of the few girls still not dancing. However, he refuses because, in his opinion, none of the girls present, Elizabeth included, is deemed beautiful enough to tempt him.¹⁰³ This response stabs Elizabeth's pride because she feels treated as an object but also because she has been rejected by a man of his status. The idea of Mr Darcy thinking her unpleasant just because she is still not dancing with anyone makes angry feelings arise. These feelings will play a part in the misinterpreted idea she creates of him throughout the novel. To clarify this offended pride, the omniscient narrator provides an objective description of the aristocratic man, stating that he is much more handsome than Mr Bingley and that he is worth ten thousand pounds a year. This information is relevant to the story because Mr Darcy is still a bachelor and following the ideals of the time, he would represent the perfect match every mother would like their daughters to achieve.

Despite his perfect status, Mr Darcy is not a perfect man. Together with Elizabeth, he represents one of the traits mentioned by the title of the novel: *Pride and Prejudice*. He embodies pride and Elizabeth embodies prejudice. However, Elizabeth prejudice is more than that. Her characterization as a faceted character makes this trait connected with another one: vanity.¹⁰⁴ Her opinion of Darcy is prejudiced because of the unpleasant remark he made without knowing her, but what she unconsciously desires is being noticed by Darcy in the right way, namely being appreciated for her intellect and her character. Unfortunately, there are some obstacles impeding that because Elizabeth is aware that her family is not the most reserved or well-behaved family in the world and her younger sisters, along with her mother, embarrass her at public events. Despite this, Elizabeth feels vanity rather than prejudice because she wants to excite a good impression on others, whereas Mr Darcy is uncaring of others' opinions. Also, what Elizabeth doesn't know until the end is that she has indeed enough charm to fascinate Mr

¹⁰³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, pp. 214-217; hereafter quoted as *PAP*.

¹⁰⁴ Susan C. Greenfield, 'The Absent-Minded Heroine or Elizabeth Has a Thought', *Eighteenth Century*, 39 (2006), pp. 337-350 (pp. 339-341).

Darcy and keep him interested in time. Her witty remarks and sharp tongue deeply fascinate him because they make her very uncommon and unique to his eyes.

Similarly to Elinor and Marianne, Darcy and Elizabeth undergo a transformation that makes them go from one trait towards the other, balancing their emotions in the process. Misunderstandings, accidents, elopements and time will reveal to them what kind of people they both are and how their prejudiced vision has obfuscated their true selves to the other. The absence of Mr Darcy for most of the novel is filled by his actions to help Elizabeth's family and it will give her time to think about Mr Darcy's true self. The physical absence of the man plays a relevant role for Elizabeth who has only his actions to analyse and appreciate. Her mind will ponder how the man presented himself on the few occasions they met and how instead he is acting behind the scenes to avoid her family's social disgrace and be forgiven for his mistake: preventing Jane and Mr Bingley's engagement.¹⁰⁵

Elizabeth's strong character and values are shown many times in the novel, but on three different occasions they stand out: during the proposals made by Mr Collins and Mr Darcy's, and during a dinner hosted by Lady Catherine at Rosings. The first proposal is made by Mr Collins, a distant cousin of the Bennet's and heir of Longbourne, the Bennet's estate. His main purpose is to find a wife among the Bennet's girls to keep the estate in their family. Elizabeth however, does not share this idea. In fact, she doesn't want to marry Mr Collins because she wants a marriage based on love and respect. Consequently, by accepting his proposal, she would have gone against her principles. In his proposal, Mr Collins lists three reasons about why he has chosen to marry her but they fail to appeal to the young girl because instead of complimenting the lady, he declares logical motives. Moreover, he completely lacks the pathos and emotions a man usually feels when proposing. Then, among other reasons, he proceeds to worsen his position by affirming that Elizabeth should marry him because the estate will remain in their family after his father's death. However, what brings him to be rejected by Elizabeth in the end, is that he does not take her seriously when she refuses him. She needs to refuse him more than once to make it clear that she is serious about her decision.

“You are too hasty, sir,” she cried. “You forget that I have made no answer. Let me do it without further loss of time. Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour of your proposals, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise than to decline them. [...] Your hope is a rather extraordinary one after my declaration. I do assure you that I am not one of those young ladies (if such young ladies

¹⁰⁵ Greenfield, ‘The Absent-Minded Heroine or Elizabeth Has a Thought’, pp. 339-341.

there are) who are so daring as to risk their happiness on the chance of being asked a second time. I am perfectly serious in my refusal. You could not make me happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who could make you so.” (*PAP*, pp. 269-270)

In her first refusal, Elizabeth tries to be very delicate, as the historic period requires, but when she feels she is not taken seriously, she clearly states that Mr Collins cannot make her happy and that she too cannot make him a happy man. Her statement is said with so much pathos that her distress arrives directly to the reader. His unfortunate proposal is however, a very good offer for that century: it allows her family to stay in the estate and to have a secured future as a wife. A refusal is then not the first option for a woman, but Elizabeth refuses Mr Collins because she wants to put herself as an individual and her own happiness before anything else. Also, when she hears that her friend Charlotte has accepted Mr Collins’ proposal, she is astonished because in her eyes her friend is just choosing a comfortable life instead of her true feelings.

The second marriage proposal comes from Mr Darcy, but it is not the typical proposal a modern reader expects. As seen with Mr Collins, proposals were rather formal, but in this case, formality is intertwined with statements that are understood by Elizabeth as subtle insults to her family and origins. In the passage where the proposal takes place, Elizabeth is at Charlotte and Mr Collins’ house and listens to what Mr Darcy has to say:

“In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.” [...] He spoke well, but there were feelings besides those of the heart to be detailed, and he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride. His sense of her inferiority - of its being a degradation - of the family obstacles which judgement had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit.” (*PAP*, p.314)

His declaration of love comes out as an insult to Elizabeth. Despite feeling strong emotions for her, Darcy marks the fact that everything comes with a cost for him: the disapprobation of his family for the match and the inappropriate behaviour of her family, which renders his feelings hard to accept. Also, these two elements are enough for his family to be opposed to his choice of a wife. This concept will later be reinforced by Lady Catherine when, after the engagement of Jane to Mr Bingley, she pays a visit to the Bennets and asks Elizabeth a private audience. She informs her that she has heard some rumours stating that Mr Darcy is going to marry her

but this cannot happen. Her lower status in society is enough for her to be opposed to their union. Moreover, Darcy has tacitly agreed to marry Lady Catherine's daughter, so he is already engaged. Her snobbishness is clear in the attacks she moves to Elizabeth, but the response the latter gives her is full of her strength and ideals. In fact, Elizabeth states: "I am a gentleman's daughter. [...] I am resolved," she says, "to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to you, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me."¹⁰⁶ With this affirmation, Elizabeth is affirming that she does not want to be submitted to others' opinions and ideas because her behaviour and her decisions have as ultimate goal her happiness. Lady Catherine's status does not mean anything to her since she is so wholly unconnected with her.

The enraged response Elizabeth's reserves to Mr Darcy's proposal highlights her true essence and what she really thinks about the proposal, as well as Mr Darcy himself:

"I might as well enquire," replied she, "why, with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character? Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I was uncivil? But I have other provocations. You know I have. Had not my own feelings decided against you, had they been indifferent, or had they even been favourable, do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?" (PAP, pp. 314-315)

Faced with Mr Darcy's proposal, Elizabeth's answer is negative and to enforce her refusal she gives him three reasons why she is not accepting his proposal. The first reason she gives him is that every time they had the chance to meet, he has always talked to her with an air of superiority because of their class difference, but even when professing his interest in her, he states that he loves her against his will, his character and his reason. His arrogance in this statement is for her already a valid motive for refusal. The second reason is about the many opportunities in which he misbehaved. He plays indeed a wicked role in intruding in Mr Bingley and Jane's engagement, consequently causing both their reputation to falter: Mr Bingley has been considered by people in the neighbourhood inconsistent and fickle, whereas Jane is thought to be a foolish girl who has fallen in love with a man of that type. The third reason Elizabeth provides Mr Darcy with, is about the situation with Mr Wickham. She accuses Mr Darcy of

¹⁰⁶ PAP, p. 404.

being inconsiderate and unjust towards the man because he is preventing him to access the money Mr Wickham deserves for his merits. His behaviour is thus causing Mr Wickham to be economically unstable.¹⁰⁷ In this case, the motives of refusal are very different from those she expressed when refusing Mr Collins. Here, she has been insulted because of her lower status and family behaviour. Her pride has been hurt. In this case, Elizabeth is refusing him because she dislikes what he has done to her family. Her reasons are personal and not valid enough, which is why Mr Darcy is hurt by her cold answer and demands an explanation. However, there is a reason that cannot stand as valid: the accusation she moves to Mr Darcy about what he is doing to Mr Wickham. Elizabeth has taken as valid only Mr Wickham's version and has sought no additional proof on his story. Her accusation is partly prejudiced because she has a negative vision of Mr Darcy and consequently, she believes Mr Wickham's story.

Elizabeth then perceives the proposal as an excuse for incivility since his feelings are felt against reason, his nature and his will. Even in this case, the proposal is unfortunate because Mr Darcy and Mr Collins both make the mistake of undervaluing Elizabeth as a woman and as a thinking individual. In both proposals she makes her reasons stand with evidence and she is not scared of asking for proof when she needs it. In fact, Mr Darcy will send her a letter explaining everything she accused him of and his motives in doing so. She allows the two men to speak up and expose their reasons to marry her but they both fail because they only talk about what concerns them: Mr Collins lists the benefits of a possible marriage with him whereas Mr Darcy talks about the problems his feelings have procured him.

Another example of Elizabeth's firmness in her beliefs and ideas is present when she goes to visit Rosings and is invited to dinner by Lady Catherine de Bourgh. During the meal, the aristocratic lady asks her many questions on themes considered very important during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century: family, marriage and money. One of the first questions she asks Elizabeth is about her family. She wants to know how they were educated and if there are other young ladies of their family already 'out' in society. When Elizabeth affirms that all her sisters are already out in society, Lady Catherine indeed exclaims "All! What, all five out at once? Very odd! And you only the second. The younger ones out before the elder ones are married!".¹⁰⁸ This astonished reaction to Elizabeth's affirmation marks the

¹⁰⁷ On this see Muhammad Naem, 'On What Grounds Does Elizabeth Reject Mr. Darcy's Proposal of Marriage, and How Does Mr. Darcy Defend Himself Against Her Allegations?', <<https://neoenglish.wordpress.com/2010/11/06/on-what-grounds-does-elizabeth-reject-mr-darcys-proposal-of-marriage-and-how-does-mr-darcy-defend-himself-against-her-allegations/>> [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹⁰⁸ *PAP*, p. 301.

traditional view Lady Catherine has about customs. The social custom for young ladies implies that younger daughters can attend social events such as balls only after their elder sister is married. In the Bennet family, none of the daughters is married but all of them are already out in society. The decision was made by both Mr and Mrs Bennet because their main goal is to secure a stable future for all their daughters as soon as possible.

“[...] But really, ma'am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement, because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. The last-born has as good a right to the pleasures of youth as the first. And to be kept back on such a motive! I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind.” (PAP, p. 301)

Here, Elizabeth exposes her personal opinion on the matter in simple and direct words that strike the rich lady. Her answer may appear also a bit ironic, in contrast with the traditional view of the society. What Elizabeth is remarking in her words is equality between her sisters, so that they can all enjoy a nice *soirée* together and strengthen their sisterly bond. She also subtly condemns the institution of marriage because the primary goal of a woman was to secure herself a good match and social events were the right occasions to do so. She wants to make Lady Catherine aware that, in her eyes, these events are just events where young ladies can have fun instead of hunting for a man. Elizabeth's vision on this theme is very modern because she proclaims fun over duty, an imaginable thing for women of early Nineteenth-century England. The conversation proceeds and Lady Catherine is more and more bewildered by the young lady's answers. The aristocrat is appalled by the lack of a governess for the girls' education, implying that Mrs Bennet should have become a slave to give her daughters a good education. Again, Lady Catherine's view is focused on tradition: her baffled reaction rises from the uncommon practice of women acting as teachers to their children. This is unusual because education for rich children was provided by governesses and not by their parents. Each family member had a specific role in the household and parents were too busy administering the house and the image of the family outside of it to spend their time teaching their children.

These questions, seemingly innocent, hide more to the eye. Lady Catherine is appalled by the unconventional education Elizabeth received as well as the decision of her parents to put them all out in society without waiting for the eldest daughter to be married. What emerges from this conversation is that Lady Catherine becomes aware of having in front of her a rather unconventional young lady, who expresses her ideas very openly and firmly. Elizabeth's

education and free, uncensored ideas are in stark contrast with the traditional image of a lady of the Georgian era. Freedom of speech above all was something ladies could not think to express in public for their image was to be preserved as silent and faithful to their husband.

4.1. Character's Analysis

Elizabeth Bennet has been considered the most fascinating character of Nineteenth-century literature. Her characterization is so complex and consequently, it is not possible to collocate her into just one category. In the story, Elizabeth is described as a person full of qualities, but she also has some flaws, which play an important role in the plot.

Elizabeth is part of a large middle-class family, but in her house discipline and education are not priorities, in fact, her younger sisters are often described as embarrassing and vulgar when in public. The only exception is Jane, the elder sister, who is shy and reserved, but well-mannered. Elizabeth instead, is portrayed as intelligent, vital, witty and most of all a good observer.

In order to discover her character, it is essential to analyse her behaviour in relation to other characters. She shares some characteristics of her father's detachment to events and problematic situations, but at the same time, she is also expansive.¹⁰⁹ The detachment is evident in her because she thinks she lives in a world of fools, and this allows her to despise them and look at them downwards, feeling superior and more intelligent. But as an expansive person, she has high expectations for herself and she would never settle for something less. As a fictional character, Elizabeth is an evolved form of Jane Austen's previous heroines. In fact, she belongs to the later heroines because she represents the central intelligence through which events and characters are mediated to the reader. Compared to Elinor and Marianne, she represents the next step towards evolution. Despite this choice, there is an authorial narrating voice of an unnamed narrator that tells us the story, but the point of view is always Elizabeth's.

What makes Elizabeth one of the most appreciated heroines of the early Nineteenth century is probably her characterisation. As a matter of fact, she is designed to be as complex as the other male characters in the novel. She is not portrayed as the typical Regency young lady who excels at traditionally feminine activities such as drawing, embroidering or singing. Instead, she possesses masculine assets such as intelligence, integrity and self-possession. Moreover, her vocabulary is far more articulate than any of her sisters. The speaking superiority

¹⁰⁹ Bernard Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels: A Psychological Approach* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1979), pp. 120-121.

and fluidity she possesses are shown on more than one occasion, where Elizabeth speaks almost in the same way as a man, showing all her straightforwardness and confidence in expressing facts and supporting them with evidence. Also, because of her strong personality, she will stand for what she believes in: a marriage between equals and based on love.

Her strong personality is somehow challenged by events and this leads critics to affirm that Elizabeth could be the perfect main character of a *Bildungsroman*. Indeed, she does change and evolve into a more mature and down-to-earth person, setting aside her prejudices and not stopping at first impressions. Her evolution becomes even more complex because she is described as the example of a highly individualized person who is also a deeply social being.¹¹⁰ She values her identity and her independence, but she also likes to be in the company of other people. In addition to this, she is rather quiet and knows her mind well, and when the circumstances require it, she can be rather direct, letting aside dignity and expressing exactly what she thinks. Her straightforwardness is indeed a feature both Mr Darcy and Lady Catherine learn at their expenses.

As evidence of her versatile character, Elizabeth keeps, for most of the novel, a defensive attitude towards Mr Darcy, reserving her straightforwardness only on special occasions. Darcy's hostile behaviour at Meryton rises her barriers and because of this, she constantly misinterprets him. His attraction is confused by the young lady as a form of aggression and his interest in observing her as a critique of her person. The only idea of being the object of his interest cause her to fortify her defences because if she is wrong, she cannot bear to be hurt by Darcy again.¹¹¹ Her defences prevent her from reading Darcy's signals of interest. Only when she receives the long explanatory letter about Wickham she finally sees things clearly. The letter opens her eyes to her prejudices and her misinterpretations of Darcy's actions and intentions. At first, she cannot accept what he has written, but upon thinking, she must recognise that she was mistaken and has hurt him too. Accepting to have made mistakes is not an easy task for her, since she praised herself to be an intelligent person. The truth written in those pages shatters her beliefs because Mr Darcy clearly states that her familial situation can be a problem, not only for her but for Jane too. Her mother and sisters are inappropriate in public, being rude and undisciplined. The reality crashes upon her and she doubts herself deeply. A consequence of this letter is depression: Elizabeth feels powerless because as an expansive person, she has always wanted to be her own boss and the creator of her fate. But

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 107.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 122-123.

with this letter, she sees that it is not like that. That people can judge her based on her family and she cannot change it. This makes her feel trapped in a situation that is uncomfortable and she has often tried to avoid it by detaching herself as much as possible from her family's problems and flaws.¹¹²

Despite all the obstacles and difficult situations Darcy and Elizabeth have found themselves in, there is a change that interests both of them. Elizabeth needs to face reality and the fact that her family can constitute an obstacle for a possible engagement because of their vulgarity; Darcy, after having his pride hurt by the woman he loves, rectifies his actions by demonstrating to Elizabeth his worth and how he is able to accept her family because of the deep feelings he has for her. Their transformation is not immediate because the story stretches on many months, but it is rather gradual and it leaves the reader eager to discover how and when the two lovers are going to profess their mutual love.

Elizabeth's complexity does not end here. Psychologically speaking, her inner characterisation is important too. Erikson's *Theory of Psychosocial Development*¹¹³ affirms that the psychological structure of an individual can be modified or influenced by conflicts coming from the inside or the outside. With Elizabeth, it all starts with her childhood, but unfortunately, there is not much information about it. A general overview can only be guessed from the description of her parents: her father is an uninvolved father who disapproves of his daughters' behaviour but does nothing to regulate it, whereas Mrs Bennet is completely focused on marrying off her daughters and nothing much interests her. Starting from this, the educational background or lack of it plays an important role in Elizabeth's psychological development. Because of the lack of a governess and the uninterested parents they have, the Bennet girls did not feel the need to compete with one another or to aim at excellence. This could also mean that the five daughters did not have the opportunity to develop their abilities, apart from Elizabeth who draws and one of her sisters who sings. The situation of opposition in her parents' characterisation makes Elizabeth think objectively about a possible situation in which her family is under scrutiny because of the marriage of one of her sisters. Unfortunately, the overview is not positive: her father and mother married in a hurry, led by infatuation and they are now suffering the consequences of their reckless union. Elizabeth is aware that marrying the wrong person can have serious consequences and bring her unhappiness. Despite this poorly

¹¹² *Ibid*, pp. 128-129.

¹¹³ On this see Erin Werley, *Beneath the Surface: Psychological Perception in Jane Austen's Narration* (Ph.D Thesis, Baylor University, 2008), p. 6.

familiar environment, Elizabeth will discover happiness and love with Mr Darcy. However, as Erikson's theory states, the parents' relationship defines a failure, so she will be careful and rational when approaching love. The stage in which Elizabeth fails – adolescence – is also the one in which people should strengthen their relationships with others, thus developing devotion and fidelity. In Elizabeth's situation, her fidelity is all devoted to her family, even though she knows that they are not the ideal family people would love to have when they marry.

Pride and Prejudice is a novel that talks about love and marriage, an evergreen theme in Austen's writings. In this case, there is not just marriage but marriage above one's status, a very common theme in Eighteenth-century literature. Marriage is constantly present in the story since it is Mrs Bennet's sole purpose in life. She considers it her full-time job and she wants her five daughters to have a suitable match as soon as possible, the reason why she makes them debut in society all at the same time. Elizabeth however, does not want to be married off to the first man she encounters. She dreams of the right one, a man who respects and admires her, who appreciates her mind and wit and can be her equal. In this, she is adamant. At first, she thinks Darcy a snobbish rich man who is incapable to feel respect for lesser people, but when she finally understands the motives behind his actions, he becomes the right man for her. The distance they keep for most of the novel helps them understand that they are attracted to one another and that their first impression of the other was not right. What attracts them is that they are equals in wit and they respect each other's ideas.

Elizabeth is more intelligent than her sisters, thus being superior to them and Darcy is her equivalent in the male sphere. When this attraction is not deniable any longer, marriage is the next step, but not in the traditional way. With Elizabeth and Darcy, it takes on a different meaning: contrary to most people of their time, they love each other and the final goal of this union is to achieve forever happiness. But with this relationship, the reader can see that Elizabeth and Darcy do not find happiness by chance, they first need to work on themselves and change their attitude to attain a complete understanding of themselves and the other. Their marriage can be a long-lasting one because they have a complete understanding of the other.¹¹⁴ This latter concept is seen differently by Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's best friend. In her marriage with Mr Collins, she states that happiness is a matter of chance, whereas in Austen's idea it is based on moral actions bound to personal happiness and fulfilment and not chance.

¹¹⁴ Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels*, p. 100.

Another aspect that makes marriage unconventional for Darcy and Elizabeth is surely the vision given by the authorial voice to Darcy: He is rich and thus in possession of properties, which makes him a good match for anyone. But in Elizabeth's eyes it is not his money or the magnificence of Pemberley that makes him alluring, but his personality. In some literary interpretations, such as Bernard Paris', Pemberley is an element that makes Elizabeth think differently about Darcy. When she visits the place with her aunt and uncle Gardiner, she has the opportunity to see where he lives and how he treats the people who work for him. The praises and descriptions made by the servants allow Elizabeth to perceive him differently, more human and kinder than she imagines. This plays an important part in changing her opinion about a possible marriage with him. She does not despise him so much as before and she even considers the idea of marrying him if he still loves her. Since she has acted in a remarkable way throughout the novel, overcoming every possible obstacle and compensating for the stupidity and vulgarity of her mother and younger sisters, she is defined as superior to Pemberley's worth, so when she visits it she is allowed by the narrator to dream to be its mistress. This enhances her feelings for Darcy, starting the process of recognition of her love. When in the end they find each other and Mr Darcy's proposal is accepted, their love is sealed with a promise: happiness until the very end. This tells the reader something more: the materialistic instance on which marriage is based in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries here is completely absent. Elizabeth does not want to marry Darcy because of his social status or income, but because of his qualities.

Marriage is thus depicted in a new way, where love has more weight than in the past and people start to choose their partner based on what they feel. Materialistic needs start to be put in the background and a more modern view is applied to such an important theme. There are many reasons why marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is different. Compared to the traditional view of marriage as a means to enhance social connections and increase social status, in this novel marriage is based on love. There are indeed many possible combinations between all the characters in the novel, but not all of them are acceptable. For example, marriages between Darcy and Lady Catherine's daughter, Darcy and Miss Bingley or Mr Bingley and Georgiana Darcy are acceptable, because all the parties involved are rich and they can strengthen their social connections as well as their fortunes. But other characters such as Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Wickham need to find a partner with money. Their social status is inferior and

unstable, so they cannot marry a person who is poor or belongs to a lower social class.¹¹⁵ The balance is found when Elizabeth marries Darcy not because he represents her perfect match in society, but because their relationship is based on sincere understanding and affection. The materialistic aspect of the Nineteenth-century society is thus challenged.

However, the modern view on marriage is still connected with society and its disintegration as well as the increase of social mobility and a new modern personal autonomy. Elizabeth achieves them all, by changing her social status when she marries Mr Darcy and consequently achieving even more personal autonomy. Elizabeth's change and maturation represent the apex leading to her marriage. Her younger and less mature self undergoes many changes before reaching full maturity: she learns that first impressions can be misleading and that communication is key. In fact, her first impression of Darcy is repulsion, but in the end marries him. As for communication, she is the witness of the lack of communication between Jane and Bingley because of their shyness and this almost causes them to lose their chance at marriage. These realities are important for Elizabeth because she learns that when a person marries, they do not marry just the one they love, but they also marry the entire family. As a matter of fact, she is aware that her family is embarrassing, but she would never expect that their behaviour can cause such an opposition to an engagement. In the end, when Darcy decides to marry Elizabeth, he is conscious of who he is marrying and accepts her family too. Last but not least, the awareness both Elizabeth and Darcy have of their feelings makes them reflect upon their inner transformation. To have a happy marriage both parties need to make a slight change and be able to balance passion and prudence.

This last point focuses on the core of a relationship: both prudence and passion are essential for a relationship to work out, and Elizabeth firstly plays the prudence card and only later, when she is sure about what and who she desires, gives herself into passion and accepts Darcy's second proposal. These lessons have a far more general outcome: the basis of a solid marriage and the consequences of it. In Jane Austen's times this type of union, based on love and respect, was becoming very popular and many studies were made on it. Some of them, including Locke's and Rousseau's focus on the guiding role of the father (or parent), who is responsible for the right upbringing of children and be the mentor to their success. This, piled up with better hygiene achieved with the Industrial Revolution and the consequent increase of children who survived childbirth, brought attention to the future of the next generations. Both

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 103-104.

Locke and Rousseau, assert that a couple who love each other could grant a better future to their children by setting a good example as a couple and bringing them to a happy marriage. This view is very modern compared to how things were before. Focusing on family and children, as well as feelings, was becoming more and more important for modern people and with this unconventional relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth, Austen makes a step further from tradition.

As a novel, *Pride and Prejudice* also offers the overall structure of the society of that time, with the rising of the middle class and the decadence of the aristocracy. Indeed, Elizabeth and her family represent the middle class, where money is earned through trade and the typical values of that class are based more on the individual rather than on social status. On the opposite, Mr Darcy is the best representation of aristocracy, with old money and values concerning status rather than merit or other qualities in a person. In this stratified society, where social mobility is becoming more common, Austen offers different matches and the motives behind oppositions to marriages between people belonging to different stations. However, marriage above one's station was very popular as a literary theme and here, Elizabeth, the poor but intelligent young lady, marries a richer man and the same happens to Jane. The main difference between the two sisters is that Elizabeth's marriage has been interpreted by critics as not very realistic. Indeed, she despises the man because of his haughty attitude, but then has the lucky opportunity to marry him, even though her status is highly inferior to his. Also, what makes their relationship fascinating is the first impressions they have of one another and they are not positive: Elizabeth thinks that they are incompatible because of their mentality and the hostility that Darcy shows at the ball; Darcy sees them as opposed because of their abyssal difference in social status. Despite this, both characters display an ambivalent nature: Darcy himself affirms that nature is fallible and this can apply to every human, but then the outer appearance he shows is pride. Elizabeth too is ambivalent: her intelligence is obfuscated by the prejudice she has of others, but then she is very harsh to those who are prejudiced. Also, Elizabeth's impartiality towards Wickham derives partially from the antipathy she feels for Darcy and with the former, she has never been objective. She has never checked his early life or his version of it, taking it for granted and automatically deducing that Darcy is a liar and an oppressor.

To underline this peculiar relationship, the couple's satirical behaviour is often put in contrast with the people around them, most of all they are opposed to Bingley and Jane.¹¹⁶ The latter couple is charitable and modest whereas the former is not, they tend to have low opinions of others. This contrast makes the final transformation of both Darcy and Elizabeth more evident and based on a real appreciation of one another. Despite being insecure about their feelings, Bingley and Jane are the pivotal characters that make Elizabeth and Darcy think about themselves and this brings them to abandon all the prejudices and harsh impressions they have on the other.

In relation to Elinor and Marianne, Elizabeth represents more evidently the woman going towards emancipation. She is still the protagonist of a traditional novel but her development is much more evident and focused more on her inner feelings than the past heroines: in fact, her psychology is better described and her thoughts are clearer. She values qualities over money and this is what pushes her to evaluate possible husbands and not to accept the first man who proposes to her. There is much more consideration of the other's characterization rather than material wealth or property. This gradual change is essential for Austen's development as a writer because she is reflecting on the social changes concerning the society she was living in as well as the decadence of the old values which set the basis for the aristocracy in the past. This social class is losing importance due to the establishment of the middle class and the new values this class brought. In this novel, Elizabeth and Darcy are designed to be the product of that change. With Elizabeth, Austen lists all the institutions and conventions of the early Nineteenth century, analysing them and making people understand that even though they have relevance in society and manners, sometimes they can represent an obstacle to the individual's happiness, aspirations and integrity.¹¹⁷ Marriage is the main institution Austen often refers to, stating that a person should marry for a personal choice, based on love and on the partner's qualities.

Despite all the failures, prejudices and misunderstandings, Elizabeth can finally be defined as the closest ideal of proto-feminist characters among all Austen's female characters. She refuses two advantageous marriage proposals, she strongly objects to a loveless union and refuses authority coming from both men and women of higher classes. All these traits make her the prototype of how a woman should act and what actions she should refuse to accept. With this proto-feminist character, Austen might have been expressing women's frustration against

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 211.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 103.

the rigid and sexist rules of her time by using irony, anticipating what would happen just less than a century after.

In conclusion, Elizabeth Bennet, with her strong personality and deep affections is more of a real-life character than a printed one because she defies some of the rules of plot and character, but despite this, she is still deeply connected with it. She makes a step towards emancipation nonetheless since she fights against the social conventions of her time. Her intellect and wisdom make her a strong-headed woman who gives priority to what makes her feel happy and secure. Her audacity in refusing more than one marriage proposal reinforces these strong traits of hers, defining her as a woman who can think for herself and can make decisions autonomously. Patriarchy and social status are thus challenged by her revolutionary attitude and straightforward answers.

Chapter 5

Emma: The Ultimate Form of Independent Woman

The novel *Emma* was published in 1815 by John Murray, and in its first edition's cover, it presents a dedication to the Prince Regent. It is important to underline that Austen did not have a high regard for Her Royal Highness because of his extravagant lifestyle and how he treated his wife. However, Austen came into contact with the Prince's physician when her brother James fell ill and his health was so precarious that he needed to be seen by another doctor. In this case, the new doctor happened to be the Prince's one, Dr Baillie. The doctor confessed to Austen that Her Royal Highness had a collection of her novels and he deeply admired her. After this encounter, the Royal Librarian, Reverend James Clarke, invited Austen to a tour of Carlton House. During the tour, she was advised to be "at liberty to dedicate any future novel to him".¹¹⁸ This meant that she was forced to dedicate her next novel, *Emma*, to him. In the dedication, however, she used His Royal Highness three times, which for scholars meant that she was mocking the Prince Regent's character and habits.¹¹⁹

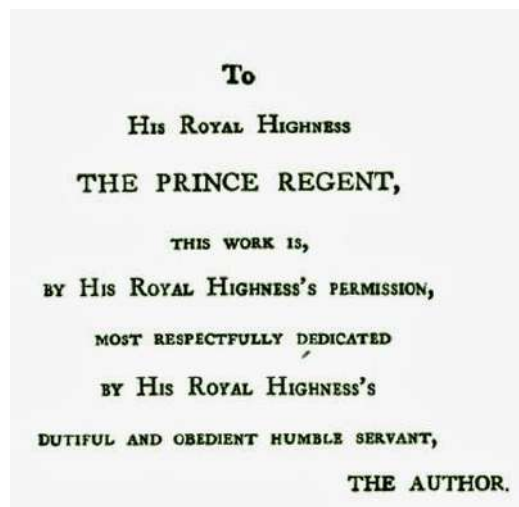


Figura 3 Jane Austen's dedication of *Emma* to the Prince Regent (austenheritage.com)

The heroine of the novel is the rich and beautiful Emma Woodhouse. Austen revealed in her letters that this character is made to be liked only by her and that probably the reading public

¹¹⁸ Jane Austen, *Lettere*, L. 125D. Letter from Jane Austen to James S. Clarke, 1815.

¹¹⁹ Unknown, 'Austen's Dedication to the Prince Regent', *Digital Austen* < <https://www.digitalausten.org/node/16#:~:text=Despite%20her%20hatred%20for%20HRH,wife%2C%20Austen%20accepted%20the%20invitation.&text=Austen%20recognized%20the%20commercial%20value,Royal%20Highness%2C%20The%20Prince%20Regent.> > [accessed 29.09.2021]

would not approve of it. The peculiarity of Emma is that she is the only heroine of Austen's collection to be rich and in not in a precarious situation in life. As a matter of fact, she is an heiress and lives in a beautiful mansion with her old father. Contrary to all the other heroines from Austen's pen, she views marriage as a damage to her stability in life. Marriage is the reason why families separates and the quietness of life is disrupted.¹²⁰ The character of Emma presents also qualities that are usually attributed to the protagonists of fairy tales: beauty, intelligence and a happy disposition. Her almost perfect characterization will later be revealed to be just a façade because in reality, the rich young woman has some flaws and Mr Knightley is the only one speaking about them freely. Some of the misfortunes of her character are that she thinks a little too well of herself and having rather too much her own way.¹²¹

The novel tells the story of how Emma, through misunderstandings and mischief, comes to terms with love and marriage, concepts she avoids at all costs at the beginning of the story. The novel presents three main sections which correspond to Emma's stages towards romance: the first section, which goes from Chapter Three to Chapter Seventeen, contains Emma's scheme to put together Harriet and Mr Elton. However, this scheme represents Emma's first disappointment, because she becomes the unexpected object of interest of Mr Elton. The second section, goes from Chapter Eighteen to Chapter Forty-Six and focusses on the complex relationship between Emma and Frank Churchill. This section takes up most of the book and thoroughly describes the flirtation of two young, rich and handsome people, as well as the public engagements they have to attend. Also, Frank is the only person who is able to capture Emma's attention and be deemed worthy of her. The last section, which goes from Chapter Forty-Seven to Chapter Fifty-Five, talks about Emma's understanding of her feelings for Mr Knightley. She understands that the relationship she has with Mr Knightley has never been the brother-sister relationship she has always thought it was, but an unconscious love story.¹²²

This multifaceted presentation of Emma makes her indeed a character that, as Jane Austen states, will only be liked by her. The portrayal of this young and rich woman is indeed peculiar. At the beginning of the book, she is presented to the reader as spoilt and conceited. Her character is domineering, snobbish, and sometimes unfeeling.¹²³ Her self-thought superior nature brings her to prevent other characters to find happiness, just because she wants to play

¹²⁰ Jane Austen, *Emma* in *The Complete Novels*, (Penguin- Random House, New York, 2020), p. 689; hereafter quoted as *E*.

¹²¹ *E*. p. 689.

¹²² Joseph M. Duffy Jr, 'Emma: The Awakening of Innocence', *ELH*, 21 (1954), 39-53 (pp. 40-41).

¹²³ Edgar F. Shannon Jr, 'Emma: Character and Construction', *PMLA*, 71 (1956), 637-650 (p. 638).

matchmaking. The imagination in which she is immersed, prevents her to see that she is hurting the people who surround her. The only character that can limit the consequences of Emma's past-time is Mr Knightly, who is also the only person who sees her for what she really is: imperfect but with clear judgment, only if she does not let her imagination interfere with reality.¹²⁴ A vision that most critics share is that Emma's character is going to change throughout the story, but she will never be a better version of herself. Moreover, at the end of the book she still achieves her happy ending (deserved or not), despite all the chaos she creates with her matchmaking and the hurtful consequences of it.

One peculiar trait of this heroine is that her fortune and her high social station allow her to think that she does not need to get married. She has everything that, historically speaking, was required to possess to find a good match: money and high status. But marriage does not seem to be in her picture, because both in her eyes and in her father's, marriage brings a family to disruption. Because of this, she defines herself as a respectable woman even if she remains single, just because she has a fortune and, most of all, she will never become an old maid like Miss Bates. What Emma affirms has solid basis, since being an old maid is a weight for the family because women do not have an independent income. They still depend on the male members of their families to survive.

Because of Emma's beliefs against marriage and the slightly isolated position of Hartfield, no man can arise her interest. They do not possess the perfection she aspires to achieve and thus they are all inferior to her social station. Moreover, Emma's house is placed in the outskirts of Highbury, almost like a separated reign where nothing can disturb its inhabitants. As a matter of fact, the narrator affirms that the only stressful event in Emma's life was the marriage of her governess. The loss of this family member (Miss Taylor was more than a friend rather than a governess for the Woodhouses) is a low blow for them. They often refer to her by using the adjective poor. After the marriage of her friend Miss Taylor, Emma takes on a new past-time: playing matchmaking. As Mr Knightly often remarks, this new hobby is a double-sided weapon because it is distorted by Emma's social vision: she sees society as a vertical line, where she is at the top and everyone else is below. Her beliefs are later broken by the collateral events caused by her matchmaking: when people of different classes connect, through marriages or by meetings, Emma finally sees that the line is not vertical anymore but

¹²⁴ *E.*, p. 639.

horizontal.¹²⁵ For Emma, a vertical vision of the society means that the upper classes are distanced by the lower ones and social stratification is preserved. On the opposite, if society is perceived horizontally, this means that social stratification is not respected anymore and people can mix even though they belong to different classes. This latter vision is then settled by the marriage of Harriet Smith with the well-educated farmer Robert Martin. The match, at first not even taken into account by Emma, will turn out as the best ending for young Harriet.

When Emma first meets Harriet, she does not see just an orphaned girl of seventeen, but also a young lady she can form, take under her wing and make her in image and likeness. She thinks that “She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and manners.”¹²⁶

Harriet is an orphan and in Emma’s eyes, she is the perfect blank canvas. Because of her unclear origins and unknown parents, she needs to preserve her social status with all her efforts. Because of this, Emma feels a duty to her: teach her how to do that and act like a proper lady. Her rescue complex is evident: the only way Emma Woodhouse notices people below her rank is because she needs to help them in some way, but only if the people have “a creditable appearance.”¹²⁷ For example, when Harriet tells Emma about the young farmer she has met while in the countryside, Emma perceives him as dangerous, a menace that can destroy her plan of making this girl a respectable person. She defines Mr Martin as a yeoman, an old English term that defines a man cultivating a small landed estate. In her eyes, this man belongs to the social class she would like to have nothing to do with. The match between Harriet and Mr Martin cannot happen because even if the man possesses a piece of land, he does not have a fortune or at least he would spend several years forming it. Because of this, he would have to wait many years before being able to marry. Also, the term used by Emma, ‘yeoman’ is an old-fashioned one, which shows how backwards her vision of society is. This description of him is not at all a nice one. She thinks everyone below her station as useless and tries to manipulate the innocent and inexperienced Harriet so that she lands in the arms of a respectable and genteel man of Emma’s choice. As a matter of fact, she makes Harriet do a comparison between Mr Martin, Mr Elton and Mr Weston. The perfection of the latter two is in stark contrast with the

¹²⁵ Pam Morris, ‘Emma: A Prospect of England’, *Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf and Worldly Realism* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 90.

¹²⁶ *E.*, p. 699.

¹²⁷ *E.*, p. 702.

former one. Harriet feels ashamed of her feelings when Emma makes her see that she has feelings for a man so simple and unremarkable.

Her blinded character receives the first disenchantment when, after a day at Randalls, Emma goes back to Hartfield in a carriage with Mr Elton. The man takes the opportunity to speak with Emma alone, for once, and professes his love for her. Emma is horrified by this sudden declaration of love because she had always thought that he was interested in Harriet. This unexpected change of programme is not well received by the young woman, who, enraged, responds:

“[...] Mr Elton, my astonishment is much beyond any thing I can express. After such behaviour, as I have witnessed during last month, to Miss Smith, [...] this is an unsteadiness of character, indeed, which I had not supposed possible! Believe me, sir, I am far, very far, from gratified in being the object of such professions”. (E, p. 760)

Emma's response to Mr Elton's proposal is the first traumatic consequence she experiences while playing matchmaking for her *protégée* Harriet. She has been so focused on making the pair get acquainted with one another that she never saw Mr Elton's real intentions. In her harsh response, she defines Mr Elton's character as unsteady, because he has shown an amiable and interested attitude for the young girl. She deems his behaviour impossible to understand since he had plenty of opportunities to demonstrate that he never loved Harriet. The last sentence expresses her horror in finding out that she is the desired object of his feelings. And since the entire ordeal is about her making love matches, she cannot be the object of the affection of a man who, unconsciously, is the intended match in Emma's plan. Their heated conversation continues with Mr Elton explaining to Emma that he has visited Hartfield just to see her and not Harriet. She is so beautiful that in comparison Harriet is nothing. Mr Elton also feels offended by Emma's belief that he was in love with Harriet. Her response is however, very harsh and fuelled by her contrasting feelings of shame and rage.

Later at night, Emma thinks and analyses the earlier events and feels mortified as well as angry because a man like Mr Elton has dared to think about marrying a woman of high station like her. The objections she draws up are mainly social and economic: she believes herself superior to him because of the fortune she is going to inherit and because her family name means something in their society whereas Mr Elton's is nothing. However, she cannot deny that some of the regards she reserved for him when trying to make him fall in love with Harriet, could have been misinterpreted as an encouragement to court her instead.

The dread she feels for the situation is nothing compared to what she has done to the poor young girl: she has prevented her to get married to Mr Martin and pushed her in the arms of a man who never looked at her as more than a friend. She seems to understand that Harriet's situation is not privileged as hers and, on the contrary, the girl needs a marriage to have a stable future. Her manipulative and spoilt character is even more evident when, during a visit, Emma discusses Mr Knightley's future with Mrs Weston. The latter, attempting to play matchmaker as Emma did, foretells a possible match between Mr Knightley and Jane Fairfax. Emma's response to this statement is anger and she manipulatively states that the man must marry. The force she puts in the word 'must' is so strong that clearly shows how she likes to manipulate and plan life for other people. She does not care for their feelings, but she observes the behaviour and the manners in which her friends interact, to see whether they feel affection of just friendship. The idea of staying single is just a given to Emma, but other people, belonging to lower classes, rely on marriage to secure themselves a living and a stable future. This point seems to be missing in Emma's schemes, supplanted by her imagination and desire to put people together.

Her strong character is again put into motion when Frank Churchill almost proposes to her, stating that, despite his immediate leaving, he has a warm regard for Hartfield.¹²⁸ This fuels the love-based ideas Emma has of Frank. However, in her monologue she finds herself being forcefully convinced that she must be in love, despite her previous intention not to:

"I certainly must," said she. "This sensation of listlessness, weariness, stupidity, this disinclination to sit down and employ myself, this feeling of every thing's being dull and insipid about the house! — I must be in love; I should be the oddest creature in the world if I were not—for a few weeks at least. [...] I do suspect that he is not really necessary to my happiness. So much the better. I certainly will not persuade myself to feel more than I do. I am quite enough in love. I should be sorry to be more". (E, p. 832)

In this passage, Emma is trying to give a name to the sensations of unhappiness and lethargy she feels after Frank's leaves. The presence of the young man is described earlier as pleasant for her and a nice way to occupy the previous two weeks. But with Frank's sudden return home, Emma thinks herself in love. The use of the word "must" again is employed to express the forceful belief Emma has about love and feelings. She thinks she knows what being in love is and now that she is experiencing a love interest herself, she is sure that Frank is the right man

¹²⁸ E., p. 832.

for her. This belief she has on Frank is mainly enlarged by her daydream about him before he arrives at Highbury. The narrator clearly states that Frank Churchill's persona was fascinating and mysterious to Emma. She has a conversation with Mr Knightley about the young man and her vision is in contrast with the one her friend has. This contrast is caused by Emma who has depicted Frank as she would like him to be, that is, the perfect man in age and manners; the opposite view belongs to Mr Knightley, who describes Frank in negative terms because he fears he could be indeed his rival for Emma's love.

However, the self-thought love does not last long because, thinking about Frank so much, brings Emma to conclude that she is not in love with him. The second part of the quotation contains the disillusionment Emma feels when she understands that her feelings are not strong enough for her to abandon her father and sacrifice her single life for marriage. This encounter with Frank Churchill shows Emma the first stages of love and what she could have if she would ever consider marriage. But the intensity of her feelings is just not enough for it to be love. Also, what Austen puts between the lines, is that Frank is a man who pleases others through the falseness of manner and fake politeness. He courts Emma, admiring her and using all the right words to seduce her and make her fall in love with him, but at the same time, he continues his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax. Emma here is seduced by compliments and good manners which please her ingenuity of mind and superficiality. She observes people only by their behaviour and how they communicate with one another. Because of this, Austen provides the reader with a net of social engagements and visits paid by the small group of characters. This also allows Emma to find new matches for her friend Harriet but never taking into consideration the desires of the girl or the uneven affinities of her intended matches.

Emma's change starts towards the end of the book when Harriet professes her feelings for Mr Knightley. The misunderstandings of Harriet's feelings are a thread in the entire story because Emma's will of finding the young girl a suitable man is stronger than the young girl's feelings. In the end Harriet finds the courage to talk to Emma and the outcome is pure shock on Emma's part:

“It darted through her with the speed of an arrow that Mr Knightley must marry no one but herself! [...] She saw that there never had been a time when she did not consider Mr Knightley as infinitely the superior, or when his regard for her had not been infinitely the most dear. [...]

Till now that she was threatened with its loss, Emma had never known how much of her happiness depended on being first with Mr. Knightley, first in interest and affection. [...]. She had herself been first with him for many years past. She had not deserved it; she had often been negligent or perverse, slighting his advice, or even wilfully opposing

him, insensible of half his merits, and quarrelling with him because he would not acknowledge her false and insolent estimate of her own - but still, [...] he had loved her, and watched over her from a girl, with an endeavour to improve her, and an anxiety for her doing right, which no other creature had at all shared. In spite of all her faults, she knew she was dear to him; might she not say, very dear?" (E, p. 914)

This passage contains many reflections Emma does on Mr Knightley and what Harriet has confessed. She passes from wanting to help the young orphan girl to find her place in society, to feel threatened by the girl's feelings for a man who has always been part of her family. Mr Knightley has known Emma since she was a little girl because between them there are less than twenty years of age gap. The egocentrism of Emma is shattered: she becomes aware of having taken the man for granted and consequently thought him untouchable in his position of bachelor. The idea that he could have ended up married to Harriet or, as Emma thought before, to Jane Fairfax, makes her panic. The two young ladies are not worthy of him. To Emma, Mr Knightley is superior in everything and embodies the perfection of a man of the early Nineteenth century. He is kind, gentle, his manners are impeccable. He is also the only character throughout the book who is allowed to scold Emma or to highlight her faults. Emma takes them as a joke, but these faults are then what makes her act recklessly with other people's emotions.

While reflecting, Emma knows that her behaviour towards Mr Knightley has not been the kindest in the last months. Indeed, all her misunderstandings with Harriet and the accident at Box Hill have made her a disagreeable person, but he has always been there for her, reproaching her when she made Harriet refuse Mr Martin, trying to conceal his jealousy of Frank Churchill's interest in Emma and making her see that the young man was indeed plotting something and finally scolding her for her impolite remark about Miss Bates. In the end, despite the mischief of Emma's plan and Frank's secret engagement, Emma achieves her happy ending by marrying her beloved Mr Knightley. This happy ending seems undeserved for a character like Emma. She has not changed from the beginning of the book. Her spoilt and superior behaviour cannot be compensated by the few acts of kindness she reserves to the unfortunate people living in Highbury, because even among the lower classes, she makes a classification since, in her opinion, not everyone can be blessed by her good actions. This is indeed what happens to Mr Martin, the farmer. For her, he is not worthy of her kindness because his rank cannot be improved.

Her character is very controversial, but most of all, her superiority and stubbornness are her greatest faults. Those two traits are strongly embedded in her being and they make her blind

about what is happening around her. Emma thinks that what she is doing for Harriet is right, because of the girl's unknown origins she needs to find a good match and use that connection to be someone in society, but in reality, Emma is mining the girl's self-esteem as well as ruining her happiness.

On the opposite, Mr Knightley represents good sense: he has a regard for other people's feelings and he uses his honesty to correct Emma's behaviour. This last quality is essential to understand the real worth and behaviour of other characters since Emma's vision is distorted by her imagination. He represents the reasonable counterpart of his beloved Emma. Because of this man and his good qualities, Emma can be less harsh in her judgements and less reckless. In the end, Emma is informed that Harriet has accepted Mr Martin's second proposal, autonomously, and that they will soon be married. The plan she had concocted for the girl turned out to be a failure and Harriet is better off without Emma's mentoring.

5.1. Character's Analysis

In comparison to Austen's previous novels, *Emma* is the most modern one, even though it is still classified as conservative for its themes about class and marriage. The stream of consciousness is always present in the narration and introduces the reader to Emma's thoughts and beliefs. As a character, Emma is presented as the most complete and most feminist heroine of Jane Austen, however, her characterisation is not simple to understand. What makes Emma so complex to critics is her intelligence and its depiction. It is indeed not wrong to state that Emma is not just a paper character, but she is an imagined human being with emotions and personal problems like a real person. Compared to other female heroines, Emma is highly intelligent but some of her mistakes come from her conscious will, others instead, are unconsciously made because of her beliefs.

However, like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma is difficult to classify. Some critics define Emma as the heroine of a *Bildungsroman*, others prefer to classify her as the stereotype of sentimental literature, because of her role as a dutiful daughter towards her invalid father. Others, because of Emma's defined and complex characterisation, believe the novel to be a novel of characterisation. The difficulty of classification, both in the genre of the novel and in Emma herself, is part of what Austen chooses to present: a complex, double-sided character. On one side Emma can be perceived as a rich, independent woman, who plays matchmaking for others, and who does not think about her future nor her feelings; on the other side, she is a thoughtful and caring woman towards the poor and her hypochondriac father.

To better understand Emma and her personality, the reader must first understand the social background in which Emma is set. The story develops in England, in a countryside town named Highbury. What strikes the reader is that among all the well-known classes of that time, aristocracy is never mentioned. The main focus of the novel is showing how the rising middle class is struggling to find its place in a society dominated by the aristocracy and its values. The only way the middle class can be accepted by the upper classes is to act like them, by assimilating their attitudes and values. As a matter of fact, the middle-class beliefs are based on idle living and material pleasures.

The social changes happening during the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century are visible in the way Emma perceives people. In fact, she thinks that the profession of a tradesman is not appropriate or of high station, but when at the end of the novel Harriet's true heritage is discovered and she comes out to be the daughter of a tradesman, Emma's point of view changes and she defines her young friend's roots to be as genteel as those of a gentleman. But her opinion changes just because she knows the girl and thinks she has the potential to become a lady, otherwise, she would have never approached her because of her lower-class status.

Social status matters to Emma and this is visible also when she helps poor people. In fact, not everyone is worthy of her help. In the novel, Emma's need to help other people is projected mainly towards Harriet, who is an orphan. But being an orphan is not easy, especially at that time. As a matter of fact, being attractive and averagely intelligent is not enough to find a husband. The intervention Emma makes for this young girl consists in pushing her towards relationships with men she does not like and refusing the only marriage proposal made with love by a farmer. From a historical and social point of view, what Emma does is not wrong. She is indeed following social rules, but at the same time, she is trying to find the most advantageous situation for her friend. By introducing her to her friends, Emma thinks she is doing right. But even though it is the thought that counts, Emma is not contemplating or even respecting her young friend's feelings. Forcing her to refuse the offer made by a man she loved and who reciprocated her feelings risks making Harriet an unfeeling person. However, Emma's actions throughout the novel are justified by the fact that Harriet does not have any relatives. This means that contrary to other people, she needs to create her personal image and fight hard to keep it. This is why Emma offers to help her and introduces her to her bachelor friends. Despite her good intentions, Emma's plans never go as planned.

The first target chosen for Harriet is a clergyman, Mr Elton. The profession of the clergyman was advantageous because it allowed the subject to have a living by administering the parish. In this case, Mr Elton was a vicar and he was entitled to little money compared to other ranks of clergymen like a rector or a bishop.¹²⁹ Because of this, Mr Elton's need was to find a wealthy wife to keep a high lifestyle. Those reasons are not clear in the novel, but if a reader has this in mind, the scene where Mr Elton asks Emma's hand in marriage and not Harriet's becomes even clearer. Emma's wealth is what Mr Elton needs and desires, whereas Harriet is not even taken into account. But Emma is oblivious to this because all she thinks about are Harriet's suitors. This first failure should have made Emma think about things twice, but she is even more addicted to the mission. As a rich woman, she is feeling like doing the best interests of her friend but she is not.

Similarly to *Pride and Prejudice*, there is miscommunication between characters: Emma organises the meetings for Harriet, but the latter is not confident enough to tell her wealthy friend her real needs and desires. The only time she does this is at the beginning when she reveals her feelings for the young farmer and thinks she may have offended Emma. Because of this miscommunication, Emma and Harriet's friendship is eventually ruined, even though respect is still there. Emma is following social rules to help her friends and the fact that she never asks Harriet about her real feelings is a common thing. Love was not necessary for a marriage to work in the past, respect was enough.

Emma's trouble is always fixed by another character: Mr Knightley. His rationality often contrasts with the impetuous and stubborn personality of Emma. His main aim is to be one of the characters who make Emma develop, by playing the mock-heroic role.¹³⁰ Through the little lectures Mr Knightley does to Emma, the reader can perceive the boundless character she possesses and how her life decision of never getting married has compromised her way of seeing things. She meddles with other's affairs but she is not able to think for herself. However, when she understands that she has feelings for Mr Knightley and her connection with him is threatened by Harriet, she puts herself forward and ruins the match, as a true spoilt child. But what many critics have found out reading the novel, is that Emma may have undergone a deep, maturing change. From the snob, daydreamer, spoilt woman she is, she changes into a more down-to-earth and sensitive woman. This deep change is set in motion when she hears Harriet's

¹²⁹ Maria Grace, 'Vicars, Curates and Church Livings', *Random Bits of Fascination*
<<https://randombitsoffascination.com/portfolio/vicars-curates-and-church-livings/>> [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹³⁰ Kirkham, *Jane Austen*, p. 128.

feelings for the man she loves too. This makes her castle of dreams about Harriet's matches go down and consequently, she acts recklessly at Box Hill saying unflattering things to Miss Bates. As a result, Mr Knightley reproaches her and the humiliation she feels helps her undergo her transformation. Her beliefs about marriage and the negative consequences she thought it could bring come to an end, making her fight for that same thing she once disapproved of. However, not every critic is convinced that Emma really deserves the happy ending Austen allows her to obtain. After all the mischief she has caused, such a happy ending is not what Emma deserves.

About this aspect of Emma's maturation, there is still a lot of debate going on. For some of them, Emma should not be considered as the character of a *Bildungsroman*. The reason for this statement is that in her own terms Emma does not keep the terms of the psychological or the social development which usually touches the hero/heroine. The main goal of the *Bildungsroman* is that the individual needs to integrate with society and realize his potential to obtain self-actualization and to achieve social-reconciliation.¹³¹ For others, Emma matures and goes from imagination to reality because of her mistakes. As a matter of fact, she does not need to travel far from home to mature because all the events mentioned earlier happen in her social sphere, which is formed by people living in her neighbourhood. But what is more important than this, is that from a psychological point of view she does not mature nor she understands who she really is. So the formative aspect of this novel, namely the maturation of the heroine, is distorted and thus not countable as part of the *Bildungsroman*. Moreover, the limitation of Emma's development, or lack of it, is caused by the paternal figure. Emma's father never leaves the house, consequently forcing Emma to stay with him. In fact, he is described to be a "valetudinarian all his life, without any activity of body or mind".¹³²

To better understand Emma's psychological development or lack of it, it is possible to apply Erikson's *Theory of Psychosocial Development* (1968), which, as mentioned in Chapter 4.1., states that the psychological structure of an individual can be modified or influenced by conflicts coming from the inside or the outside. Erikson also states that if the individual excels in completing a task, this has positive consequences on them, but if the individual fails, then the consequences are negative and they can worsen the self-esteem or cause a lack of confidence. With Emma, the failing task is about building love relationships and since she is

¹³¹ Ali Sabri Abuhassan, Mohd Nazri Latiff Azmi, 'Psychosocial Development in Jane Austen's Emma', *Language Literacy: Journal of Linguistics, Literature and Language Teaching*, 3 (2019), 185-200, (p. 185).

¹³² *E.*, p. 690.

failing more than once, she is suffering and feeling isolated. Love relationships are not just those involving the search for a suitable match, but also those of friendship.

In Emma's life, many relationships have formed her personality, especially the one with her former governess, Miss Taylor. This character is fundamental in forming Emma's personality. As a child, Emma was given to Miss Taylor's care and instead of acting as a governess, due to the proximity of the two girls' age, the latter has acted more like a friend than as a guide. This has caused Emma's superiority to be a strong trait in her characterisation. Because of this, Emma has always been praised and never reproached, even when she was at fault.

The unhealthy relationship with Miss Taylor is in part remedied by Mr Knightley's behaviour towards Emma. By being her senior, he does not fear Emma's reaction to his lectures. As a matter of fact, he acts as a guide as Miss Taylor should have done. This dominant trait of Mr Knightley is in stark contrast with Emma's personality, and it constitutes a reasonable point of view of a person who is not spoilt. As Emma, herself states, with Mr Knightley she can discuss and argue but he would always tell what he thinks of her without refraining from telling the truth. And contrary to any belief, Emma appreciates it. Mr Knightley is indeed the only one allowed to tell Emma that she is not perfect and has flaws. He is attracted to her because of her charms and her continuous mistakes, where he can intervene as a mentor and guide. Moreover, Mr Knightley is the only person in Emma's social sphere who tries to open her eyes about her relationship with Frank and he directs her attention to a possible relationship between Miss Fairfax and Frank.¹³³ In the end, he acts like the paternal figure Emma needs, thus impeding her evolution. In being her guide, Knightley does not provide her with the right place to evolve into a mature person because she projects the need of a father onto him. In addition to this, Knightley and Emma represent continuous fighting because of his superiority of wisdom and maturity which arise Emma's faults and makes her the object of his lectures.¹³⁴

Another formative character in Emma's life is Harriet. As stated earlier, Harriet is an orphan and she is taken under Emma's wing. However, Emma imposes her plans of marriage on the poor girl, taking her through a nightmarish adventure full of misunderstandings and deception. Harriet has found love, but the chosen man is not up to Emma's expectations and he is soon set aside. After a couple of disastrous attempts of finding a husband for her friend, Emma understands that she is hurting the girl's feelings. Socially speaking, Emma is superior

¹³³ Abuhassan, Nazri Latiff Azmi, 'Psychosocial Development in Jane Austen's Emma', p. 194.

¹³⁴ Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels*, pp. 90-92.

to Harriet because she is a wealthy woman and her future is already stable, so she does not need to get married. But for the girl, the story is completely different. So, when Emma offers to play matchmaking, Harriet does not want to hurt her feelings or be ungrateful and accepts. However, when she sees her hopes of marrying the young farmer go up in smoke, their friendship changes. Harriet has a taste of what means to be rich and understands that love is not always there when it comes to secure a place in society. But when the love interest of the two young women converges to the same person, Mr Knightley, their friendship turns into jealousy. In the end, Harriet dares to choose by herself the man she wants to marry and despite ending the friendship with Emma, they are still on civil terms. With Harriet, Emma has failed. Not once, but three times. Firstly, with the young farmer, then with Mr Elton and lastly with Mr Knightley. This serves her as a lesson to understand that nothing comes without a price. Love causes heartbreak and jealousy, friendships can be true and they can end too, and lastly, never judge things by the first impression they give because they can hide beautiful things. It is just the personal point of view that makes things change. Harriet, Mr Knightley and Miss Taylor, along with the circumstances surrounding them, make Emma change and mature. They constitute and create the inner and outer changes Erikson mentioned in his theory.

Despite being surrounded by many formative characters, Emma's inner change is still a matter of debate. There are two main views about Emma's supposed change: some critics believe that in some way she changed whereas others do not agree. Those who do not believe in her change give as evidence the fact that she acts in a restricted area. In order to change positively, Emma should have a broader space where to act. Because of the limited space, there is no assurance that the change is permanent and applicable to outer society. Moreover, the Box Hill accident is another event where Emma shows her true colours: she insults Miss Bates, but it is not an accident. At the beginning of the novel, Emma clearly states that Miss Bates is not the kind of person she would like to be associated with because she praises Jane Fairfax too often in Emma's presence and as an individual, Miss Bates is silly for Emma's liking. The insult she throws at Miss Bates is just the consequence of her dislike kept private for too long. However, this adds up to the list of elements that make Emma appear as an immature girl even if her behaviour seems to have changed. She apologises to Miss Bates, but her apologies are not sincere because she dislikes the woman and the reason behind her peace offering is caused by Mr Knightley's reaction to Emma's rudeness. Also, her awareness of her rude behaviour rises only when people tell her that she was rude and insensitive, but in general, Emma is not really able to see that she is misbehaving.

Another example is provided by her manipulation of Mr Knightley's feelings. In her opinion, he must not marry at all, but if this should happen, it must be with her. This is the manipulation of a person's feelings. She puts forward her desire for Mr Knightley not to be married, but when this desire is threatened by Harriet, she decides that she should be the one who marries him. Despite the close acquaintance, Mr Knightley is the only one who sees Emma for who she really is, and accepts her with her flaws. He plays the double role of fatherly figure and love interest, figures Emma needs in her life to understand how to control her emotions and her reactions to others. Because of Mr Knightley, Emma changes her opinion on marriage, which is a turning point in the whole novel. Marriage is the sacrament that has always been seen by the Woodhouses as the origin of their misery because Miss Taylor abandoned them to get married.

Her incapability to see that she is misbehaving has deep psychological sources. Emma is indeed a narcissistic and perfectionist woman, who needs to constantly show her superiority to other people. She is domineering and wants to get rid of her rivals in every way possible, but she is also dutiful towards her family and those who need her. This strong and contrasting character causes in her inner turmoil and psychological distress. What Emma feels goes from discomfort to self-hate. However, when she understands her mistakes, she feels anxiety and self-contempt. Gradually she feels confident no more and needs to find someone who gives her support and praise: Mr Knightley. She projects her praise on him and desires to have him as a husband, projecting her dependency on people. In this, Emma has not matured at all but has just projected the fatherly figure she admires and respects on Knightley.

Emma's problems are caused by how she was educated when she was a child: the constant praise and the elevated social position as mistress of her mansion and the richest of Highbury, contribute to her idealised image of the world. She has an idealised image of herself too. She thinks too highly of herself because of how she is treated by her close family members. However, this brings negative aspects: anxiety and the constant need to be at the centre of attention as well as to be jealous of other women, especially Jane Fairfax. Also, her illusory superiority is threatened more than once when she is asked by Mrs Elton the permission to be introduced to a friend of hers in Bath, or when Mr Elton at the beginning of the novel proposes to her. In these two situations, her superiority is non-existent because both Mr and Mrs Elton do not think of her as superior to them. To detach herself from people she does not like, she divides them into two categories: on one side some make her feel threatened, mostly women; on the other side she surrounds herself with those who feed her ego and praise her a lot, such

as Mr Woodhouse, Harriet and Mrs Weston. Emma is a resilient woman and because of this, she needs to re-establish her position and her pride more than once, by doing something she is not used to doing: apologise and ask for forgiveness.¹³⁵

All these events along with their consequences are told through Emma's stream of consciousness. This linguistic device is prevalent than narrative or dialogues and it conveys all the thoughts Emma has about the most disparate subjects. One aspect is rather predominant in this flux of emotions and thoughts: self-delusion. As a character, Emma is indeed self-deluded. Most of her actions have as a result failure. The failure she experiences multiple times is due partly to the ignorance of her feelings and partly to her will. But as Mr Knightley often affirms, Emma is intelligent, but sometimes her judgement is clouded by imagination. When the event at Box Hill happens and Emma insults Miss Bates, Mr Knightley reprimands the rich woman and thanks to that she can see her past mistakes more objectively. Despite this newly found clarity, Emma still makes mistakes because of the ignorance of her feelings. She has not yet understood that what she feels for Mr Knightley is not just respect and mere friendship, but something more. To understand this, she needs to come face to face with Harriet's feelings for him and the dreadful feeling of having a love rival. Because of these confusing feelings and consequent ignorance about them, Emma cannot be considered a reliable narrator. Moreover, the novel has always Emma's perspective about events, however, Chapter Forty-One is told from Mr Knightley's point of view. His point of view is fundamental to have a different perspective about what is happening. He is portrayed as an almost silent character, speaking only to reproach Emma's straightforwardness. But his silence hides an attentive observation of what is going on in the group of acquaintances of Highbury. He perceives Frank's lies and suspects him from the first moment, fearing that his interest in Emma is not genuine at all. And he is right. This perspective allows the reader to see what Emma is not seeing, lost in the superficial gratification of being praised and admired by many people. Her superficiality is another aspect that makes Emma oblivious to part of her mistakes. But that is why Emma is so modern and enchanting in her personality.

Emma's character is shaped by the people living in Highbury. These characters appearing in the story can be put into two categories: flat and rounded. In this novel, most of them are flat and they act like narrative embellishments. They are not rounded nor they show deep feelings or a well-defined mind. However, some of them are strictly connected with the

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 68-77.

heroine, like Emma's father. His character is flat, he does not bring anything new or important to the narration but has a deep influence on his daughter since in the end, he would be one of the reasons why Emma finds it difficult to listen to her feelings and get married. In general, every character in *Emma* has the function to identify an aspect of the protagonist that needs to be changed. Despite being just narrative accessories, these flat characters are part of Emma's characterisation.

As a novel, *Emma* is difficult to categorise. It is indeed a traditional novel but can be defined also as a novel of characterisation, where similarities and contrasts of character abound. It is a comedy of social and intellectual pride, the humour arising from the initial mistakes of Emma, which she carries out with consistency and vigour.¹³⁶ *Emma* is a novel about marriage too. From the first page, marriage is the main theme and until the end, it is what makes the engines of narrative in function. The finale Austen gives to Emma is a marriage. But even in this circumstance, Emma is not evolving. Her change is refrained by the feeling of guilt she feels because of her engagement. She feels anxious because once married she would become invested only in her marriage and her father would be put in the background. Unfortunately for Mr Knightley, Emma sets her conditions for their marriage which are to go and live at Hartfield and stay with her father until he dies. The sentimental relationship with the father is an additional element of non-evolvement. The father, albeit a figure of inspiration and guidance, here is a hypochondriac and the constant need for Emma by his side prevents her to mature. He represents a fatherly tyrant towards his daughter and in doing so Emma falls in the category of the 'dutiful daughter', ready to stay by the father's side and not living her life.¹³⁷ She does not give herself the freedom she needs to evolve. Following Erikson's theory, Emma has not changed but has regressed in a state of "childish dependency" by marrying Mr Knightley.¹³⁸ The only form of relationship she knows is the paternal one and thus she tries to substitute the figure of the father with a man who gives her the most similar feelings her father does.

The novel ends with three marriages, but for many critics, this conclusion is ambivalent because on one hand this ending is pretty traditional and follows the social conventions of that time and is thus an unspoken conventional ending; on the other side, it seems a psychological need of the author to solve a problem she was not able to solve in real life: getting married.

¹³⁶ E. N. Hayes, 'Emma: A Dissenting Opinion', *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 1 (1949), pp. 1-20, (p. 16).

¹³⁷ Kirkham, *Jane Austen*, p. 126.

¹³⁸ Abuhassan, Nazri Latiff Azmi, 'Psychosocial Development in Jane Austen's Emma', p. 198.

Other critics affirm that the happy ending provided by Austen is a poor conclusion to the story or a thought choice that needs to be interpreted as an ironic ending.¹³⁹

Emma's character could be said to be very similar to Austen's, indeed both of them do not think that marriage is for them, and they both share analytical intelligence which prevents them to find love and pursue it.¹⁴⁰ Because of contrasting qualities and flaws, Emma is a complex character because, with her, Austen seems to praise and scorn her at the same time. But as a complex character, Emma is believed not to be the true main character of this novel. *Emma* has often been considered by critics as a novel where the main protagonist, Miss Woodhouse, is not the real heroine. Her snobbish behaviour and the involuntary mischief she creates make her appear as the unworthy heroine of the entire story. The best candidate for the leading role is indeed Jane Fairfax. Her role makes her the perfect *protégée* for Emma's attention instead of Harriet. The description Austen makes of Jane is that she is a young and refined woman, who seems to be destined to work as a governess and nothing more. This simple yet short description allows the reader to imagine Jane as the traditional heroine coming from the lower classes and achieving in the end happiness and a good marriage. However, Emma despises her because of her reserved behaviour which is translated into jealousy between women. Moreover, Jane is the keeper of a secret: her engagement with Frank Churchill. The main reason why Emma does not like Jane is because she is not an open woman. Openness was a distinguishing trait of social relationships at the time and Jane's shy and reserved character are perceived by Emma as cold and hostile. Also, compared to Emma she lacks the power of imagination and her mind is just dull and plain.¹⁴¹

Because of her characterisation, Emma is, among all Austen's heroines, the perfect subject for debate and despite Erikson's psychological theory, the perception of her character can be tricky. Indeed, critic Richard Simpson, affirms that Jane Austen's heroines, especially Emma, do not possess fixed qualities but they struggle and conquest, as progressive states of mind, making these heroines living history, unfolding themselves with time.¹⁴² In more general terms, Emma can be perceived as a character that does not develop much from her childish and egocentric state, even though she is surely intelligent. For some readers, she is just a superficial and rich person who likes to meddle with others' lives. For more specialised people, Emma becomes a complex manipulative woman, tied to family and incapable of expressing her

¹³⁹ Kissane, 'Comparison's Blessed Felicity', pp. 173-184 (p. 174).

¹⁴⁰ E. N. Hayes, '*Emma*', p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Kissane, 'Comparison's Blessed Felicity', p. 178.

¹⁴² Kirkham, *Jane Austen*, p. 259.

feelings correctly. What is perceivable from her characterisation is that she is intelligent and capable of feeling her emotions very deeply, but she is not able to express them in the right way. She represents the most similar behaviour and the degree of freedom a modern woman now has. She thinks and acts without caring much about the rules society imposes on her, except for ranking. She uses her mind and intellect to help poor people in society and her friends when they need her, albeit in the wrong way, but she uses the resources at her disposal autonomously. In the sentimental sphere, Emma is very modern: when she finds the man she wants to marry, she does not ask for the blessing of a male figure but autonomously decides to court the man. This was not an acceptable behaviour even for a wealthy woman like her, but it shows how Austen's idea about feminism and women, in general, was changing. The patriarchal system of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth-century society is more and more disintegrated, its power is lost and modernity is indeed stepping in. Women are trying to become autonomous in every field and they are moving towards freedom and independence.

In conclusion, Emma is still a character that fascinates and intrigues both readers and critics. Her characterization is mostly modern and her complexity is so exceptional that it cannot be reproduced so faithfully in any movie adaptation or TV series. Directors and actors have done their best, but those interpretations of Emma will never be as close as the one and only imagined by Austen.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

As Bernard Paris stated in his work “*Character and Conflict in Jane Austen’s Novels: A Psychological Approach*” (1978) Jane Austen was a great comic artist, a serious interpreter of life and a creator of brilliant mimetic characterizations.¹⁴³ However, comedy and realism together can cause tensions in a text because they cannot easily coexist. Despite this difficult mix, Jane Austen was able to mix these elements together and create peculiar heroines. As a matter of fact, all female protagonists taken into analysis show a strong character, often in opposition to social conventions, something unthinkable for a woman of the early Nineteenth century. However, this revolutionary characteristic is present in all the analysed heroines. These novels were published in subsequent years, but they show striking differences in the depiction of their female heroines. The first two, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were written just one year apart, whereas *Emma* was written more than a decade later. Despite this temporal pause, the three novels are very similar in plot and structure, but their heroines are gradually more psychologically defined as the novels are published.

Austen chose to portray common people easy to identify with, who, in the end, after reaching maturation, achieve what they deeply desire. The protagonists are women, acting in some stylised and familiar situations where they are supposed to follow a code of behaviour typical of the late Eighteenth century. Focussing on characters, Austen stresses the submissive position of women in their family, their dutifulness, self-abnegation and self-control, which were traits belonging to moralists’ writings that already existed at the time.¹⁴⁴ But classify Austen’s heroines is not easy. Margaret Kirkham affirms that Jane Austen’s heroines are not conscious feminists, but they are part of the so-called “Enlightenment feminism”, where women share the same moral nature as men, the same moral status and exercise the same responsibility for their conduct.¹⁴⁵ This shows that Austen was writing about modern women, equals to men and possessing the same relevance in the social environment. This view on women was impossible to achieve in the late Eighteenth century, but by using fictional characters, Austen

¹⁴³ Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen’s Novels*, p. 13.

¹⁴⁴ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. xvi.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. xxii.

was making the first steps towards what would later be achieved by her sex: getting the same rights as men, gaining freedom and independence.

These heroines are a perfect, balanced mix of mimesis and comic. Austen uses the comic to create obstacles and to balance punishment and reward, whereas the realistic characterization of her heroines powerfully contrasts these comic actions. The reality of these heroines lays in the fact that they are drawn from reality, they resemble common people and they follow moral concerns of their society. The balance Austen gives to comic and realistic aspects is based on the heroines themselves. In all of her novels, these women are keeping their own identity and their values throughout the story. Some of them, such as Emma and Elizabeth need to change, albeit not drastically. This change is needed because as characters, they constitute an obstacle to their personal happiness. This is also why Austen manipulates the events so that they can help her heroines achieve their goals.¹⁴⁶

As mentioned earlier, these three novels have in common the structure of the plot, which presents tight intrigues and misunderstandings and thus leads the heroines to take a gradual consideration of their feelings. The depth of this inner consideration becomes deeper and detailed as the novels are published. Indeed, in the first novels, Austen plays with the juxtaposition of opposite values and gives less importance to the inner consciousness of her characters.¹⁴⁷ With the first three heroines, Elinor, Marianne and Elizabeth, the reader is accompanied through their adventures and discovers with them truths, lies and misunderstandings. The pieces of the puzzle lost in the plot are put together only at the end and, with it, comes the final decision of the heroine. Only with Emma, there is a much deeper psychological insight as the character discovers some inner aspects of herself and of the way she acts in relation to other people. Moreover, the reproaching tone the narrator reserves to the heroine becomes harsher in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, where the two protagonists show a more distinctive and rebellious attitude.

In the first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor and Marianne represent the first two female heroines in Austen's novel writing. Their description is already rounded, their physical and mental traits are meticulously described in the narration, but compared to the other heroines, they seem to be simpler and somehow superficial in their thoughts. A possible explanation for this could be the choice of the author to have two main characters sharing the narration, making the overall analysis of their feelings more complex and difficult to follow.

¹⁴⁶ Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁴⁷ Valerie Shaw, 'Jane Austen's Subdued Heroine', *Nineteen Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), pp. 281-303 (p. 287).

The two sisters already start to show their strong personalities, breaking some social conventions such as being emotional in public and deciding autonomously who they would like to marry. However, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the theme of marriage is still very much attached to tradition and the thread of finding a husband is dominating the narrative. The two sisters experience love almost immediately but nothing is easy as it appears. The obstacles they meet in their quest to find true love are formative because they make them question their feelings and in Elinor's case her reserved behaviour. It is not taken for granted that a reserved woman is the perfect symbol of a good wife, because, most times, being shy or reserved can be mistaken for coldness.

This misunderstanding between shyness and coldness is often used by Austen in her novels: in *Pride and Prejudice* Jane is so shy that she is believed to be cold and uninterested in Bingley; in *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor's reserved personality makes her the recipient of many secrets that harm her feelings; in *Emma*, Jane Fairfax is perceived as hostile because of her reserved attitude. Even though in the end Elinor marries Edward and she achieves her happy ending with him, she still represents the traditional woman: passive and emotionally constricted. She is driven by duty and her feelings come after. She never does anything actively to achieve what she deeply desires, but at the same time she is lucky because events turn out to be in her favour with Edward breaking off his engagement to Lucy. Moreover, the only time she breaks her emotional restraint is when she learns that Edward is single again. That cry of joy is all she allows herself to escape from her mouth.

With Marianne, there is already a change: she is more emotional than her sister and she does not control her emotions while in public. The lack of emotional control can be attributed to the fact that Marianne is still a teenager, but at seventeen, she has the right age to start looking for a suitable match. Despite this, she is still immature and keeps letting herself be dominated by emotions. She feels more than a normal person and this causes her to act recklessly to the point where she risks her reputation for a man who does not return her affections.

In their own way, the two sisters are defying some of the social rules imposed on them, but they are not as rebellious as Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Dashwood. They make the first steps towards rule-breaking, following their heart and risking their reputation. Love could mean going against the family's expectations of a good marriage, a secured future and a house. In their subtle way, Elinor and Marianne are heading towards independence since they are the masters of their own destinies. They learn what disappointment is and their adventures shape them in positive: Marianne, after having reconsidered Colonel Brandon's worth, marries him

because he is able to make her feel loved; Elinor instead, is more revolutionary because she marries for love and marries the man she has feelings for.

Austen makes a step further with Elizabeth Bennet's character. Compared to the two sisters, Elizabeth is revolutionary in many ways. She is the representation of a woman who possesses sensibility, depths of feelings and understanding, combined with strong independence.¹⁴⁸ The concept of pride and prejudice applied to the two main characters make Elizabeth undergo more truths than Elinor and Marianne. Her feelings are blinded by her prejudice towards Mr Darcy and when she understands it, she is finally able to see that the man she has despised so much is indeed a good man, loved by his housekeeper and friends. Because of pride, Elizabeth starts to analyse her family's behaviour and a new perspective opens up to her: she finds faults even in her father, the only family member she thought being not faulty. The shame she feels when in public because of her sisters and mother's behaviour is strengthened after Mr Darcy's explanation of why he prevented Jane and Bingley to be engaged: he remarks that their behaviour is not appropriate when they are in public because they do not show interest in one another. However, in the end, she acquires a clear view of Mr Darcy's personality and of her feelings. The power of these revelations is so strong that she feels frustrated because despite her intelligence she has not been able to read between the lines.

Miscommunication in this novel is a key feature of the entire plot. Elizabeth's emotional maturation reaches the apex during the long and lonely months where she never sees Mr Darcy. Her mind plays with the memories she has of this man; she reflects on his character as well as her reactions to it. The emotional depth here is more evident than in *Sense and Sensibility*. Thanks to Mr Darcy's absence, Elizabeth understands that she is indeed in love with him and has been blindsided by her prejudice and her beliefs on rich people.¹⁴⁹ The reflections she makes, show the reader a multi-faceted character with a deep consciousness. Compared to the structure of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* focusses solely on one character, Elizabeth, showing a more organised and logical conscience in the expression of her thoughts and feelings.

Elizabeth's modernity is enhanced by her refusal of two marriage proposals; a very uncommon action a woman could do: marriage is the ultimate goal of a woman's life because from it depends not only her future but also her family's reputation. What she uses to support

¹⁴⁸ Hui-Chun Chang, 'The Impact of the Feminist Heroine: Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 3 (2014), pp. 1-7 (p. 2).

¹⁴⁹ Greenfield, 'The Absent-Minded Heroine or Elizabeth Bennet has a Thought', p. 337.

her refusals are her rights as a woman and as individual. She would like to marry for love and share the rest of her life with a man who is her equal in morality and intelligence, thus why she refuses Mr Collins. Marriage with him would have been a loveless union based on duty. She thinks a lot about what happens to her, analysing the events and the behaviour of the people surrounding her. She criticises her best friend's decision of marrying Mr Collins just because she does not want to become a maid. This event appears to Elizabeth as pure egotism because she is sacrificing her happiness and her real emotions for an arranged marriage with a man she does not like. In this case, Charlotte represents tradition whereas Elizabeth is the revolution.

Love is for Elizabeth the strongest and purest feeling. Consequently, the importance this feeling has for her brings her to get married to a man she truly loves. This is why she refuses Mr Darcy's first proposal asserting that she would never marry him because he is not a good man. She does not want to sacrifice her freedom or her love for something society is expecting from her. She wants to be an independent woman, challenging gender inequality and remarking how society puts a lot of pressure on young women and their future.

Lastly, Elizabeth breaks social conventions by talking back to Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr Darcy, two people socially superior to her. This behaviour shows how little social stratification matters to her and how, in her opinion, people do not need to use their social status as a right to act snobbish or to mistreat people who are socially inferior to them. What Elizabeth searches for and likes in a person are respect and education and both Mr Darcy and his aunt act disagreeably to her: the former interferes with Jane's engagement and the latter belittles her because of the lack of a governess for her education and the choice of her family to introduce all their daughters in society at the same time without respecting the rule to wait for the eldest one to be married.

With this character, Jane Austen goes against the social position a woman should have in Regency England, making her a proto-feminist. Elizabeth is not a feminist in the extreme sense of the word, but she is making some steps towards the beliefs of feminism. Her aching for independence, her strength in defying male dominance and fighting for gender equality are already important goals she creates for herself. Also, she wants a husband who loves her and who shares her views on the world. But to achieve this, Elizabeth's stubbornness and impertinent character, allow her to make Mr Darcy's beliefs change. She is not forcefully shaping the man's ideas and beliefs, but she is showing him that not everything he knew about

the world was right.¹⁵⁰ As part of the middle class, Elizabeth sees things more concretely and shows Darcy that feelings matter more than class division. Her feminist traits are what make her a rather modern character in Austen's novel writing. However, Elizabeth is not her final version of a feminist character. That place will later be given to Emma Woodhouse.

In *Emma*, Jane Austen shapes a heroine that uses views and words that in the late Eighteenth century could only be attributed to men. In fact, Emma believes herself to be equal to a man because of her wealth, she does not need marriage because she is already financially stable, she speaks her mind freely like a man would do and she prefers to speak instead of staying silent.¹⁵¹ Emma's character is emphasised by Harriet, who represents her opposite. The latter one is created by Austen to portray the typical view women of the late Eighteenth century ought to have about marriage. Emma educates Harriet to be a perfect, traditional woman because her social position is almost non-existent because of her orphan status. Harriet needs a marriage, a man that can provide financially for her and that can give her a title. Emma instead has already all of it. With *Emma*, Austen makes further steps towards modernism and equality between the sexes. The gradual depiction of women refusing to be subjected to male power or social conventions makes clear that even though the Regency Era was still dominated by patriarchy, things were gradually changing.

These novels are Austen's means to share with the reading public her vision of the world, where men and women had the same rights and the same freedom. Emma is indeed understood by the modern reader as the "fantasy of autonomy"¹⁵² because she is the representative figure of autonomy. But what readers forget is that these are fictional characters acting in a fictive world. The historical and political background is barely kept by the author, so the reader must be prudent when identifying with a character. Usually in novel writing, rules adapt to characters and do not always reflect reality. An example can be Emma's autonomy in her choices: despite being rich, she would not have had all that freedom in the real world. Social classes, marriage and wealth are still strong features of the late Eighteenth-century society and even she would have been subjected, at least slightly, to them.

All three novels should be understood and analysed by paying particular attention to the time and place they are set. But as it appears, the environment in which the story develops is

¹⁵⁰ Mihaela Živković, *Protofeminist Characters in Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, Emma and Mansfield Park*, (Bachelor Thesis, University of Zagreb, 2018), p. 25.

¹⁵¹ Donna Hilbrant, 'Jane Austen Shows her Feminist Side in Emma', *Owlcation.com*, (2017) <<https://owlcation.com/humanities/Jane-Austen-Shows-her-Feminist-Side-in-Emma>> [accessed 29.09.2021]

¹⁵² Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels*, Methuen (New York, 1987), pp. 19-21.

manipulated by the author to accommodate the heroine's change and further maturation. The background changes too: the society, in which the heroine lives, goes from stratified and patriarchal to a less restricted one, where people can fulfil their desires and gradually become deserving and rational beings. But the reality of the characters does not end with the story. The narrator operates a general view of their future life with the partner they have found after lots of misunderstandings and difficulties. But whether these characters are able or not to keep this newfound attitude is not known. The full development Austen's characters have, makes it hard for the reader to be happy at the end of the novel. The reading public struggles to see beyond the end of the story because Austen's characters are already so developed that there is no point in imagining what happens next.

Since these heroines are placed in a stratified society where they interact with people belonging to other classes, communication between them can be difficult. Elizabeth's communication with Darcy is indeed difficult and they often misinterpret one another's words; Emma treats people as her inferiors and is often rude to them, making sly remarks and being unable to refrain herself when speaking about others; Elinor and Marianne risk to lose their opportunity to achieve a happy ending because they cannot freely declare their love to the two men they love. Their social behaviour is limited by the established social norms and this can be misleading for the reader. Gestures, shyness, silence, words, all matter in communication, but at the time, a woman could not be so confident and declare her love for a man or make effusions in public. People were much more prudish and physical contact was not allowed between people who were not engaged. So miscommunication is what makes these novels so comic and theatrical at the same time.

In his work *Resisting Novels* (1987), Lennard Davis dedicates an entire chapter to characters. He states that, in novels, characters mislead the reader to think that they are going to tell them about real-life events and people but, in reality, characters are not real people, they are fabricated constructs.¹⁵³ However, what distinguishes modern characters is the presence of psychology. They give access to their mind to the reader so that the motives behind what they do are known and understandable. Also, characters are deeply embedded in their social and historical backgrounds. But what Davis focuses on is the aspect of the reader: for him, the reader is the means through which characters become alive. Characters are purposefully created by the author and they are designed to identify with the observer. In Jane Austen's case, her heroines

¹⁵³ On this see Lennard Davis, *Resisting Novels*, p. 116.

need to be considered as creations inside a creation, since their complexity does not allow them to be fully understood. The environment in which they are placed and their characterization are heavily intertwined with one another. They need to be understood in relation to the place and the other characters surrounding them.

To further understand the difference between a character and a living person, Davis proposes to make a distinction between character and personality. Character is what fictional people have because they are formed by characteristics, whereas people in real life have personalities. The main difference here is that personalities are not always coherent nor understandable. Sometimes they are misinterpreted or inaccessible to others. Also, it is very difficult to provide a valid description of someone's personality and be satisfied with the outcome, so personalities are more complex than characteristics. The reading of the novel creates the illusion that characters have personalities because the boundaries of fiction are overstepped by the reader.¹⁵⁴ This, however, makes it clear that even if characters are fictional beings, they do need to be as close as possible to reality, with all the positive and negative aspects of their persona. They need to seem like complex beings but literary speaking they are simplified because they do not exist in the real world. They need to have clear limits in order to differ from other characters. The author of the novel creates instructions the reader needs to build that specific character in their mind.

In Austen's novels, the creation of the character is clearer than in other writers' works. Critics affirm that these heroines can be part of two schools of thought on characters. They can be "purists" or "realists".¹⁵⁵ Austen's characters are both because, as part of the purists they do not belong to the real world, they are fictional creations who are subjected to the author's design. As part of the realists, they indeed acquire a certain independence from the plot, thus it is easy to discuss them from a distance. In this case, the creative writing of Jane Austen puts together the three forms of mimesis, form and theme, so it is important to look at and analyse her characters as both purists and realists. Their complexity is intriguing and tense at the same time, so there is a path to follow in order to understand them. Austen heroines must be firstly understood psychologically because most of the conflicts take place in their minds; only after doing that there is the possibility to look at the comic, mimetic and moral aspects they have. As problems in this last part, there can be a conflict between realism and comic because Austen

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 111.

¹⁵⁵ On this see Bernard Paris, *Character and Conflict in Jane Austen's Novels*, pp. 17-19.

does not sacrifice the realistic aspects of her novels in favour of the comic but manipulates the fictional world in favour of her heroines.

But what is peculiar in Austen is that she introduces her characters with an omniscient narrator, which clearly states the characteristics of these fictional people. Here, the fictive part of the character is explained with the narrator and she does not have to overwork herself in search of a way to make her characters seem like real people. Austen writes for amusement and this is exactly what she does with her technique.

Another point in character making is to try and make them comprehensible to the reader, thus fulfilling the idea that people's personalities can be understood. Because of this, the concept of individuality is given much importance. Portraying a group is no easy task since it is formed by many people, but if there is focus on one character, then it can be full of details and better shaped in terms of personality avoiding dissolution.¹⁵⁶ The single character is then shaped by the public environment in which it is placed, in fact public beliefs and social norms are aspects that play a part in the shaping of the individual's maturation. The process towards maturity brings a change in characters, making them go from unfeeling to feeling or from naïve to knowing. This change brings the character to be more similar to a real living person.

A further step is made by authors of the early Eighteenth and Nineteenth century when they apply psychology to their character's minds. They make them speak through their thoughts, which become a powerful voice. In this case, physical appearance shifts back to the background, whereas other abstract qualities of the character are brought in the first plan. An example can be Jane Austen's depiction of Elizabeth Bennet: the reader may have to think twice about Elizabeth's appearance because what strikes their attention is mainly her wild temperament and her sensuous eyes. These two features are often recalled by the narrator, but her physical appearance is not given any further descriptions.¹⁵⁷

As Roland Barthes states, characters display some physical features, which may hide a specific intention of the author.¹⁵⁸ Physical traits can be used for a specific purpose in the novel making. Another aspect that is part of the novel is the concept of beauty: in most novels belonging to the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth century, the main character is often depicted as beautiful. This reminds readers that being aesthetically pleasing is a trait that even today is still kept in the film industry, where leading actors are rather attractive. However,

¹⁵⁶ Davis, *Resisting Novels*, pp. 114-119.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 122.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 123.

beauty, as Davis states, is often associated with specific traits that characters need to have: men are brave, rebellious within the limits and romantic whereas women are virtuous, rebellious within the limits and desirable. Generally speaking, beauty is associated with social class and the lifestyle it brings with. There is no mandatory association between beauty and physical appearances also because, in the Twentieth century, beauty is never associated with characters.

Lastly, the plotline is rather simple in all three books, but each heroine, because of miscommunication, plays a catalytic role, starting the complex net of intrigues and events that constitute the real core of each novel. What Austen wanted to strike with it, was the idea of a less constricted, less structuralised society, where individuals can interact freely without needing to keep in mind all those rules and prohibitions. In order to do so, she has imagined four heroines, all with different personalities and gradually deeper psychological insight, acting in a harsh and ruthless world where money and status are everything that counts. These heroines defeat social conventions, manners and they finally achieve their goal in the end. They are modern before their time, they are actual, fresh and revolutionary because they defeat everything they have been taught in life in order to achieve happiness without sacrificing their identity, especially as women. The vindication of female identity as independent from the masculine one is a wide step towards modern times.

In conclusion, to answer the main question of this thesis about whether Austen's heroines are just revolutionary fictional characters or real feminists, it can be said that all four analysed heroines have proven to be modern, independent and revolutionary characters, not just on paper, but also as representations of human beings. These heroines are not traditional fine women, they are strong-headed, self-confident and they will do everything they need to achieve their happiness, even if this means going against their society's rules. The idea of having faulty heroines, who make mistakes and display a rebellious or impertinent personality is a very modern idea of representing women in literature. Indeed, they do not follow the literary currents of the time, instead, they create a new current, where imperfections are what make them real and easy to identify with. Moreover, their psychological insight and the way they choose to act in given situations, often defying social conventions which regulate their lives, are the first steps Austen makes towards female independence and self-affirmation in society, where values such as personal happiness and fulfilment were starting to gain importance. The representation of these women as individuals who can make decisions without relying on other people's will is what really contrasts with the era Austen was living in. An independent woman, choosing what is best for herself is indeed a powerful image in literature, but is also very powerful in the

Eighteenth-century society because that would mean that men were losing their power over women. Austen was audacious as a writer, but at the same time, she was projecting her personal desires onto her characters, desires which reflected the subtle changes that were already happening in that heavily stratified society she was living in and giving hope to women in terms of freedom and equality.

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