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JANE AUSTEN: Lessons in 'ladyhood' for both ladies *and*
gentlemen of nineteenth-century England and beyond.

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Abstract

Austen took up the literary challenge and wrote within the tight parameters set by the prevailing male society. She was able to portray her heroines as ideals of “ladyhood”, she rejected skewed masculine values unfavourable to women prevalent during her time. Her heroines discover feminine self-awareness, they have travelled the path of fundamental growth and maturation. Admired in her own century as having “nothing doctrinaire” in her work and ‘no trace of a woman’s mission’ (Parrish, p.370) in the hindsight of one hundred and fifty years; it is important to recognise both her teaching intent and her concern with female development, indeed, it is impossible not to recognise her “pondered intent” in relation to social and political issues generally that was eclipsed by earlier hegemonies.

Acknowledgments

My interest in Jane Austen has never faltered and I continue to enjoy her novels today as I did when I read my first Austen novel whilst still at school. I was also fascinated with her personal background; how a commonplace daughter of a country clergyman was able to make such an overwhelming contribution to the literary world. I did not appreciate at that time the extent of the literary quality in her work, but when serious study began at university my admiration became a passion. Austen continues to be part of the English school curriculum in England to date and, no doubt, she will continue to be so in the future. Remaining focussed on a limited area of Austen's works has been a challenge as there is so much of Austen that I find interesting. The past twelve months have often been demanding but without the support of two important people this thesis would not have been possible. I would like to acknowledge the valued assistance of my supervisor, Mary Paul, who has made available her encouragement, guidance and support from the initial stages to the closing pages of this project, thank you. Secondly, I owe my deepest gratitude to my husband Robert, who has given his unwavering assistance and endless supply of patience throughout my academic progress.

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Introduction

In late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century England, in order to continue and perpetuate the status quo, men, husbands and fathers had to be key players in the game of life. Laws of the land had, for centuries, protected their interests and men were in alliance to preserve their privileges of property, money, and rights and at the same time, deny any freedom of choice to their female counterparts. Austen sought to address some aspects of this injustice to women, but in particular she addressed her abhorrence at the very notion of marriage for money rather than for love. *Northanger Abbey* was written when Jane Austen was still a young woman,¹ and like Jane, the narrator also disapproves of marriage for money:

‘Fortune is nothing. I am sure of a good income of my own; and if she had not a penny, why so much the better.’

‘Very true. I think like you there. If there is a good fortune on one side, there can be no occasion for any on the other. No matter which has it, so that there is enough. I hate the idea of a great fortune looking out for another; and to marry for money, I think the wickedest thing in existence.’ (*Northanger Abbey*, p. 113)

Austen’s abhorrence was particularly risky and radical because at that time women depended on men for financial support and security. There were little or no means available for middle-class women to support themselves. In a letter to her niece, Fanny Knight,² Jane Austen writes:

¹ MS sold to R Crosby & Co in the spring of 1803 – according to Cassandra Austen, Jane’s sister, it was completed by 1798, Jane Austen would have been twenty two years old.

² Daughter of Edward Austen, adopted son of landed gentry and sole heir to their estate in Kent.

Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony, but I need not dwell on such arguments with *you*, pretty dear, you do not want inclination. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.332)

In Austen's lifetime the idea of immutable human rights according to birth, and to a lesser extent gender, were questioned by the 1789 French Revolution and related English movements. Yet, during the time of Austen's writing career writing the Evangelical faith was also a growing force throughout English social life. Allied to the reactive conservative political mood of the times, intensified both by the challenge of revolutionary thought in Europe, but also by the extreme events in France, the Evangelical doctrine strongly condemned all forms of levity. Its influence was to bring about a moral and cultural conformity that established the Victorian values. The tension between this movement and libertarian an egalitarian activity and thought made early nineteenth-century England, as Marilyn Butler argues, politically a particularly turbulent country. Not only was there a threat of French invasion, but also fears of a revolution, as had recently occurred in France, were looming. Butler, writing in the 1970s, saw Austen's novels as representing anti-Jacobin (ie anti-leftist or radical) attitudes. And, although Austen wrote a prototype of what we now call romance fiction, this is not to be identified with the cultural and literary movement of Romanticism that was another expression of radicalism. To a limited extent Austen engaged with Romantic ideals through dramatization of the attractions of love and sensibility but she maintained a conservative vision, her plots are designed to uphold the establishment, be it church, government, or family structure.

In contemporary rethinking Austen's novels may now be seen as evidencing complex judgements as she operates within this turbulent mix. While in some aspects of the plot Austen is firmly in the realms of conservatism her radicalism may be identified in the novel's contents, as she dramatizes and questions the extent of paternalistic responsibilities, the coalescence of the

aristocratic and middle-class interests, the nature of moral education and the duties within the family and society at large. Austen, as I will argue, is also concerned with women's position in society, the inadequacy of the female education, their lack of independence under patriarchy. I discuss Austen's six major novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion* and refer to Austen's letters and critical discourse.

At this point, it is relevant to trace the history of marriage as perceived by evolving societies over the millennia to establish if marriage has indeed perpetuated male power and authority and if this was the purpose of marriage. Stephanie Coontz (2005) has chartered the 'social invention' (*Marriage, a History*, p. 34) of marriage; she begins with the Egyptians, Ancient Greeks, Romans, and concludes in the twenty-first-century. Her research covers many cultures and also examines different class structures within a particular culture. When discussing the eighteenth-century, Coontz sees marriage as a less turbulent affair among people who were not in pursuit of political power. She argues that marriage was a matter of practical calculation rather than an arrangement entered into for the individual fulfilment and pursuit of happiness:

For people with property, marriage was an economic transaction that involved the transfer or consolidation of land as well as the development of social networks. Even small landowners manipulated kin and marriage ties to consolidate property. For families with larger amounts of wealth, marriages in [eighteenth-century] world were the equivalent of today's business mergers or investment partnerships. (*Marriage, a History*, p. 63)

Coontz, furthermore, argues that even those individuals fortunate enough to be able to make their own marriage partners did so with political and financial motivation rather than with notions of love or desire.

She marks the end of the 1700s as a time of profound change in record time regarding society's views on the institution of marriage. By this period in time people were encouraged to marry for love:

For the first time in five thousand years, marriage came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals rather than one link in a larger system of political and economic alliances. The measure of successful marriage was no longer how big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members. Where once marriage had been seen as the fundamental unit of work and politics, it was now viewed as a place of refuge from work, politics and community obligations. (*Marriage, a History*, p. 63)

Austen began her own mission for the institution of marriage through her novels; she saw marriage as a private and intimate relationship that should fulfil emotional desires. A successful marriage had as its foundation stone the true sentiment of love.

By the end of the eighteenth-century, Jane Austen was twenty-five years old and had already written three novels, not in the form they were later to be published, but nonetheless, they were completed works. The latest trends in novel reading were domestic scenes of the family and its relationships. Many popular novels of the time were about sentimental, sickly love stories, which Austen viewed with contempt, 'pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked'. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.335) Austen was interested in a more sophisticated writing style and chose to write clever satires of arranged marriages and the financial aspects of courtship; she was interested in the "here and now" of her own society and in great detail. When she wrote in 1816, to Stanier Clarke,³ 'Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit and Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in' (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.312), she was working to her own theory of the realist novel genre. And furthermore, in another letter to her nephew

³ Stanier Clarke was librarian and chaplain of the Prince Regent, later George IV, who escorted Jane Austen on her tour of Carlton House.

James Edward Austen, also an aspiring writer, who had mockingly charged his aunt of having purloined two missing chapters, she replies, 'what should I do with your strong, manly, spirited sketches, full of variety and Glow? – how could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour?' (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.323)

Austen's work is rooted in reality, so much so that if actual occurrences appeared unnatural she would not consider them to be included in her work. In giving advice and editing part a novel for her niece Anna Austen, another aspiring writer, she goes to great lengths to ensure reality is faithfully portrayed:

I have scratched out Sir Tho: from walking with the other Men to the Stables & c the very day after his breaking his arm – for though I find your Papa did walk out immediately after his arm was set, I think it can be so little usual as to appear unnatural in a book - & does not seem to be material that Sir Tho: should go with them. Lyme will not do. Lyme is towards 40 miles distance from Dawlish & would not be talked of there. I have put Starcross indeed. If you prefer *Exeter*, that must always be safe. I have also scratched out the Introduction between Lord P. and his brother, & Mr Griffin. A Country Surgeon (don't tell Mr Lyford)⁴ would not be introduced to Men of their rank. And when Mr Portman is first brought in, he w[oul]d not be introduced as the Hon.ble – That distinction is never mentioned at such times; at least I beleive (sic) not. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, P.268)

And:

And we think you had better not leave England. Let the Portmans go to Ireland, but as you know nothing of the Manners there, you had better not go with them. You will be in danger of giving false representations. Stick to Bath & the Forresters. There you will be quite at home. Your Aunt C. does not like desultory novels, & is rather fearful yours will be too much so, ... I allow much more Latitude than She does. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, P.269)

⁴ Mr Lyford was the Austen family surgeon.

From Austen's many personal letters much can be learned of her philosophy as a writer. The letters are able to reveal a very conservative minded person who holds some very strong principles. These very personal and occasionally intimate letters are the only evidence of Jane Austen *the person* as opposed to the fictional works of the author. These personal quotes are also further evidence of the educational intentions in her novels. Austen's realist works have led many of her critics from varying periods to want to position her in opposing modes of thought. Either she wrote limited and boring novels or she was one of the world's greatest and innovative writers. Claudia L Johnson summarises, 'a conservative holding the values of the landed gentry in the late eighteenth-century or ... a subversive who undercuts the very premises upon which English society rests' (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, p. 337) It is perhaps more beneficial to place her more appropriately somewhere in the middle of these two extreme views.

It is well established that the setting for each of Jane Austen's novels was very similar to the setting of her own life, the upper-middle class of rural England. The cast of characters usually includes those people considered to be the elite of rural society, great and titled land owners, as well as those perched on the margins of gentility, and those who were advancing through the ranks, both literally and metaphorically. It has only been recently, at the end of the twentieth-century and the beginning of the twenty-first, that a plausibly complete picture of Austen's life can be seen 'based upon original research in family archives and civic records.' (*Jane Austen in Context*, p.38) Claire Tomalin in her biography *Jane Austen: A Life*, tells us that Austen had a classical reading background and that she read contemporary poets and fiction, in her personal letters we even have evidence of what kind of writers she admired.

Tomalin also tells us that Austen was brought up in a free learning environment and that her own literary creativeness began at an early age by entertaining her family with readings of her tales. By the young age of seventeen she was already quite a talented and experienced author. Tomalin seeks to investigate the discrepancy between the narrowness of her life,⁵ for she had originally been described as having lived an uneventful life, and the brilliance of her work. Tomalin makes it clear that Austen led a busier life than had been known though Austen's life was, for the most part, subordinate to the needs and desires of others. Tomalin portrays a feisty and determined character who rejected the conventional path of marriage in favour of the unconventional path of spinsterhood. She challenges the traditional image of Austen as a Tory; she also makes a case for the Austens as a meritocratic family that built up their fortunes due to hard work and shrewdness rather than through inheritances, family connections and extended networks.

⁵ In the first biographical work by H Austen, and nephew, J E Austen, Jane is described as not having an eventful life, the two biggest events in many, if not most western world women's' lives, is marriage and bearing children.

(1) Austen's contemporary Readership:

Jane Austen received virtually no publicity as a writer in her own lifetime, indeed she was scarcely known. Only family and close friends were intended to hold the open secret that she was a professional writer. Proof of her modesty and unpretentiousness, as Henry Austen confirmed when he wrote in the Biographical Notice (1817) in *Northanger Abbey* and, contrary to what some attacking modern biographers would have readers believe, may be found in an letter to her brother Francis Austen in 1813:

Henry [Austen] heard that P. & P. warmly praised in Scotland, by Lady Rob[er]t Kerr and another Lady; - & what does he go and do in the warmth of his Brotherly vanity & Love, but immediately tell them who wrote it! - A Thing once set going in that way - one knows how it spreads! - and he, dear Creature, has set it going so much more than once. I know it is all done for affection & partiality - but at the same time, let me here again express to you & Mary my sense of the superior kindness which you have shewn [sic] on the occasion, in doing what I wished. - I am trying to harden myself. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 231)

Even after her death, the novels *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published anonymously, according to her wishes they were released with the usual terminology "written by A Lady".

Sense and Sensibility was first published in 1811 and received very favourable reviews. The Countess of Bessborough, sister to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, wrote, 'It is a very clever novel tho' it ends stupidly I was very much amused by it.' (Beecher Hogan, p40) And in 1813 *Pride and Prejudice* was also in receipt of good reviews, the reviewer of the *British Critic* writes:

We cannot conclude without repeating our approbation of this performance which rises very superior to any novel we have lately met with in the delineation of domestic scenes. (Beecher Hogan, p. 41)

However, it was only after the review published in the *Quarterly Review*⁶ that greater interest was aroused; admiration for Austen's novels was official and in print.

The popularity of *Pride and Prejudice* can be substantiated by Anne Millbanke, the future Lady Byron, who observed that it was 'at present the fashionable novel' and contained 'more strength of character than other productions of this kind.' (Beecher Hogan, p. 41) Maria Edgeworth also commented 'we are again on the London road and nothing has interrupted our perusal of "Pride and Prejudice" for the rest of the morning.' (Beecher Hogan, p. 42) The following year, in 1814, Mary Russell Mitford, a British poet, novelist and dramatist, thought very highly of *Pride and Prejudice*, she wrote:

I quite agree with you in preferring Miss Austen to Miss Edgeworth. ... There is none of the harshness, the cold selfishness, of Miss Edgeworth about her writings; she is in a much better humour with the world; she preaches no sermons; she wants nothing but the beau-ideal of the female character to be a perfect novel. (Beecher Hogan, p. 42)

Thus far Jane Austen had good reason to be pleased with the reception of her first two novels. Though this did not prevent her from being auto-critical, for she wrote in 1813:

Upon the whole however, I am quite vain enough and well satisfied enough. – the work is rather too light & bright & sparkling; it wants shade; - ... an Essay on Writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte – or anything that would form a contrast & bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness & Epigrammatism of the general style. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.203)

Austen was well aware of her target audiences; she had access to the worlds of the upper classes and aristocracy, and was educated and talented enough to impress many male readers, notwithstanding her lack of formal education, that was dominated by males. She comically comments, 'I do not

⁶ John Murray was Jane Austen's publisher and also proprietor of the *Quarterly Review*.

write for such dull elves' (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 202) when reading her first printed copy of *Pride and Prejudice* and realises that clearer signalling of the dialogues would have improved the reader's understanding.

In 1814 *Mansfield Park* was published, and given Austen's moderate success of the previous two novels, *Mansfield Park* never received any mention from the reviewers. It was not until Scott's review of *Emma*, when he referred to the author's previous *two* novels instead of *three* that Austen wrote to John Murray her publisher:

I return you the Quarterly Review with many thanks. The Authoress of *Emma* has no reason I think to complain of her treatment in it – except in the total omission of *Mansfield Park*. – I cannot but be sorry that so clever a Man as the Reviewer of *Emma*, should consider it as unworthy of being noticed. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 313)

By way of recompense Austen herself collected, under the title 'Opinions of *Mansfield Park*', some thirty-eight views; she was keenly interested in what readers thought of her novels. Beecher Hogan has several comments from high ranking and fashionable highbrow readers. A Miss Romilly in correspondence with Miss Edgeworth wrote, '[*Mansfield Park*] has been generally admired here, and I think all novels must be that are true to life which this is.' (Beecher Hogan, p.43) In a private letter to Jane Austen, Lady Kerr comments:

You may be assured I read every line with the greatest interest & am more delighted with it than my humble pen can express. The excellent delineation of Character, sound sense, Elegant Language & pure morality with which it abounds, makes it a most desirable as well as useful work, & reflects the highest honour &c. &c. - universally admired ... by all the *wise ones*. – Indeed, I have not heard a single fault given to it. (Southam (ed), p.50)

Like Lady Kerr, Austen's first publisher Mr Egerton also expressed praise for the level of morality in *Mansfield Park*.

By the time *Emma* was about to make her entrance into the literary world, both the *Quarterly Review* and the *British Critic* were already giving high praises to the work. Scott wrote for the *Quarterly*, which will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter; and the *British Critic's* review read:

Whoever is fond of an amusing, inoffensive and well principled novel, will be well pleased with the perusal of EMMA. It rarely happens that in a production of this nature we have so little to find fault with. ... The author ... has contrived in a very interesting manner ... to form out of slender materials a very pleasing tale. (Beecher Hogan, p.45)

The previously mentioned Miss Mitford considered *Emma* to be the 'best of all [Jane Austen's] charming works.' (Beecher Hogan, p. 45) However, Miss Romilly found the novel quite insipid, so much so that she wrote in a letter to Miss Edgeworth 'there is so little to remember that I am not inclined to write about it.' (Beecher Hogan, p. 45)

Shortly after her death in July 1817, Austen's name appeared in public for the first time. She was finally acknowledged as the authoress of her four novels. Five months later *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published along with Henry Austen's "Biographical Notice", which heightened interest in the author. The *British Critic* quoted the biography at considerable length and concluded with a general analysis of Austen's work. With an obvious intention of sales promotion, it reports:

Northanger Abbey is one of the very best of Miss Austen's productions, and will every way repay the time and trouble of perusing it. (Beecher Hogan, p. 47)

In Scotland, the *Edinburgh Magazine* fermented Austen's popularity by printing an extremely laudable review, part of it reads:

We are happy to receive two other novels from the pen of this amiable and agreeable authoress, though our satisfaction is much alloyed, from the feeling, they must be the last. ... We have no hesitation in saying, that the delightful writer of the works now before us, will be one of the most popular of English novelists, and if, indeed, we could point out the individual who, with a certain limited range, has attained the highest perfection of the art of novel

writing, we should have little scruple in fixing upon her. ... She has much observation, - much fine sense, - much delicate humour, - many pathetic touches, and a tone of gentleness and purity that are almost unequalled. (Beecher Hogan, p.48)

Persuasion received very few comments and was not seen in to favourable a light; the *Gentleman's Magazine* merely states, '*Northanger Abbey* is decidedly preferable to the second novel, not only in the incidents, but even in its moral tendency.' (Beecher Hogan, p. 48) But Maria Edgeworth disagrees, for she dislikes, 'The behaviour of the General in "*Northanger Abbey*", packing off the young lady without a servant or the common civilities' (Beecher Hogan, p. 48) and prefers ' "*Persuasion*" – excepting the tangled, useless histories of the family in the first fifty pages – appears to me, especially in all that relates to poor Anne and her lover, to be exceedingly interesting and natural. (Beecher Hogan, p. 49)

Even for contemporary readers, responses are very varied, and have continued to diversify in many areas. Austen herself was very interested in the views of her readers and documented these various opinions with substantial detail. As mentioned earlier, she compiled lists of varying responses to *Mansfield Park* and also *Emma*, the preferences of many readers contrast with those of many others and it is difficult to establish an overall favourite, as many respondents made comparisons between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen was mindful to record the names alongside their comments and many are easily identifiable as family members or close friends of the family. Austen's own words, 'Nothing will please all the world, you know;' (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.373) seem most appropriate here. In her own time, as in the following two hundred years, she has had defenders, detractors and apathetics. The point I am attempting to establish is, not what later, non-contemporary critics believe the purpose of her novels to be, but what she intended and what her contemporaries understood. The sparse but well documented personal and public records demonstrate an overwhelming case for that purpose to be

educational. Austen wrote of morals, manners, principles, protocols and etiquettes of England's polite society which reinforce the societal structure, but I argue, that she also wrote to modify the marriage and courtship customs of ladies and gentlemen in the privileged classes of society.

(2) Dysfunctional Fathers and Mothers

The model family results out of a critique of the status quo. Fathers in the Jane Austen novels are for the most part absent. It is the spirited and intelligent women that are central to her works and provide their moral centre. Men are never primary characters and fathers are almost always peripheral. Even when they remain within the domestic environment they do not provide any moral guidance for their children, or conduct themselves in a way that promotes good sense and judgement. The most sensible female characters, Elinor, Elizabeth, Jane, Fanny, and Anne, seem to have looked at the world and formed their own system of moral values and understanding of how they should behave; whilst the silly girls, Lydia, Maria, Julia, and (initially) Marianne, have looked at the world and seen only its stupidity and taken that for correct behaviour. It appears that the younger characters learn from their contemporaries rather from their parents or elders.

In one sense it could be argued that Austen may be seen as being radical in saying that parents cannot be aware of the changing currents of contemporary society and are unable to relate to young people. However, although Austen addresses the educatory and moral shortcomings of many in society, she can be seen to support patriarchy. Indeed, in many of her novels it is the youthful characters that take on the role of father or mother. All of Austen's heroines have been either educated or lectured by men, older women – often a sister, or by experience themselves: they have never learnt from a parent. Often it is the heroines who act as educators. Elizabeth Bennet, like Elinor, Marianne and Anne Elliot, learn through experience; Emma is guided by Mr Knightley, as is Catherine Morland by Henry Tilney; Fanny Price is vastly responsible for the moral instruction at Mansfield Park. They need to learn that appearances are often deceptive, no matter how attractive; Wickham, Willoughby, Crawford, Churchill, Eliot and Thorpe all lack moral strength and importantly, stability. This last point will be discussed later.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth, unlike her mother, is keenly aware of the deficiencies in the behaviour of her younger sisters, and the impropriety of chasing soldiers throughout Meryton. Indeed, the narrator reveals that Mrs Bennet 'cried for two days together when Colonel Miller's regiment went away. I thought I should have broken my heart.' (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.177) And it is Elizabeth who tries to persuade her father of the dangers of allowing the immature and irresponsible Lydia to go to Brighton, later, in direct criticism of her education and upbringing Elizabeth states:

She has never been taught to think on serious subjects, ... she has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came her way. (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 216)

Lydia is nauseated when Mr Collins attempts to instruct with Fordyce's sermons which he claims, were written for the sole purpose of young ladies' benefit, and typically, Lydia uses the pages for curling papers to do her hair.

Similarly in *Sense and Sensibility* it is Elinor who takes on the role of housekeeper, and it is she who attempts to rein in Marianne's love for Willoughby. Mrs Dashwood is passive and delicate, the family would never be able to survive without astute Elinor. The late Mr Dashwood has failed to provide financially for either his widow or his daughters; another subtle criticism by the author. Mr Dashwood should have attended to financial affairs well before the death-bed plea for help to his son by his first wife. Irresponsible parenting was an issue Austen addresses in all six of her novels. This again reinforces that she pitches all of the narratives in the upper landowning classes and is acutely critical of their failing moral standards in many areas of social behaviour.

Austen is not overtly criticising the prevailing gender culture, or the balance of power between men and women, but neither was she an outright supporter of it. Austen is correcting the misapprehensions of the new middle classes that all the values and habits as the upper classes are to be emulated. She is creating a debate and a new amalgam of values and conduct for the new society. Her novels rather promote debate, as some of her titles would suggest, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Persuasion*.

Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century society looked to the higher orders of society for moral guidance, but didn't always find it there. With the emergence of the rising middle classes, the nouveaux riches, Austen sought to address the new social balance. As Monaghan notes, 'The middle classes were not granted any independent moral role, but were simply expected to follow the example set by the landowners.' (*Jane Austen, Structure and Social Vision*, p.6) Austen is sympathetic to the new class structure and is intent on offering a positive and dignified model in which to follow but does not want to see the new model include the worst aspects of some of the aristocracy.

Austen's positive and dignified model is in opposition to the pretentious aping of the aristocratic manners and obsession with rank. The male heroes in her novels also tend to take on the role of the father. Darcy, in wishing to serve Elizabeth, saves the entire reputation of the Bennet family. He is a man of the world and even without his knowledge of Wickham's former associates, he would know where to seek for a couple on the run. To say that fathers are absent or weak in Jane Austen's novels, and that she concentrates on the younger generation and feisty women, is not to say that patriarchy is absent for the model father and new family. This new family model is found in the male heroes and feisty heroines. Furthermore, Darcy runs a successful estate and is respected and celebrated as a good landlord.

Colonel Brandon is also a positive role model; he too, has a well-run estate and has acted as surrogate father to Eliza. Mr Knightley, in *Emma*, is the more obvious father figure, sixteen years her senior, he is the one who corrects her behaviour and challenges her decisions, in contrast to Mr Woodhouse, who is best described as a valetudinarian and a hypochondriac. He is over indulgent to his daughter, as he believes her to be perfection incarnate. Emma is indeed both a loving and caring daughter, however, Mr Woodhouse has no desire to control her, and there is no evidence to suggest that he has in the past. Emma has had a good education and is intelligent, but despite her governess's best efforts, Emma is wilful:

Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of governess, the mildness of her temper had hardly allowed her to impose any restraint; and the shadow of authority being now long passed away, ... and Emma doing just what she liked. (*Emma*, p.5)

The novel tells us that only her mother was able to manage her. It is because Emma is socially privileged and unmanaged that she is idle and indulges in inappropriate matchmaking.

Austen does support the patriarchal system but sees women as needing to be full and equal partners in marriage, and often as more value than their husbands are willing to accept. None of the fathers in Austen's novels seem to exert any particular influence over their children. Mr Bennet is perhaps the exception here, in that his perceptive, wry wit has influenced Elizabeth, even though she is at times over pleased with her own wit, but by choice he prefers to remain outside the role of educator or moral instructor. Mr Bennet is confined to his study, he is ready to humour and mock but never to intervene, and is only roused into action by the disastrous elopement of Lydia. Even at the end of the novel the reader is not convinced he will be any more protective towards Mary and Kitty, indeed, the narrator tells us that Kitty spends a lot more time with Elizabeth and Jane and becoming much improved in their society. One can easily imagine why the Bennet

parents would allow her to leave the family home; Mrs Bennet would feel Kitty's marriage prospects would be greatly improved by the wider society of Pemberley and Jane's new home, whilst Mr Bennet would be mightily relieved to be rid of her, secure in the knowledge that Elizabeth and Jane would take far better care of Kitty than he or his wife would, or indeed could.

In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot's father is a vain, idle and conceited snob. Sir Walter Elliot has allowed his once prosperous estate to become so debt-ridden that the family is forced to vacate their ancestral home. Sir Elliot is the negative example of the upper class that Austen is exposing; he is guilty, among other things, of vanity. Sir Elliot has no interest in saving Kellynch Hall from ruin and is intent only to be in possession of what revenue can be salvaged. He shows no regard for servants or retainers, indeed, it is left to Anne to bid farewell to all their tenants and neighbours as custom dictates.

Similarly in *Emma*, there is a deceased mother who appears to have been both intelligent and sensible; whilst she was alive, she was able to control Sir Walter Elliot's behaviour and moderate his vanity. Lady Russel takes on the role of surrogate mother to Anne, but her advice to refuse Wentworth is at least partly based on material interests; a sensible parent would have proposed a long engagement in order for Wentworth to prove himself worthy of supporting Anne as he eventually does. This, however, is an example of Austen's radicalism in that the decision to take advice of an elder would have been applauded by the older generation. Marriage without parental consent would have been regarded as an act of impropriety; this is another example of the younger generation needing to find a new model.

Mansfield Park differs greatly in tone from its two published predecessors as it is markedly more moralising both in tone and content, especially for the

modern reader today. Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are exposed to harsh criticism for their lack of values. Sir Thomas, like Mr Woodhouse, has been neglectful in his role as moral instructor. The primogeniture Tom, has been brought up ignorant of moral principles and almost risks his life because of this. Julia and Maria are also in desperate need of moral education, they are fundamentally good charactered daughters as, 'There was no positive ill nature' (*Mansfield Park*, p.19) demonstrates. Both lack discipline and have become engrossed by vanity with all its associated vices. Both Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram have also failed in the establishment of any affectionate relationship with any of their children, with reference to Maria and Julia the narrator tells us, 'Their father was no object of love to them; ... his absence was unhappily welcome.' (*Mansfield Park*, p. 31) Sir Thomas is seen as a parent worthy of respect and obedience, but is shown to be a weak and self-deceiving father. Lady Bertram, albeit a comic figure, is the epitome of indolence. Their life of prestige and luxury has not been without its disastrous consequences, both privately and socially.

Fanny takes part in no damning dialogue about any of the family characters in *Mansfield Park*, it is only through the action and Austen's use of free indirect speech that the reader learns of her thoughts and emotions. We learn that, like the Bertram daughters, she has no love for her parents; the Prices have also failed in the provision of love or even affection in the first ten years of Fanny's life. Upon her visit home to Portsmouth Fanny concludes, 'She could not respect her parents as she had hoped.' (*Mansfield Park*, p.394) Fanny is also able to compare the father she remembers to the one she now sees before her:

... he was more negligent of his family, his habits were worse, and his manners coarser, ... She had never been able to recall anything approaching to tenderness in his former treatment of herself.
(*Mansfield Park*, p.394)

And of her mother:

... she must and did feel that her mother was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children, whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end. (*Mansfield Park*, p. 396)

Here Austen is telling the reader that the parent must set a good example for their children in order for the positive actions to be perpetuated through future generations. Lessons in correct nurturing practices are also on her instructive agenda. Though the Prices may have been financially motivated by the removal of Fanny, Austen makes no allowances of class for parental neglect. Before Fanny benefitted from the opulence of Mansfield Park, she was keenly aware of both her mother and father's shortcomings. Fanny is particularly scathing in her opinion of her mother. She feels repulsion at what she deems to be vulgar and base origins largely due to a mother's failures at jurisdiction.

Northanger Abbey is slightly problematic in that Catherine's parents are all but absent in this novel. The father is a clergyman with no authority to speak of. Mrs Morland 'was a very good woman', (*Northanger Abbey*, p.3) but not intent in either teaching or instructing her 'elder daughters [and] were inevitably left to shift for themselves;'. (*Northanger Abbey*, p.3) General Tilney is not the father of the heroine but he is not an attentive or very affectionate father to his own two children, and his is representative of the father figure. He behaves appallingly when he casts Catherine out to return home alone at night-time and is therefore uncharacteristic of correct behaviour of a man of his calibre and social standing. The General is guilty, as Tony Tanner summarises, of a 'gross transgression of hospitality and emanating from the patriarchal centre of power.' (*Jane Austen*, p.43)

General Tilney had acted neither honourably nor feelingly, neither as a gentleman nor as a parent. ...what could have provoked him to such a breach of hospitality, and so suddenly turned all his partial regard ... into actual ill-will. (*Northanger Abbey*, p.218)

The General is portrayed as one of Austen's most damning fathers, the other is Sir Walter; the Tilney siblings, like the Elliots, are a motherless family where General Tilney is oppressive in his authoritarian rule.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*, the business of the parent is to marry off their children. In *Emma* however, Mr Woodhouse would be happy for Emma to remain unmarried and at Hartfield with him. His primary objective is to ensure his own personal comforts. In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter is so wrapped up in his own interests he has not exerted himself to seek a husband for any of his three daughters. The youngest daughter secured herself a husband thanks to Anne's rejection of a marriage proposal from Charles Musgrove. 'Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family', (*Persuasion*, p.7) Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably.' (*Persuasion*, p.7) and for Anne, 'He had never indulged much hope, he had none now, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work.' (*Persuasion*, p.244) He is more than content to leave his two unmarried daughters to the ignominy of becoming old maids. A judicious and caring parent provides respectability to the courtship proceedings and seeks to ensure the future happiness of their children, that the choice of partner is a good intellectual match as well as an affectionate one.

Though I have begun with fathers, the target of criticism proves wide. In all six of these novels the only route of escape of parental authority, parental neglect and parental misdirection possible to women is marriage. Mrs Bennet's major concern is to see her five daughters advantageously married. Despite all of her efforts, none of the three marriages in *Pride and Prejudice* are a direct result of her scheming. Austen shows us the faults of both fathers *and* mothers; she indirectly states that parents should provide a good example to their children. The marriage of Mr and Mrs Bennet is not one of happiness and understanding, 'the experience of three-and-twenty

years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.7) Mr Bennet is a man of good judgement but his sense of appropriate action is wanting, furthermore his interaction with the younger couples is woefully poor. Mr Bennet is at least mindful of this as he warns Elizabeth of the dangers of marrying someone she cannot respect.

The Gardiners, conversely, have a good marriage in which there is love and reciprocal understanding. Together they advise and support their nieces, Elizabeth, Jane and Lydia. Lydia’s reaction to their support is in contrast to that of the sensible Jane and Elizabeth, she complains of being locked away without seeing a soul, ‘I did not put my foot out of doors, though I was there a fortnight.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.244) She fails to see the severity of her misconduct and believes herself to be treated harshly by the Gardiners and behaves in a childish and petulant manner. Through these characters Austen dramatizes and explores the changing social structure of England, the rising business class, represented by the Gardiners, are brought into contact with the landed gentry of Darcy. Other examples of the rising middle class are the Bingleys, similarly the Crofts in *Persuasion*, and the Crawfords in *Mansfield Park*. The ridiculing of the proud Lady Catherine contrasts with the portrayal of the Gardiner’s rational and generous conduct that can be seen as a caustic comment on the merits of rank and birth. Lady Catherine remains aloof, not wishing to associate with inferior classes, as can be seen with her animated comment, ‘Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.275) Though she sees herself as a surrogate mother to Darcy, it is only as far as forging an alliance between two sides of the family. Like Mrs Bennet, Lady Catherine does not have the best interests of her daughter Anne, or Darcy at heart; she only wants to see her daughter in a profitable marriage.

Through her criticism of weak and ineffective mothers and fathers, Austen calls upon the younger generations to take an active and positive role in the instilling of sound moral principles in their families in the future. For Austen, the younger generations are the future of England, if the aristocracy were incapable of setting an exemplary model for society, then the emerging middle classes were to take the lead. The well-to-do bourgeoisie and the burgeoning manufacturer group were in pursuit of an equal social status. Austen believed that the social advancement should be achieved on one's merits rather than on rank and riches. She suggested a change in attitude to successful men from the military, and in particular the navy. The establishment of the patriarchal system is maintained throughout her career, Austen did not wish to overthrow or subvert that order, instead, she seeks a shared educatory role based on an equal footing for the positive advancement of society.

The new emerging middle classes of either successful tradesmen like Mr Bingley and Mr Gardiner, business men and military officers like Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft, are models for Austen's new and developing society that were to take the example from the best models of the upper classes rather than the less desirable. I suggest that these middle classes are prepared to see marriages as a work of cooperation and equal contribution on both sides instead of being enslaved to an anxious desire for rank. The aristocratic gender model is often of female indolent invalidism and male fecklessness. Throughout the novels we are presented with a series of marriages which are to varying degrees either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The marriages which are most successful are those in which the couple have shared interests and a certain degree of connectedness. William Elliot in *Persuasion*, like Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, is not a suitable match for Anne as his interests lie in both status and financial gain; Austen describes him as 'a man without heart or conscience, a designing, wary, cold blooded being who thinks only of himself.' (*Persuasion*, p.198)

Often, Austen's characters are precariously positioned on the margins of the gentry, threatened with the very real threat of removal from the fashionable gentry-society due to a lack of both money and social connections. One solution of such a predicament involved making a *good* marriage, good meaning financially advantageous. At worst, Austen's characters are prevented from marrying who they genuinely desire by greed, vanity, and snobbery of their families. At best, characters that desire to marry must be practical and ensure there are sufficient funds to live on. Hence the conflict in Austen's novels, as in the society of her time, conflicts arise between love and economic security and between individual desire and familial and societal expectations. What is important is how they deal with this challenge.

Austen gives examples of both good, or positive, and bad, as in negative, marriages. Austen's personal views on marriage were radical for the time; she felt so strongly that she chose to live her life in spinsterhood, as did her sister Cassandra. Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, likewise, refuses to marry with a man whom she does not love: she has rejected the odious Mr Collins and in doing so forfeited the security and stability of both a husband and home. Charlotte Lucas, however, is more conventional:

I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state. (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.101)

Austen's comic portrayal of Mr Collins cannot reduce the devastating consequences of this marriage. The relationship is symbolic as we know that Mr Collins cannot possibly love Charlotte. This marriage highlights the outcomes of placing practicality before romance. Even though Charlotte appears to be able to endure Mr Collins, the reader is made aware that she will never have a life of happiness or even allow herself to engage emotionally with Mr Collins.

Conversely, in *Sense and Sensibility*, the marriage of Colonel Brandon and Marianne Dashwood is portrayed in a positive light. Marianne has learned that love needs to be reciprocal, she realises this when she says, ‘... My happiness never was his [Willoughby’s] object.’ (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 344) The older, and wiser, Colonel has been very much in love with Marianne for a very long time; as a wise person he wants a union of mutual attraction, he will not accept a marriage whereby his bride has been *purchased*. His patience has earned him a bride that has matured, by the end of the novel she has “composure of the mind”, she has “virtuous self-control”, she will read six hours a day in order to gain ‘a great deal of instruction which I now feel myself to want.’, (*Sense and Sensibility*, p.336) and finally Marianne has purged herself of ingratitude. The narrator confirms to the reader:

... in Marianne [Colonel Brandon] was consoled for every past affliction;- her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness: and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend. Marianne could never love by halves: and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby. (*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 373)

Austen gives to this couple a future that is full of promise for both parties. Theirs is a match that is balanced, formed slowly and steadily, a match that will bring serenity and true happiness.

Austen had a firm belief in the notion of couples being firstly acquainted with one another prior to any emotional involvement. This idea is, in fact, present in all of her six major novels. In *Persuasion* the reader is informed of this tenet as early as page twenty-four, ‘They were gradually acquainted, and when acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love.’ (*Persuasion*, p.24) But Anne is persuaded by both her father and Lady Russell as they equate a “prudent” marriage with fortune or family connections. Both Anne and

Captain Wentworth, however, remain true to their feelings; one cannot forget the other and they have each chosen to remain unmarried.

Anne Elliot, like Elizabeth Bennet, regrets her decision to reject her suitor. Anne also refuses a second offer of marriage, Charles Musgrove has also proposed, and therefore shows great strength of character in not bowing to social pressure. Like Colonel Brandon, neither does Captain Wentworth seek to marry for financial gain, he values and respects a woman with, 'A strong mind, with sweetness of manner'. (*Persuasion*, p.60) Austen, through this marriage shows a couple who are endowed morally, who are sure to spend a future together; the narrator asks rhetorically:

... how could a Captain Wentworth and an Anne Elliot, with the advantage of maturity of mind, consciousness of right, and one independent fortune between them, fail of bearing down every opposition. (*Persuasion*, p.250)

Austen positions the readers in order to persuade them to agree with the narrator's attitude of the importance of marrying for love. *Persuasion* is arguably the most radical of Austen's novels and will be discussed in a later chapter.

Austen was very concerned with the major theme of marriage in all six of her novels but her treatment of the subject is tainted by the financial status of her characters. It is due to this very real and contemporary phenomenon that Austen is able to combine romance with realism. The restricting power of money on romantic love is clearly stated in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth asks, 'Where does discretion end and avarice begin?', (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.130) when she replies to Mrs Gardiner's inquiry regarding Wickham's latest object of interest, Miss King. For Austen the theme of marriage was a recurring and on-going one. The intricate nexus of marriage, money and love in Austen's fictional world is revealed through varying plots and many characters in her novels. Marriage was indeed many women's chief aim and was markedly more desirable than the precarious existence of spinsterhood.

The union of Elizabeth and Darcy is an example of both a successful courtship and marriage. Austen makes the case that feeling cannot be developed by appearances, but must gradually develop between two people as they learn of one another. Initially Elizabeth and Darcy are distant because of their prejudices; the many events which they both experience enable them both to understand one another and to reconcile their feelings. It is this mutual understanding that, for Austen, was fundamental to a successful marriage. She stresses the importance of fully knowing both yourself and your partner before entering into marriage.

Of the many marriages that take place in *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane and Bingley's is another example of a solidly founded relationship. The narrator vehemently tells us that they:

... really believed all his [Bingley] expectations of felicity, to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding, the excellent disposition of Jane, and a general similarity of feeling and taste between her and himself. (*Pride & Prejudice*, p.267)

Again, Austen reiterates the importance of in-depth understanding of the partner and a similarity in personality as vital to a successful union. However, alongside the good examples of marriages, Austen is also careful to prepare the reader for the dangers of entering into a marriage when one acts on impulse. Lydia and Wickham's is one such example. Theirs is a marriage based on appearances, fine looks and youthful exuberance. Conjugal bliss is indeed short lived as, 'His affection for her soon sunk into indifference, hers lasted a little longer;' (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.298) amply testifies. As their relationship declines, Lydia becomes a regular visitor to Pemberley as, 'her husband was gone to enjoy himself in London or Bath.'

(*Pride and Prejudice*, p.198) Through this unfortunate relationship Austen forewarns the reader of the great risks of a marriage based on superficial attractions that rapidly cool and that inevitably leads to unhappiness and misery.

Little is revealed of the romantic history of Mr and Mrs Bennet, though it may be inferred that their relationship was not too dissimilar to that of Lydia and Wickham. Mr Bennet had married a woman he found sexually attractive and was blindsided to her intellectual, or even moral, shortcomings. Mrs Bennet's favouritism towards Lydia and her comments of her excitement at seeing officers in uniform and how she too was once as energetic as Lydia, reveal similarities. When Lydia herself comments:

"I am sure my sisters all envy me. I only hope they have my good luck. They must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands. What a pity it is, mamma, we did not all go!"

Mrs Bennet replies:

"Very true; and if I had my will, we should." (*Pride and Prejudice*, p. 243)

she is unaware that her perceived happiness will be woefully short-lived. She has yet to learn that the pains of her indiscretions will indeed force her to see her errors. The reader is much more familiar with the character of Wickham, but for Lydia that knowledge, when it arrives, is futile. The narrator deplores the elements of marriage and of society that are objectionable and criticises constructively by suggesting how unions should be forged. The reader is in no doubt as to how the narrator feels in regard to the mercenary and immoral aspects of marriage, in particular that will ultimately lead to a great deal of unhappiness for many. Austen's unequivocal message is to marry for true affection and compatibility of character, and for those who have the possibility or opportunity to choose freely, and to do so with conviction.

The addition of romance is part of the feminist agenda as it is not determined by conventions or constraining traditions. Writing in 1984, the critic Mary Poovey offers a gender based view that was ignored by the earlier critics, as they saw Austen as a writer exclusively committed to a reformed vision of traditional values. Poovey takes a different angle and differs from many critics as she explores the reasons why people believe in the fairy tale ideologies which perpetuate their inequality, and why they identify with ideas which increase their own suppression. Poovey is a Marxist-feminist, and as such, is particularly concerned with why women are so easily persuaded to accept these ideologies that are blatantly biased. Austen was writing at a time when restrictions for women, and in particular women writers, were the accepted norm. Austen's novels seek a modification of certain socially constructed norms, be it intellectual, matrimonial, or financial, in the hope of improving daily existence. Poovey argues that the idea of the *proper lady* was sold to women through the ideology of romantic love; she argues:

... by focusing on courtship, the myth of romantic love tends to freeze the relationship between a man and a woman at its moment of greatest intensity, when both partners are seen (and see themselves) in the most flattering light, and – what is perhaps most important – when women seem to exercise their greatest power. Romantic love, in other words, seems to promise to women in particular an emotional intensity that ideally compensates for all the practical opportunities they are denied. All that it can actually yield, however, is the immediate gratification of believing that this single moment of apparent autonomy will endure, that the fact that a woman seems most desirable when she is most powerful will continue in marriage and in society. (*The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, p.237)

In Austen's society and in her novels, many married couples are no longer romantic, many females are in desperate financial difficulties are either dependent on male relatives or destitute, and the unfortunate law of primogeniture guaranteed the continuity of the male privileged system, but at the centre of the novels are the romantic courtships. Poovey argues that romantic love lived its finest hour in the art of fiction and not in reality.

For many feminist critics, however, the conventional view of sexual relationships implied in romance is of concern. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the woman writer, to find a vent for expression, was forced to employ strategies of misdirection and subversion, for example irony and symbolism, in order to express herself within the existing literary forms. Gilbert and Gubar read Austen's novels as exclusively feminist in approach whereas Butler (1987) does not take into account gender. So one critic makes a strong case for the battling of ideas, whilst the other, a battle between the sexes. For Gilbert and Gubar, Austen does conform to male authority, but in appearance only; the conventional plot is subverted by the features employed by the narrator. Earlier critics, on the other hand, use historical evidence to establish Austen's conformism, and they make a strong case to reject a subversive Austen. However, a focus on a strictly feminist reading of Austen excludes the important socio-political aspect of Austen's world and vice versa.

Poovey brings these aspects together as she is concerned to trace romantic love in terms of history and class. Romantic love in novels persuades women to accept their conventional domestic existence by proffering a promise that marriage will involve supreme emotional fulfilment. Poovey summarises that women are told they are responsible for the 'dissemination of domestic virtue throughout society', (*The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, p.240) and that this moral task can be fulfilled only by a demure and domesticated wife. She suggests that romantic love, like Austen's acceptance of a class based society, and her belief in the moral presentation of the ruling class, is a form of false consciousness and dangerously illusory, as it conceals the realities of male social power and female powerlessness.

Like Butler, Poovey sees Austen's novels as influential vehicles of ideology, though Butler uses the stronger term of controversy. Austen was not a dedicated Tory who endeavoured to use her fiction as a bolster for traditionally held notions of rank and status, neither was she an outspoken campaigner for women's rights. Austen was working within the limited cultural restrictions afforded to women of her time; Austen employed the novel form, together with comedy and drama, to displace the outmoded conduct books in order to construct didactic narratives without being overly moralising.

Austen would have known that books were very capable of carrying controversy, novels were equally suitable for disseminating political debate. With her constant quest for realism, Austen depicted a believable reality for her readers, she wrote of the *here and now* of society. Austen was critical of hypocrisy and of the double standards of her characters no matter what their position in the hierarchy of status or wealth. She devised narratives that were primarily stories that centre on the heroine choosing for herself her partner in life and for life. She was also concerned with the self-knowledge of maturity in her heroines; Austen gives the central role to the female characters, they take initiatives and learn to be part of the fabric of society.

Poovey locates Austen in a masculine domain, Gilbert and Gubar as a subversive author and Butler situates her as a firm Tory supporting the establishment. It may be argued that Austen's novels could be read as all of these ways and in others, it may all depend upon the reader and his/her social and historical perspective. The critical writer can make sound and convincing arguments but they will only ever be hypotheses of Austen's original meaning or her socio-political position. All works of criticism operate within some form of theoretical position; the last forty years of analysis have produced a variety of new approaches to looking at Austen's novels, no doubt the next forty years will bring continued interest.

(3) Feminist Austen.

‘The more I see of the world, the more I am dissatisfied with it; and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense.’ (*Pride & Prejudice*, p.107)

In the twenty-first century it is easier to contextualise Austen; in this chapter I argue that Austen, via her novels was speaking to a growing female readership. The timing of her novels was a crucial factor of their emergence; she wrote in the midst of a period of social and economic adjustment. Austen was able to write as she did because she was speaking to women, through a female narrative voice about a new female awareness. Due to her astute personal awareness of human nature and her talent as a writer, Austen was able to proffer an alternative to the marginal female readership by writing about women, using female narrated voices and told from the female perspective. Whilst working within the confines of the romantic novel, Austen expressed the awareness of inequality among class and gender, but importantly, she revealed women’s perception of the world around them and their changing role in society.

Austen’s novels, at first glance, appear to be commonplace, feminine reading material. It seems that her contemporary critics, most of whom were male, desired to keep the female reading public firmly in the realms of the domestic sphere. Due to women’s limited education and experience, they felt that these novels did not possess any ability to make deep philosophical contributions to offer to the literary world.

In spite of the fact that Austen is polyvalent, able to be interpreted in different ways, it can be argued that Austen was disseminating new ways of thinking for women through her fiction. She was also asserting female value in society as women began to vie for position in the male world. In *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia L Johnson asserts that Austen has been categorised as politically conservative by males, and that misleading statements from nineteenth-century critics continue to influence readers today. She particularly holds R. W. Chapman responsible for his effect on two generations of readers; according to Johnson:

To Chapman, Austen is in the canon not because of her social vision or even because of her formidable artistry, but rather because she had the good fortune to be able and the good taste to be willing to record the elegant manners of her time. And so, with an inexorable circularity, Chapman's edition of Austen creates the author it presumed, and the history it desired. (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, p. xvii)

Chapman suggested that because manners were of great importance during Austen's time, and that her novels often spoke of manners, then this had to be her *raison d'être*. Johnson also contends that scholars since Chapman have minimalised Austen's artistry, claiming that by looking at Austen in comparison with important male authors or with pressing social and political issues, they deny her any direct access or pondered relation to them. It is unacceptable for Johnson that Austen is always looked at in comparison to males and never in her own right. Johnson also maintains the view that Austen deployed the only means available ⁷ to expose the gender-related injustices in society of the day through her orchestration of female characterisation.

Austen took up the literary challenge and wrote within the tight parameters set by the prevailing male society. She was able to portray her heroines as ideals of "ladyhood", she rejected skewed masculine values unfavourable to

⁷ Mary Poovey similarly suggests the need to look at the lady writer within the strict parameters of society.

women prevalent during her time. Her heroines discover feminine self-awareness, they have travelled the path of fundamental growth and maturation. However, she was appreciated in 1852, literary critic George Lewes ⁸ saw Austen as an antidote to preceding novels, he characterised the art of Jane Austen:

There is nothing *doctrinaire* in Jane Austen not a trace of a woman's "mission"; but as the most truthful, charming, humorous, pureminded, quick-witted, and unexaggerated of writers, female literature has reason to be proud of her. (Parrish, p.370)

Written thirty five years after her death, such criticism was typical of the time. Lewes finds her writing commendable because, according to him, Austen promotes no social message of mission. Lewes admires Austen's lack of didacticism and doctrinaire, hence his praise, but nevertheless he seems not to recognise her teaching intent.

This early critical statement by Lewes reflects the attitudes toward women and women's writing during the nineteenth-century. Lewes finds that novels written by a woman are praiseworthy when they are written about the world of the author and are not trying to make a moral point. If he fails to discern the subtle didacticism used to convey this "female literature", it is probably because he is contrasting Austen with more moralising novels of the time. Recent studies and several biographies confirm the difficulties women writers encountered, and an increasingly large body of scholarship has explored many aspects of Austen's works. Austen gained her power through her pen, she maintained her sense of propriety by comporting herself as a "proper lady", she holds the superior position: as the anonymous author (A Lady) controlling the narrative, and as the instructor possessing superior knowledge in order to instruct.

⁸ George Henry Lewes 1817 – 1878, English philosopher and literary critic was the husband of English novelist George Eliot.

Unbeknownst to Lewes, Austen may well have been both philosophical and with a mission. The philosophical element to her writing can be seen as concerning the question of epistemology. Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that investigates how knowledge is obtained. It is still today a common theme in literature. The question of the reliability of the knowledge offered in the books is a theme generated by the narrative technique as the author is permitted to maintain secrets from the reader, the narrative style and features can mislead the reader and characters are allowed to disguise their true nature. This theme interacts with the theme of secrecy as aspects of a character's personality or past remain hidden from others. For example Elizabeth learns the truth about the villainous Wickham and the honourable Darcy. Elinor admits that her initial impressions of people are frequently wrong. However, not all secrets are to conceal mercenary motives as Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars have motives that are essentially honourable. They are in the incongruent position of having to hide past events to protect others.

Similarly Austen's "mission" has been uncovered by the late twentieth-century critics who can see her work in broader historical context when 'women writers were slowly working into the mainstream and influencing a growing female public'. (*Feminisms*: p.865). Austen was one of these writers. According to Nancy Armstrong her work invested qualities and audience of 'Conduct books [which] addressed a readership comprising various levels and sources of income and included virtually all people who distinguished themselves from the aristocracy, on the one hand, and from the labouring poor on the other.' (*Feminisms*: p.867) Lending libraries and more affordable publications allowed easy access to genres that were previously available, and of interest, only to the wealthy. Seen in this way Armstrong argues that a subtle elaboration of the conduct book tradition but using that mode to warn this new audience of the madness in committing oneself into a loveless marriage.

Austen sought to defy the traditional marriage process and by doing so she made a case for female rights. All six of her novels are predominantly about young girls who marry. Each and every single heroine desires to enter into the sanctity of marriage but they all have the privilege of choosing their own partners and they all marry primarily for love and also for intellectual compatibility. Austen had views on women and marriage and on women's rights and she made them known in her writings. Within the theme of marriage Austen addresses women's financial states and their dependency on men for security (*Emma* is the only exception here). Writing witty social commentary, and combining romance with realism, for Austen is rooted in reality, Austen explores how the reasons for marriage and the personalities of the couple result in either eternal marital bliss or perpetual misery.

The difficulties of impoverished females are a recurring theme present in five of Austen's six major novels: Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters (*Sense and Sensibility*), potentially Mrs Bennet and her five daughters (*Pride and Prejudice*), Mrs Price (*Mansfield Park*), Miss Bates (*Emma*) and Mrs Smith (*Persuasion*). The normal practise in England at this time was to have estates entailed to the closest male relative, such as Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mr William Eliot in *Persuasion*.

This practice made the choice of marriage even more crucial. Austen's repeated theme suggests that she felt strongly on the subject and wanted to offer an alternative to readers whatever the sex; if a marriage was a disaster, neither party could be happy. Austen's pioneering heroines are unafraid to speak their minds, they think independently, are intelligent and very articulate. They possessed a female awareness that was voiced by their own sex. Importantly, her heroines verbalise a feminine perspective of men, society and women's place in the society.

(4) *Emma*: A Revised Heroine

Austen began the first criticism of *Emma* when she had not yet begun writing the novel, she believed she would create 'a heroine whom no one but myself might like'. (Walder, p.62) She wrote to James Stanier Clarke in December of 1815 and expressed her concern for how *Emma* would be received by her reading public:

My greatest anxiety at present is that this 4th work shd not disgrace what was good in the others. But on this point I will do myself the justice to declare that whatever may be my wishes for its success, I am very strongly haunted by the idea to those Readers who have preferred P&P, it will appear inferior in Wit, & to those who have preferred MP, very inferior in good Sense. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.306)

Brave words indeed for a woman on the threshold of being considered a successful author, to expose herself to unrestricted condemnation. Academics and scholars today continue to labour over what Austen might have been trying to say. Critics of her day and the years immediately following saw this work as belonging to the genre of the romantic novel and many types of criticism that are fashionable today, brought to bear. Many of today's recent criticisms have focused on the feminist and ironic qualities of Austen's work, others look at the different features of Austen's innovative method of alternating narrative features and female voice. The latter group examines Austen's techniques of allowing the reader to become intimately acquainted with her main character, her heroine. Austen created an increasing intimacy with the protagonist for the reader. One narrative technique discussed is free indirect style of narration and how it creates for the reader the impression of entry into the consciousness of the characters.

The criticism of one of Austen's contemporaries, Sir Walter Scott, reveals that some features in *Emma* were valued while others were not. Overall, Scott did write positively of *Emma*, but his praise was muted as his summary of the actions leaves out an awareness of the writers' skilfulness. In the *Quarterly Review* of 1815, Scott wrote:

Miss Emma Woodhouse, from whom the book takes its name, is the daughter of wealth and consequence residing at his seat in the immediate vicinity of a country village called Highbury. The father, a good-natured, silly valetudinary, abandons the management of his household to Emma, he himself being occupied by his summer and winter walk, his apothecary, his gruel, and his whist table. The latter is supplied by the neighbouring village of Highbury with precisely the sort of persons who occupy the vacant corners of a regular whist table, when a village is in the neighbourhood, and better cannot be found within the family. We have the smiling and courteous vicar, who nourishes the ambitious hope of obtaining Miss Woodhouse's hand. We have Mrs Bates, the wife of a former rector, a good-natured, vulgar, and foolish old-maid; Mr. Weston, a gentleman of a frank disposition and moderate fortune, in the vicinity, and his wife an amiable and accomplished person, who has been Emma's governess, and is devotedly attached to her. (Parrish, p.367)

Scott abbreviated the cast of characters and took the narrative at face value, equating the unassuming and unadorned with the insignificant. Consequently, he did not attribute any features of Austen's style of writing to the purpose of the novel, features such as the narratorial devices and the feminist stratagem Austen employs to transform a conventional scenario into a platform for female verbal authority. Scott does not consider the consequences of the placement in society of Austen's characters: major or minor. Scott began his review by informing the reader that '*Emma* has even less story than either of the preceding novels'. (Parrish, p.367) It would appear that Scott was not aware that *the author* had, in fact, already published *three* novels, and not just two as the 'either' implies. When

viewed in a present-day context, Scott's comments may be seen as condescending with feigned or faint praise; his reading of the novel is superficial and touches only the surface of the text and tells us more about Scott's taste than about Austen's talent.

Following Scott's rather insipid review of *Emma*, in 1852 came George Henry Lewes' excessive praise of Austen, whereby he describes her as the "greatest artist that has ever written", echoing Macaulay's assertion that Austen was a Shakespeare in prose. Lewes tells us that "Her circle may be restricted but it is complete". His praise for her is indeed high:

Only cultivated minds fairly appreciate the exquisite art of Miss Austen. Those who demand the stimulus of "effects"; those who can only see strong lights and shadows, will find her tame and uninteresting. ... The incidents, the characters, the dialogue – all of everyday life, and so truthfully presented, that to appreciate the art we must try to imitate it, or carefully compare it with that of others. ... Never does she transcend her own actual experience, never does her pen trace that line that does not touch the experience of others. (Parrish, p.370)

Lewes acknowledges Austen's acute understanding of human nature within the terms of her restrictive circle. Nonetheless, Lewes also judges her by different standards, perhaps as superficial when he differentiates her as a female author, 'they are novels written by a woman, an Englishwoman, a gentlewoman ... but as the most truthful, charming, humorous, pureminded, quick witted, and unexaggerated of writers, female literature has reason to be proud of her.' (Parrish, p.370) Thus Lewes not only marginalises Austen but also literature itself. He has separated literature into male and female factions, and though he lauds Austen's ability to create and develop characters, he implies that she is a great artist only because her writing remains apolitical. Furthermore, from his perspective, Austen's greatness does not appear to have the same elevated meaning as *male* greatness. Like Scott, Lewes observes some special qualities in Austen's writing, but their socio-political positions in society only permit them to see a simple romantic story told with a feminine voice.

Many aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century criticism have produced scholarly articles about Austen's narrative techniques, her feminist leanings, her political stance, and her use of irony. In 1961, Wayne Booth wrote extensively on Austen's novels and in firm support of her masterful control of narrative.

For Booth Austen openly illustrates Emma's flaws while at the same time maintaining her as a heroine sympathetic to the reader. Austen allows the reader to see predominantly through Emma's eyes, in order to mature and develop with her as opposed to against her. Austen was able to heighten our sympathy by withholding the interior thought process of other characters, Jane Fairfax may not have had complimentary thoughts for Emma. Furthermore, Jane would have hindered our sympathy for Emma, but more importantly, it would have ruined the entire mystery plot surrounding Frank Churchill and Jane which was a major structural element on which Austen relied. Booth also brings to our attention that a further aspect of reader sympathy toward Emma is Austen's careful balance between Emma's mistakes and her punishment. Emma is not permitted to escape from errors without retribution of some sort, and justice to transgressors generally meets with approval for most readers, particularly where characters heroes and heroines are concerned.⁹ Austen's heroines learn gradually from their errors, they see more clearly, and they discover what is best both for themselves and for others. Whilst all minor characters have dialogue of various degrees of importance, only the main characters think and reason. Austen maintains a hierarchy of consciousness for her heroines. Just as Macaulay compared Austen to Shakespeare in prose, Austen has reinvented the Shakespearean soliloquy:

⁹ Critics after Booth have also focused on additional devices developed by Austen to express interior perspectives, particularly the cultivation of her innovative free indirect style of writing. This technique was the precursor to the stream-of-consciousness method employed by later writers in the mid-twentieth century by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

“How despicably have I acted!” she cried; “I who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have prided myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or [blameable] distrust. How humiliating is the discovery! yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.” (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.162)

Austen was at the pinnacle of her brilliance with this new style of writing, especially with *Emma*. This fourth novel uses the technique with even greater sophistication; she eliminates quotation marks and blends the heroine’s soliloquy with her own third-person narration so that she is able to weave in and out of a character as she pleases.

Austen is able to give the reader the authority of inner knowledge of her protagonist without appearing to be there; Austen is not shown as revealing Emma’s thoughts, it is Emma herself who tells the story and for most of the novel. The shift back to the omniscient narrator occurs only when Emma cannot possibly have knowledge of events or details. Narrative studies would indicate that the narrator’s voice is unidentifiable but feminist studies adopt a more definitive stance in identifying the female narrator and the feminine tendencies of the narrative. Unlike Scott and Lewes, who both implied that Austen’s novels were creditable *in spite of* its womanly perspective, feminist criticism examine how Austen’s oeuvre is praiseworthy *because* of the level of female consciousness.

(5) Emma's Lesson on Considering Others.

When reading *Emma* as a bildungsroman novel of development, it is possible for the reader to discern the classical features of this type of writing. A bildungsroman is a novel that deals with maturation; the protagonist's increasing awareness of him/herself and in her relationship in the world around her. However, as modern readers we are at once removed from the novel's social context. So for this reason, to the modern reader today it is not immediately obvious that this novel is not only a didactic work for *ladies*, Austen's target audience, it is also, by association, an instructive work for the many male readers who were also keen followers of Austen's novels, readers such as the Prince Regent, as well as ordinary men such as James Stanier Clarke and Scott. When it is read in this way, as an educational novel, and read within the context of the late eighteenth-century, when readership would have been concerned with manners and propriety, especially the proper behaviour of a lady, the reader then becomes aware that Austen was indeed critiquing society and offering alternative matrimonial procedures to the unacceptable existing status quo. In a letter to her niece Fanny Knight, Jane warns of the unhappiness of marriage without love:

'... nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound *without* Love, bound to one, & preferring another. That is a Punishment which you do not deserve. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p.286)

However, this is not to say Austen was writing in the genre of the conduct books, which also advised of poor marriage options, her method in lessons in conduct were so very different to the heavily moralising styles of earlier conduct manual writer such as Forsythe and Richards, or the later conduct novels by Mrs West and Maria Edgeworth, her approach was subtle and her tone was not accusatory. In a letter to her niece Anna Austen, Jane Austen gives a clear indication of her preference in authors:

Walter Scott has no business to write novels, especially good ones. – It is not fair. – He has Fame & Profit enough as a poet, and should not be taking the bread out of other people’s mouths. – I do not like him, & do not mean to like Waverley If I can help it – but I fear I must. – I am quite determined however not to be pleased with Mrs West’s Alicia de Lacy, should I ever meet with it, which I hope I may not. – I think I can be stout against any thing written by Mrs West. – I have made up my mind to like no Novels really, but for Miss Edgeworth’s, Yours & my own. – (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, p.278)

As a lady herself, Austen’s intended readership were readers of the higher ranks of society and also the new burgeoning middle classes.

Emma is introduced at the beginning of the novel as being strong-willed and self-confident, but by the end she has learned to temper these qualities with extensive self-knowledge. Emma does not by any means relinquish these attributes as she continues to be strong and assertive, but she has learned, among many things, to be more sensitive to the feelings of others. Furthermore, Emma does not conform to the typical submissive and self-effacing definition of the contemporary Regency period. *Emma* is Austen’s proposal for social modification; to her niece Anna Lefroy upon the arrival of her baby girl, she tenderly writes, ‘As I wish very much to see *your* Jemima, I am sure you will like to see *my* Emma,’ (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, p.310) Just as one woman was physically populating the world, the other was propagating new ideas.

It was in the early twentieth-century that two British academics and critics, A.C. Bradley and R.W. Chapman, virtually paved the way for Austen to become firmly placed in critical focus. It was only after writings by these critics in the 1920s that there was a boom in Austen scholarship that continues today. By the middle of the twentieth-century and the second wave of feminism, exploration of Austen as a subversive writer became very popular – this idea was based on her irony being caustic not humorous and therefore intended to undermine the assumptions of the society she

portrayed. In his essay, 'Religion and Politics' in a comparison to Jane Austen, Gary Kelly summarises:

Some see her as a political conservative because she seems to defend the established order. Others see her as sympathetic to radical politics that challenge the established order, especially in the form of patriarchy. ... Some critics see Austen's novels as neither conservative nor subversive, but complex, criticising aspects of the social order but supporting stability and an open class hierarchy.' (Cartmel, D., & Welehan, I., p.156)

Kelly divides critics of Austen's novels into three camps, they either view her as a conservative upholding the values of the landed gentry of the late eighteenth-century or as a subversive writer who undercuts the foundations of English society. The third group of critics identified by Kelly are positioned in a no man's land that does not fully ascribe to conservatism but not quite radical.

In terms of romance, it is by exploring the detailed development and maturation of the female protagonists, and in contrast, the subordinate role of the male characters, that Austen's works were predominantly intended to inform and instruct female readers, and to inform male readership of what best suited, and pleased, the female. Austen was writing of women's experience whilst just touching the surface of the male perspective. This inclusion of the male standpoint, however minimal, establishes the belief that contentment in life is important to both men and women alike. It is by exploration of the detailed development of the female protagonist that we can see the emergence of the subtle didactics. Emma was indeed a radical character in several aspects, but she was firmly in the tory camp politically.

Emma is a new type of woman: she is independent and forthright, but she is in need of education and guidance and by the end of the novel she is sufficiently disciplined and moulded into the perfect match for Mr Knightley.

When Austen wrote 'I am going to take a heroine whom no one but myself will much like', (*The Realist Novel*, p. 62) she took a heroine that exhibited masculine attributes and who conducted herself in an atypical manner of the time. There is a role reversal between Mr Woodhouse and Emma; Mr Woodhouse is presented with many female traits whilst Emma takes an active male role, '... ever since she was twelve, Emma has been mistress of the house and of you all.' (*Emma*, p.29). Her oversight of the household would traditionally be a male privilege while her father resembles a female. This is indeed a shift from conventional patriarchal norms, and could be construed as subversive, but the novel's resolution forbids this interpretation.

Emma is spirited, inquisitive, intelligent and sharp-witted, she is rendered sympathetic by showing her short comings. The structure of the novel is such that the woman reader can easily identify with her. Mr Woodhouse is a hypochondriac and is greatly dependent upon his apothecary. He has little to interest him and does not like to venture from his home or indeed from the village of Highbury itself. The significance of *Emma* as a didactic novel is the evolution of Emma's character to her understanding and full awareness of the world around her and her role in the world. The authorial voice of the narrator tells us on page one of the novel:

The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her. (*Emma*, p. 5)

To demonstrate Emma's incompleteness and developing nature, Austen presents Emma with imperfections. Mr Knightley informs us of Emma's good taste in reading material but she does not follow through with her intentions and complete any readings from her elaborate lists. Similarly, she has learned to play the piano and sing only just enough to play passably

well. On this point Emma is able to acknowledge this deficiency of her character and reflect later in the novel, as the narrator confirms:

She did unfeignedly and unequivocally regret the inferiority of her own playing and singing. She did most heartily grieve over the idleness of her childhood – and sat down and practised vigorously an hour and a half.
(*Emma*, p. 174)

Austen informs the reader of Emma's faults through the character of Mr Knightley, the narrator, and Emma herself with self-enlightenment. Austen does so with a balance of attributes and criticisms; the reproaches have not been harsh or mordant but rather subtle and humorously delivered in order to maintain reader sympathy for Emma.

As the reader progresses through the novel it becomes obvious that Emma is not only unable to complete a project, she also displays ineptitude as a matchmaker. Her efforts, though well intended, seem to be destined to failure from the outset. Emma's first task is to find a husband for Harriet; she decides upon Mr Elton who is totally inappropriate given her uncertain parentage, her lack of social prestige, a major concern of Mr Elton, and a total absence of ambition to ascend the class ladder. Emma's second choice of suitor, Frank Churchill, is also an erroneous choice but for very different reasons, the most obvious being his prior arrangement with Jane Fairfax that is revealed later in the novel. Like her personal shortcomings Emma's matchmaking also appears doomed to failure. It is due to the fact that none of her endeavours are for self-gain, and that she demonstrates good will that the reader cannot help but warm to this character and clearly see her naivety and innocence.

A further example clearly demonstrating Emma's predisposition for commencing, but never completing projects, is Austen's depiction of Emma's portfolio of artwork. The subject is introduced because Emma's stratagem is

to paint Harriet's portrait in order to develop her ultimate goal, to unite Harriet and Mr Elton:

Emma wished to go to work directly and therefore produced the portfolio containing her various attempts at portraits. For not one of them had ever been finished, that they might decide together on the best size for Harriet. Her many beginnings were displayed. Miniatures, half-lengths, whole-lengths, pencil, crayon, and water-colours had all been tried in turn. (*Emma*, p.34)

However, in this instance, Austen provides the foreshadowing of Emma's development as Emma does indeed complete her first portrait. This achievement is made early enough in the novel that the reader is given hope for Emma, albeit after twenty-one years. The reader is now prepared for further advancements in Emma's maturation but at the same time aware that her learning is by no means close to its completion.

Much of Austen's ability to gain and maintain reader sympathy for Emma depends on the reader's relationship to the text. Austen permits a relational development between the reader and *Emma* by supplying the reader with an expanding intimacy with her heroine who continues to progress and to become more self-aware. Through various narrative techniques, Austen is able to position Emma in a contradictory role as a determined and independently thinking woman while concurrently making her a believable, likeable person. She also allows the reader to connect with Emma through the information given by Emma herself. The knowledge obtained by the reader *about* Emma is also given by the narrator, much of which is information Emma would not communicate to another of her own accord.

Austen's novels, while seemingly about everyday life were also allowing the reader a glimpse into female consciousness of her main character to develop a relationship or connection with the text. The narrative techniques which Austen created in her earlier novels and employed extensively in her later works, enables the reader to experience Emma's experiences, to judge or

misjudge events through Emma's eyes. As the transition between narrator's viewpoint and Emma's take place the reader shares the pains of humiliation and self-reproach and is persuaded to feel sympathy for and, on many occasions, empathise with her. A reflective example clearly exhibiting Emma's self-recrimination occurs after she has discovered her disastrous miscalculation of Mr Elton's feelings for Harriet:

The hair was curled and the maid sent away and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. It was a wretched business indeed. Such an overthrow of everything she had been wishing for. Such a development of everything most unwelcome! Such a blow for Harriet! That was the worst of all. Every part of it brought pain and humiliation of some sort or other; but compared with the evil to Harriet, all was light; and she would gladly have submitted to feel yet more mistaken, more in error, more disgraced by misjudgement than she actually was could the effects of her blunders have been confided to herself. "If I had not persuaded Harriet into liking the man, I could have borne anything. He might have doubled his presumption to me – but poor Harriet!" (*Emma*, p.103)

The narrative style allows both the pictorial image of Emma completing her customary bedtime routine and then the shift to share her remorse and humiliation for being the instigator of the entire plan. This is just one instance where Emma's recognition of a wrongdoing, her sense of accountability and genuine reflection of the painful effects on others, is a step in the maturation of the female character.

Another example that clearly demonstrates Emma's awareness that she has caused pain to someone is at the Box Hill scene, where she carelessly voiced the cruel remark to Miss Bates, and has been confronted by Mr Knightley:

While they talked they were advancing toward s the carriage; it was ready; and before she could speak again, he had handed her in. He had misinterpreted the feelings which had kept her face averted and her tongue motionless. They were combined only of anger against herself, mortification and deep concern. She had not been able to speak, and on entering the carriage, sunk back for a moment overcome; then, reproaching herself for having taken no leave, making no acknowledgement, parting in apparent

sullenness, she looked out with voice and hand eager to show a difference; but it was just too late. ... Never had she felt so agitated, so mortified, grieved, at any circumstance in her life. She was most forcibly struck. The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel, to Miss Bates! (*Emma*, p.284)

Austen carefully selects the characters with whom the reader will gain the inner knowledge; we slowly become acquainted and more intimate with her fully *rounded* characters while the auxiliary ones remain *flat*.¹⁰ While we sympathise with Emma, as she feels guilt, our sympathy for the victim Miss Bates, is only mildly evoked.

I shall not be a poor old maid; and it is only poverty which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! (*Emma*, p. 67)

In an exchange between Emma and Harriet, Emma states that it is only acceptable to remain single if there are sufficient funds to support oneself. However, it was pitiful if one were dependent on others, as was Miss Bates. Austen held an acute insight of women's limitations in society; this provided the motivation for creating a character as strident as Emma, 'a heroine whom no one but myself will much like'. While tied to actual societal limitations, Austen created a female character with feelings, who was assertive, possessed of a strong sense of self-worth, and who was free of society's expectation that she should marry, and advantageously so. Instead, she has no economic need to marry, she has no desire to conform to social customs and marry to resemble normality, and importantly, she was not married under duress to accommodate parental pressure, but did so on her own free will.

Upon reading *Emma*, one perceives that Emma is not the conventionally reserved late eighteenth-century lady. Emma attempts to control the course of her own life, and she also attempts to influence the lives of those around her. While Austen positioned Emma in upper class society, this is not

¹⁰ Nineteenth-century writer and critic Thomas Hardy described characters as either round or flat to explain reader sympathy. (*The Nineteenth-Century Novel*).

categorical proof that Austen ‘was a conservative holding the values of the landed gentry’ (Johnson, p.337) as one camp of Austen critics argue. Neither should she be considered as a ‘subversive who undercuts the very premises upon which English society rests’ (Johnson, p.337) the opposing sentiment of the second camp. Austen is possibly best positioned in the middle ground. On one level Emma resembles the typical role of the lady of the late eighteenth century. She is a loving daughter who cares for her widowed and aging father. She conducts her charity work for the needy local neighbours that would be expected from someone of her social standing. She has the general female accomplishments; she is an affectionate sibling who loves her nephews. She does not discuss affairs of state or the economy, neither does she display knowledge of the nation’s political situation. However, her autonomy, as I have suggested above, is unusual and the fact that Austen allows us to enter Emma’s consciousness does unsettle the conventions.

Emma has displayed an awakening female perspective. She has married for love and she has remained in control of her household, even after her new husband will move in with her at Hartfield. Austen has modified the “happy-ever-after” conclusion with a very different, if not radical, alternative. Austen has also modified the nominally male gendered Bildungsroman genre by supplanting the protagonist with a female. Emma’s journey is internal as opposed to external; she travels the road of fundamental growth and maturation without physically travelling far from home. The end of her journey is also where she started, and upon her return she is a different character.

Emma is not the typical novel of conduct or manners. Austen’s contribution to the development of this type of novel was the inclusion of drama. Austen was the third generation of the instructive and didactic genre; firstly were the sermons of Fordyce and Richards, and secondly were the heavily

moralising works of Mrs West and Maria Edgeworth. Emma's journey is significant because it concerns a woman in a patriarchal world. Emma is observing, thinking, feeling and developing as a person; she is aware of her place and importance in society. Austen was giving readers something to ponder on, she was inviting them to think, to reason and develop in order to formulate a new female perspective and to consider a new unconventional male stance.

(6) *Mansfield Park*: The Moral Mission

Alistair Duckworth, writing in 1971, laments the unexplored implications of “estate improvements” in Austen’s novels by critics. He argues that:

So important is the estate improvement in Jane Austen’s novels that a case can be made for its role as a connecting thesis in her work. ... in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen deliberately uses a motif of estate improvements to define an attitude toward social change that is found elsewhere in her fiction. As the title of the novel suggests, an estate is not to be considered merely as a piece of landed property but as a metonym of an entire cultural inheritance. Improvements, likewise, go beyond on aesthetic meaning to suggest the nature and quality of an individual’s response to the social, ethical and religious values he inherits. (Duckworth, p.26)

Mansfield Park is Austen’s most obviously didactic novel; it is because of this fact that the narrative is not palatable to the modern reader today. Many readers find Edmund and Fanny to be pompous and unlike the usual Austen hero and heroine. The very tone of this novel is far removed from Austen’s two previous works, so much so that there is hardly any comedy at all. Austen was only too aware of the more sombre tone; ‘I have something in hand [*Mansfield Park*] – which I hope on the credit of P. & P. will sell well, tho’ not half so entertaining.’, (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, p. 217) is a clear indication that she felt her readers would be disappointed at the scarcity of comedy.

Both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1811 and 1813 respectively, were first drafted, albeit in a different format, many, many years earlier when Austen was still a young girl. By the time she began *Mansfield Park*, there was no draft to work from, she was now a professional writer, this novel was therefore a product of its actual time, 1813; Austen was a mature woman of thirty-eight years of age. In January 1813 she wrote to Cassandra, ‘Now I will try to write of something else; - it

shall be a complete change of subject – Ordination.’ (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, p. 207) This was a time when the Evangelical faith was a growing force throughout English social life. Allied to the conservative political mood this doctrine strongly condemned all forms of levity. Its influence was to bring about the moral and cultural conformity that established the exacting Victorian values. Many noted critics find the novel suffocating with moralistic policy: ¹¹ Q D Leavis deems it is its dimmed and distant effect ... that gives off low spirits in its presentation; Robert Liddell comments that one could almost say that a prim Evangelical spinster is tidying up after rather a disreputable party that she ought not to have given; Marvin Mudrick complains of the severely moral thesis of the novel which subordinates or destroys every character and blocks out the authors vital irony; Howard S Babb feels the novel chilly when compared with the rest of her work; Andrew Wright finds the hero dull and the heroine at times too insufferably good to be accepted even to the faithful; and finally Lionel Trilling, perhaps the most sympathetic of critics, comments defensively of the unlikeable heroine and the repressive moral atmosphere. (White, p.659)

Conversely, recent critic Richard Jenkyns, (2004) refers to this novel as an experimental work, where Austen ‘dares to invent a very unusual type of heroine.’ (*A Fine Brush On Ivory*, p.95) He compares this experimental work to pieces written by Mozart and Shakespeare and that for a writer of her talents it was a natural progression to attempt such a challenge, a challenge to write the perfect novel. This novel is concerned both with the usual themes of marriage and education, but Austen here also embraces a third didactic point, the breakdown of social values. The world of *Mansfield Park* is austere, precise, and is unwelcoming as a domestic family environment. Duckworth’s metonym suggests that *Mansfield Park* has not only an autonomous way of life but also a state of government as well. Sir Thomas being the head of state with Lady Bertram and Mrs Norris his delegates.

¹¹ *Mansfield Park* was Cassandra Austen’s favourite novel, she was even more starchy in her opinions than her sister Jane.

Sir Thomas is a highly authoritative figure, one who speaks with a pontifical air even when addressing his wife and children. When he is finally humbled by the reality of his inadequacies in the role of father, Austen retains his sense of dignity:

He [Sir Thomas Bertram] feared that principle, active principle had been wanting; that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments, the authorized object of their youth, could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manner, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial, he feared they had heard from any lips that could profit them. (*Mansfield Park*, p. 468-9)

He is conscious of his errors in his own conduct as a parent, and so too is the reader. Lady Bertram is indolence personified and has no influence on her family. Their marriage has long since died. She can no longer even provide companionship to her husband as a card partner as he would rather not play at all than have her as a partner; her presence in the household is surplus to requirement. Mrs Norris, however, is the de facto ruler of Mansfield Park, though her actions are motivated by two social evils: the first avarice, the second a love of tyrannical power, 'her love of power was equal to her love of directing'. (*Mansfield Park*, p. 6) She is perhaps Austen's most malicious character and only the saintly Fanny could feel any sympathy towards her, though even she feels no regret when Mrs Norris finally vacates Mansfield Park.

Tony Tanner, like Duckworth, sees *Mansfield Park* as 'an institution that is able to take raw material from Portsmouth and refine it – as it does with Fanny, as it effectively does with her brother William (by securing him a career in the navy), as it promises to do with her sister Susan.' (*Jane*

Austen, p. 148) The deficient ruling order at Mansfield Park suggests moral mal-nutrition: Sir Thomas is absent from his duties for vast lengths of time, Lady Bertram is in a constant state of somnambulance and the nasty mismanagement of Mrs Norris renders her psychologically imbalanced. This is a ruling order that has the appearance of good breeding and good manners but without morals. The consequences of which are ‘cold deception, manipulation and exploitation.’ (*Jane Austen*, p.150) Through the Crawfords Austen allows us to deduce that London can be a world of vice and perdition; the reader may learn of the various attractions of London, but the reader is also able to learn of false appearances that are corroding the very essence of propriety. Together with the Crawfords, Austen portrays London in a negative light; Fanny ‘think[s] the influence of London very much at war with all respectable attachments. She saw proof of it in Miss Crawford, as well as in her cousins;’. (*Mansfield Park*, p. 438) London is a world of vice, a locale that has no redeeming virtues.

The effects of this weak and divided authority may be revealed in the educational achievements of Maria and Julia Bertram. They are confident, self-possessed, charming, though only when it suits them to be so, they can recite the chronological order of English kings and the Roman emperors, they know vast amounts of heathen mythology, all the metals, semi-metals, planets, and distinguished philosophers. On top on this they have learnt music and art and can use many mediums. What a pity, the narrator informs us, that:

with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility. In everything but disposition, they were admirably taught.
(*Mansfield Park*, p. 18)

It is ironic that when, at the start of the novel, Sir Thomas contemplates the introduction of Fanny into his household and what possible corruptions could be inflicted on his own daughters, that he reasons that due to their older age there is no cause for concern and ‘hope[s] there can be nothing to

fear for *them*, and everything to hope for *her*'. (*Mansfield Park*, p.9) But by the end of the novel it is Fanny, through sheer strength of character, who resists any form of corruption when it was she the younger and therefore more vulnerable child.

Mansfield Park does include the usual themes of education, courtship and marriage but this very serious approach to her chosen subject "ordination" is an indication that Austen was using the clergy as a platform to address a wider and more inclusive subject: the corruption of society. Some critics have argued that *Mansfield Park* is an Evangelical-inspired novel; Chapman complains that the author was 'too much under the influence of one of her favourite divines or secular moralists.' (Duffy, p. 73) Jane Austen's letters do, in fact, reveal a very religiously orientated person, they reveal she held very strong beliefs; again to her niece Fanny, she writes:

The most astonishing part of your character is ... you should have such excellent Judgement in what you do! Religious Principle I fancy must explain it. (*Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 334)

By using the clergy and the metaphor of the state in *Mansfield Park*, Austen created the ideal social structure that did not include any new or threatening elements. Firstly the weaknesses are exposed followed by the action of reinstating traditional values. Duckworth follows a similar theme by tracing the use of landscape and improvement imagery; whereby Fanny and Edmund alone resist the onslaught of improvement ideas. In an effort to maintain a connection with earlier, happier times, Fanny quotes Cowper ' "Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited" '. (*Mansfield Park*, p56) The future of England for Austen meant a close association of religious alignment, of sound moral principles, an awareness of the rules of proper conduct and a familiarity of the social graces.

The lessons offered both at Mansfield Park and *in Mansfield Park* are many, but the ultimate lesson of the novel is possibly ‘the necessity of self-denial and humility’, (*Mansfield Park*, p.468) which the virtuous Fanny appears to already hold, and in abundance, has a very Evangelical ring it. At the start of the nineteenth-century the Evangelicals were increasingly becoming more concerned with social reform. We know that Jane Austen was in fact Anglican, but her letters reveal Evangelical sympathies:

I am by no means convinced that we ought not all to be Evangelicals, & am at least persuaded that they who are so from Reason & feeling, must be happier & safest. (*Jane Austen’s Letters*, p.280)

As Tanner concludes:

Given Jane Austen’s concern with the problem of how a true social order could be maintained, particularly in that troubled period, she clearly considered the role of the clergymen as being of special importance – less for the saving of souls (though there is little reason to doubt her genuine orthodox belief) and more with the saving of society. (*Jane Austen*, p.170)

Austen was well aware of an England that was experiencing a time of great uncertainty and fear, an England that was changing and changing rapidly; she believed that great moral strength was required to halt the downward spiral to disaster, Austen wrote to teach her readers of the importance of moral guidance. In *Mansfield Park* her approach altered immensely, and it was a style she would not repeat with her successive novels, but, of course, she did continue to write lessons.

(7) Narrative Techniques: Feminist Detail

Austen's use of narrative is a carefully crafted art; the attentive reader is able to identify the constantly alternating narrative voices and recognise the different effects those voices can produce. It is in the detail of the narrative that Austen's feminism is expressed and how it plays out the teaching quality of the novels. As the heroes and heroines learn their lessons through their experiences, so too does the reader. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the lesson on which Austen concentrates, is that of correct behaviour. The reader also learns of Lydia's naiveté as well as the difference of character between Elizabeth and her youngest sister. In chapter 10 of *Northanger Abbey*, we learn of hypocrisy and how to recognise this trait in our own life experiences. The reader can share the learning process that Catherine encounters as she grows and develops and is able to identify the malignant intentions of Isabella Thorpe. Furthermore, Austen also gives an indirect lesson on correct behaviour as she exposes the ill breeding of Isabella.

*Pride and Prejudice.*¹²

The use of showing and telling narrative techniques from an extract of *Pride and Prejudice* show Austen's ability to interweave natural dialogue with conscious and unconscious thought, whilst continuing to develop narrative structure. Showing in *Pride and Prejudice* makes us, the readers, participants in the action revealing the characters through amusing and dramatic dialogue. 'They must all go to Brighton' says Lydia, speaking for her unmarried sisters, heedless of the scandal she has caused. Telling is where the omniscient narrator consciously and objectively conveys information: 'Mr Wickham had received his commission' is a simple example. Another telling technique is focalisation, here the narrator tells us what is happening but we see events from a single character's point of view

¹² The chosen extract is at the point of Lydia and Wickham's return as husband and wife to Longbourn, (Austen, J., *Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 51, p.241-245)

as ‘She [Elizabeth] had scarcely needed her present observations to be satisfied.’ Austen also uses free indirect speech where the third person narrator adopts the style of speaking of a character, exploiting their point of view and syntax, often to comic or ironic effect as in ‘Lydia was exceedingly fond of him.’

An example of showing is where the dialogue shows Lydia’s frivolous nature to be unchanged, except that with marriage her self-importance has increased. She asks ‘What do you think of my husband’, and constantly uses the personal pronouns of ‘I’ and ‘we’ to emphasise her married status. Feeling no shame she says ‘I’m sure my sisters must all envy me’. Lydia has most of the dialogue but in her rapt attention the normally talkative Mrs Bennet shows she has chosen to forget how close the family came to ruin, preferring to agree with Lydia that Brighton ‘is the place to get husbands’. Lydia’s remarks are full of intentional irony, on Jane Austen’s part, as we know that it was not ‘good luck’ that secured her a husband but money and force.

Lydia smugly positions herself as senior daughter promising ‘to get good partners’ for all her sisters. At this point Elizabeth, who has no wish to join her sister in Newcastle, responds acerbically ‘I thank you for my share of the favour, ... but I do not particularly like your way of getting husbands.’ So far we have been encouraged to laugh at Lydia and Mrs Bennet but with one line of showing the perspective shifts and we see their mindless chatter from the point of view of the character we trust most – Elizabeth. As the person in the room with the most sense and moral maturity she sums up the reality of Lydia’s marriage saying what her mother should have, ‘I think there cannot be too little said on the subject.’

In the following paragraph we move from multiple perspectives to focalisation. Throughout the extract Elizabeth’s thoughts and dialogue are consistently serious, focalisation enables us to enter into her thoughts as she analyses the circumstances leading to Lydia and Wickham’s marriage.

She uses 'the reason of things' to sadly conclude it was 'the strength of her [Lydia's] love' rather than Wickham's 'violently caring for her' which caused their elopement. Focalisation allows us to hear what Elizabeth cannot state and combines the novel's two most trustworthy voices: the narrative voice and the best developed and informed character, Elizabeth.

In the next paragraph we encounter free indirect speech. The narrator adopts Lydia's careless syntax as she talks about Wickham, 'no one was to be put in competition with him. He did everything best.' It is cleverly placed as it shows the duality of character perspective contrasting Lydia's superficial acceptance of her 'dear Wickham' with Elizabeth's focalised analysis of a man unable 'to resist an opportunity of having a companion.' Austen then continues to alternate the narrative technique and revert back to showing and in the dialogic (Walder, p.74) of the two sisters, Austen accentuates the tension between them. Elizabeth brushes off Lydia's attempt to boast about her wedding day with a caustic put-down, 'there cannot be too little said on the subject.'

In this short extract Austen has employed many narrative techniques to expose and clarify character motivation and perspective. Through showing and telling we see neither Lydia nor her mother are changed by their experiences: Lydia's life still centres on balls and officers and Mrs Bennet's business is still 'to get her daughters married.' (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.3) Through focalisation and minimal dialogue Elizabeth's good sense is revealed and we become aware how much her perspective has changed and through free indirect speech how little Lydia has.

In *Pride and Prejudice* we encounter one of the main themes – marriage and how people choose their marriage partners through sense or sensibility. Austen places great emphasis on sense although she is sympathetic to a love match and averse to a loveless match, she disapproves of 'characters who elevate their own judgement above objective ethical foundations' (Walder, p.68). Lydia and Wickham are brought together 'because their

passions were stronger than their virtue.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.237) This union is in stark contrast to the unions of Elizabeth and Darcy and of Jane and Bingley. The narrator warns us there is little chance of happiness where affections are not equal and a marriage with mutual respect will soon sink into ‘indifference’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.296)

Throughout the novel we are shown the outcome of a marriage based on unwise emotional indulgence in Mr and Mrs Bennet’s relationship, ‘captivated by youth and beauty ... he had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.180). Marriage founded solely on sense or materialistic ambition also comes in for criticism when Charlotte becomes engaged to Mr Collins. Elizabeth is shocked believing her friend to be sacrificing ‘every better feeling to worldly advantage’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.96). Charlotte is pragmatic about her marriage prospects and not thinking ‘highly either of men or matrimony’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.94) looks only for independence from her family and ‘a comfortable home.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.94) Elizabeth’s musings on Wickham’s affection for Lydia and her astonishment at Charlotte’s acceptance of Mr Collins, contrast with her positive feelings about Jane and Bingley’s engagement which, although a love match, she believes ‘to be rationally founded, because they had for basis the excellent understanding.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.265) The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy unites both sense and sensibility and is the fulfilment of a moral mission. This couple’s union is ‘to the advantage of both’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.237) as they respect one another and Elizabeth, guided by sense as well as her heart receives the ‘worthy’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.289) Darcy’s second declaration with ‘gratitude and pleasure’. (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.280) Their mutual understanding makes her ‘the happiest creature’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.293) and Darcy’s happiness ‘he had probably never felt before.’ (*Pride and Prejudice*, p.280)

Austen's use of multiple narrative techniques in *Pride and Prejudice* effectively shows the difference in characterization and perspective, whilst exploring themes of love, marriage, status and manners through character discourse and structural narrative. Indeed, Austen was innovative in the development of these new narratorial devices in all of her novels.

Northanger Abbey

Northanger Abbey is a novel concerned with reading 'people, dress, behaviour, language and the games played out in conversation.' (Da Sousa Correa, p.41) In comparing and contrasting the conversations that pass between Catherine Morland, Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney we learn a great deal about the characters and what Austen thinks of the world.¹³

Catherine's first friend in Bath is Isabella Thorpe, a young woman adept in the language and manners of the fashionable world. Her conversational style depicts her as interested only in fashion, gossip and men. Isabella has a hyperbolic style which prepares us for her dominance in the conversation which follows. She has a 'thousand things' to communicate and is determined to keep focus upon herself and her quarry James Morland. Her dialogue is littered with 'I shall; I need not; your brother and I'. To anyone less naïve than Catherine her real purpose would be clear, that in talking to, and flattering 'My sweetest Catherine' she is continuing her flirtation with James. Her stratagem here is to encourage him to propose by repeating their conversation in which she professes to prefer 'the country to every other place'.

Isabella feigns interest in Catherine's affairs but her questions are almost always rhetorical, she asks 'is he [Henry Tilney] in the house now? ... I can hardly exist till I see him', but on being told he is not there, she returns to

¹³ The chosen extract is at the conversations Catherine has with Isabella and Eleanor, (Austen, J., *Northanger Abbey*, chapter 10, p.50-53)

her favourite subject – herself – asking ‘How do you like my new gown?’ Austen uses hyphens, exclamation marks and italics to good effect in this extract where Isabella encourages Catherine into believing that Mr Tilney is ‘coming back to Bath’ for her sake. The punctuation highlights the rapidity of her remarks and their reckless content. Isabella’s affected language and vulgar subject matter compares unfavourably with Eleanor Tilney’s well-bred manners and reserve. The narrator appears to look on with satisfaction as Catherine and Eleanor ‘continued talking together’, as the description implies a true exchange. The narrator also laughs at the conventionalities of small talk saying that in ‘all probability not an observation was made, ... which had not been made a thousand times before’ but in the same sentence notes approvingly that these observations were ‘spoken with simplicity and truth and without personal conceit.’

Austen signals that we can rely on what Catherine and Eleanor say and the future value of their friendship by connecting that statement to their conversation in the following paragraph. Throughout the exchange Catherine’s remarks and questions give away her feelings: she admires Henry, ‘How well your brother dances’ and is jealous of his dancing companion asking ‘Do you think her pretty?’, where Isabella would have called her a ‘mischievous creature.’ Eleanor though ‘at once surprised and amused’ just smiles and replies with civility.

In this extract the authorial voice does not offer a value judgment on Isabella. It is left to our naive, but ultimately instinctively sensible heroine, Catherine to sum up the disgust Austen’s polite society readers would have felt at Isabella’s conduct. Isabella expects ‘some droll remark’ from Catherine after her effusions about her compatibility with James. The impropriety is obvious to Catherine and the narrator allows her to reply for herself and the reader, ‘I would not have made so improper a remark upon my account’. In contrast, the value judgement on Eleanor by the authorial voice is approving, even allowing Eleanor to take on ‘the narrator’s own style of language’ (Da Sousa Correa p.49) which is knowing but never arch. The

final exchange between Catherine and Eleanor highlights the older girl's finer understanding of people and Catherine's innocence. As an indication of their future friendship the narrator uses one sentence to enter into both their thoughts saying Miss Tilney had 'some knowledge of her acquaintance's feelings' whilst Catherine had not 'the smallest consciousness of having explained them.' All three girls reveal themselves through these conversations, Catherine as a sensible innocent; Isabella as a vulgar flirt, and Eleanor as civilly perceptive.

It could be said that in *Northanger Abbey* both Catherine and Isabella pursue friendships in order to maintain contact with men they are attracted to. However, their way of getting husbands is very different. Whilst Catherine is looking for love and a serious attachment, Isabella is only interested in money and marrying up. Marylyn Butler comments, 'Though we love Catherine with our hearts, our heads give us access to Isabella.' (Regan, p.164) Austen's readers would have been aware that a spirited young woman without fortune would only be able to secure her future with an advantageous marriage. Isabella ruthlessly pursues James Morland, extravagantly professing 'we seem born for each other', she just as rapidly drops him and Catherine when she discovers his income is 'hardly enough to find one in the common necessities of life.' (*Northanger Abbey*, p.106) Catherine's eyes eventually become so open to Isabella's deceit that she is 'ashamed of having ever loved her at all', (*Northanger Abbey*, p.176) and whilst her encounter with Isabella takes the shine off her innocence, it also makes her more realistic about life and love; summing Isabella up as a 'vain coquette' (*Northanger Abbey*, p.176) whose 'tricks have not answered.' (*Northanger Abbey*, p.176)

When Catherine first meets Eleanor she is 'interested at once by her appearance and her relationship to Mr Tilney'. (*Northanger Abbey*, p.38) However, she has no premeditated intention of manipulating Eleanor into allowing her more intimate contact with Henry Tilney. In fact, her relationship with Eleanor becomes as important to her as her attraction to Henry.

When she feels that she has insulted the brother and sister 'she instinctively addressed herself as much to one as the other in vindication.' (*Northanger Abbey*, p.79) Nor does Eleanor attempt to manipulate or bully Catherine: a feature of her relationship with Isabella. The friendship between the two girls really begins to develop when they take a walk to Beechen Cliff where all three enter into a lively discussion on books, art, history and education. When Catherine finds herself a little out of her depth Eleanor protects her from Henry's teasing by saying, 'more nice than wise'. (*Northanger Abbey*, p.84)

How differently Isabella and James behave when the three are together in the Pump-room ignoring Catherine; they are 'always engaged in some sentimental discussion or lively dispute' leaving Catherine's friendship with 'little share in the notice of either'. By the end of the novel Catherine's friendship with Isabella is over but her relationship with Eleanor is so strong that they part with 'a long and affectionate embrace' (*Northanger Abbey*, p.186) that 'supplied the place of language'. (*Northanger Abbey*, p.186)

As readers of *Northanger Abbey* we are assisted in our perception of characters by the authorial voice and can join in the fun of its ironic remarks as it laughs at Catherine, scolds Isabella and applauds Eleanor. When our heroine, Catherine Morland, arrives at Bath she is deficient in perception, experience and acquaintance. Through two very different girls: the superficial and fashionable Isabella Thorpe and the well-bred and refined Eleanor Tilney, she gains maturity and learns to 'discriminate between true friends and false.' (Regan, p.136-7) Mission accomplished.

(8) Austen's New Heroes and the Status Quo

Jane Austen's novels are not only depictions of good marriages but also representations of ill-suited couples and empty marriages that reveal varying degrees of failure, for both parties. Without directly saying so, Austen shows how the wrong partner leads to a life of misery for both husband *and* wife. As the narrative is given predominantly from the female perspective, it is imperative that her heroines make the right choice of marriage partner. This good marriage not only benefits the couple but also, by extension, the future growth and renewal of the wider society. The society around Austen, of which she was a critical member, was one that was fundamentally based on landed interests and the preoccupation of property, the exception here is *Persuasion*. *Persuasion* is a somewhat radical novel that proposes a 'redefinition and realignment of social values' (*Jane Austen*, p.246). The status quo is both metaphorically and literally "at sea". In a time of political instability Austen takes a sideswipe at the 'sauntering politicians' (*Persuasion*, p. 242) who are not benefitting the nation in a time of crisis.

Austen is upholding of the status quo, but only to a degree; her heroes, all of whom are landed property holders and her heroines all marry a man with property or who is rich. The exception here is Edward Ferrars who has been disinherited of his birth right by his mother whose priorities lie in money and status rather than on her son's happiness. Austen places great emphasis on the morals of the upper classes and the emerging middle class; society needed good role models to follow and she is mindful to include and exemplify bad models which society should avoid. She is also careful to include many a range of social behaviour. Austen is also upholding of the status quo by positioning her heroines within the domestic sphere. None of her heroines presumes to take up any other occupation other than that of the home. However, as Tony Tanner (1986)

comments, 'the status quo is not uncritically or mindlessly upheld'. (*Jane Austen*, p. 35) *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* are perfect examples of estates that have been neglected by weak and ineffective males and so provides a definite social critique.

Persuasion differs to all other works by Austen (except perhaps *Mansfield Park*) in that it emphasises issues of the social organisation. Austen considers the status of the aristocracy against the meritocratic ideas of rank, and further examines the role of women. As has been previously stated, Austen uses the house as a symbol for the State, but the aristocracy in *Persuasion's* opening is decidedly different to the aristocracy of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*. Possibly, if not probably, voicing her own disillusion with the immoral members of the landed gentry. She paints Sir Walter Elliot as a compulsive spendthrift, forced to leave and to let his ancestral home because his opulent lifestyle can no longer be supported. His perceived status demands all the trappings of an extravagant lifestyle, hence his abhorrence of retrenchment:

What! Every comfort of life knocked off! Journeys, London, servants, horses, table – contractions and restrictions everywhere! To live no longer with the decencies even of a private gentleman! (*Persuasion*, p.11)

Instead Kellynch Hall is headed by a veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar, Admiral Croft.

Austen gives a damning portrayal of Sir Walter; he is representative of an unproductive and sterile aristocracy. Sir Walter is the patriarch who is unable to produce a male heir, like many of Austen's characters, but unlike any other character, she includes 'a still-born son, Nov 5, 1789' (*Persuasion*, p.1) The very same year of the start of the French Revolution and the day and month of the failed gunpowder plot, the revolutionary act of Guy Fawkes; given that we know how meticulous Austen was with her realist features, this should be read as symbolic of the imminent death of the aristocracy, or the stillbirth of

revolution, but a warning to the aristocracy nonetheless. Like *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* is about the need for a constitutional reform, but in *Persuasion* Austen supplants the aggressive patriarchal figurehead with a caring, sharing male, the professionally successful Admiral and adored husband of Mrs Croft.

Sir Walter, at the beginning of the novel, expresses his contempt for the navy, 'The profession has its utility, but I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it.' (*Persuasion*, p.17) Similarly, Lady Russell has 'prejudices on the side of ancestry', (*Persuasion*, p, 9) However, Mr Shepherd, Mrs Clay and Anne all speak very favourably of the navy, it is Sir Walter's obsessions of vanity and bloodlines that concern him the most:

... it [the naval profession] is in two points offensive to me; I have two strong grounds of objection to it. First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and, secondly, as it cuts up a man's youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man. (*Persuasion*, p.18)

Sir Walter is intent in maintaining a distinct level of social superiority for the aristocratic class over the meritocratic and professional classes. He cannot accept the loss of status or, that others who he deems unworthy, to gain any; it is a contentious issue for him from the very start of the novel.

Anne Elliot becomes cognisant of the qualities of the navy as she alludes to a debt of gratitude for this set of men:

The navy, I think, who have done so much for us [Great Britain], have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow. (*Persuasion*, p.17)

Anne is in agreement with Mr Shepherd, though he is more economically orientated in his view, as he thinks more 'in the way of business, gentlemen of the navy are well to deal with'. (*Persuasion*, p. 15) The atmosphere of the

novel suggests a flurry of social movement with “the peace” of wartime enabling many rich men to return to England as they wait for a return to war.

Austen has positioned Sir Walter and Admiral Croft as spearheads of Kellynch Hall; one, the legitimate but inadequate head and the second, a representative of a new social class, who leads with a broader and more liberal style. After *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* is Austen’s most overtly political novel. As Tanner highlights:

The normal sources of stability and order in Jane Austen’s world would include social position, property, place, family, manners and propriety, as generating a web of duties and responsibilities which together should serve to maintain the moral fabric and coherence of society. (*Jane Austen*, p. 216)

In *Persuasion* however, there are radical changes to the social structure. Lady Russell, who is blinded by her prejudices, is unable to recognise the deficiencies of Sir Walter, the title of “baronet” acts as an immunity to each and every shortcoming he has. When Anne was persuaded to reject Captain Wentworth it was in accordance with that class’s social rules of conduct and codes. It is because that mentality has a bias to the old order, the status quo that Austen suggests that that school of thought is wrong. Lady Russell, who is proven to have got it ‘pretty completely wrong’ (*Persuasion*, p.251) is the surrogate mother and is not blamed directly for her disastrous advice, Anne makes that point very clear, she ‘did not blame Lady Russell’ (*Persuasion*, p.27) as she was fully aware of societal expectations, Anne acted on a profound sense of *duty* to that established order, otherwise she ‘should have suffered in her conscience’. (*Persuasion*, p.248) The established order has a powerful grip on society and is able to coordinate ideologies and customs at their leisure and pleasure.

Dianne Sadoff (2009) refers to the aristocracy of this period as suffering with a crisis of identity; Sir Walter plays this out literally by his own refined appearance and his disgust of non-elegance in others. Even Mrs Clay

cannot escape his ‘continually making severe remarks upon in her absence’ (*Persuasion*, p. 32) of her lack of physical beauty as she unfortunately has “freckles”, a “protruding tooth” and a “clumsy wrist”. When Admiral Croft moves into Kellynch Hall he removes the many mirrors from his dressing room and comments, ‘Such a number of looking-glasses! Oh, Lord! There is no getting away from one’s self.’ (*Persuasion*, p.125) Elizabeth Elliot is also a reflection of her father, who shares his narcissistic traits:

It sometimes happens that a woman is handsomer at twenty-nine than she was ten years before; and generally speaking, if there has been neither ill-health nor anxiety, it is a time of life at which scarcely any charm is lost. It was so with Elizabeth; still the same handsome Miss Elliot that she had begun to be thirteen years ago; Sir Walter might be excused, therefore, in forgetting her age, or, at least, be deemed only half a fool, for thinking himself and Elizabeth as blooming as ever, amidst the wreck of the good looks of everybody else; for he could plainly see how old all the rest of his family and acquaintances were growing. (*Persuasion*, p.4)

The vain Elizabeth, like her father, for she is ‘very handsome, and very like himself’ (*Persuasion*, p.3) is a further portrayal of the unproductive aristocracy.

In *Persuasion*, Austen was advancing a new social order by the displacement of property and ownership. Property, in this novel, ceases to be an essential part of respectability; Austen deliberately undervalues property if the owners abuse their position, as does Sir Walter. Anne’s younger sister Mary, a contemptible snob, only sees property as symbolic with social value. She has little respect for the entire Hayter family and holds hopes of a husband of rank for Henrietta for ‘it would be shocking to have Henrietta marry Charles Hayter; a very bad thing for *her*, and still worse for *me*, and therefore it is very much to be wished that Captain Wentworth may soon put him quite out of her head’ (*Persuasion*, p.75). Socially, Mary is offended by an association with the Hayters via marriage, but she sees Captain Wentworth as a preferable suitor.

The existing social order is violated at the very beginning of the novel when Sir Walter effectively abandons his duty as landowner to enjoy a life of leisure in Bath when he should have been helping to maintain and preserve the community. Tanner notes, 'He is an agent of 'desolation' helping both to precipitate and to accelerate the destruction of the old order of society.' (*Jane Austen*, p.222) Sir Walter is a representation of a self-centred member of society; he is not bound to his responsibilities, instead he prefers to indulge in a meaningless existence with all the superficialities of the fashionable centre of Bath. When the Crofts are settled in Kellynch Hall Anne felt that her father was:

very fortunate in his tenants, felt the parish to be so sure of a good example, and the poor of the best attention and relief, that however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch Hall has passed into better hands than its owners. (*Persuasion*, p.122-123)

The Crofts are members of the professional classes who have both the experience and the economic means to maintain and improve¹⁴ Kellynch Hall and to attend to the sick and needy of the local community. The Crofts are portrayed as deserving, they directly replace the legal owner of Kellynch Hall and indirectly the older order of the aristocracy; metaphorically the ruling class was being displaced by a new meritocratic order. In this novel Austen has realigned her usual assessment of societal order.

Tanner observes that rank 'signifies only itself' (*Jane Austen*, p.216) but Mr Elliot mentions rank on numerous occasions: rank per se, people of rank, and jealousy of rank. In former times rank held little importance for him:

¹⁴ The Crofts even made improvements to their rented property, one of which was a modification to the laundry-door that 'Mr Shepherd thinks it the greatest improvement the house ever had.' (*Persuasion*, p.125)

... all the honour of the family he held as cheap as dirt. I [Mrs Smith] have often heard him declare, that if baronetcies were saleable, anybody should have his for fifty pounds, arms and motto, name and livery included.
(*Persuasion*, p. 201)

The reader is not told why Mr Elliot previously had such a distaste for rank and title, but given what we do know of his character as a mature adult, the title of baronet is desired only to expand his social status among other similar minded titled nobility, it is a mere vehicle of opportunism. Sir Walter's rekindling of the relationship with Lady Dalrymple, and the likeminded William Elliot to Sir Walter, are two typical examples. Austen is, in fact, saying that rank is worthless if it is not commensurate with decent comportment within society. The genuine value of rank is *not* in the civil environment but in the military sphere: the navy. In *Persuasion* it is the new meritocracy that is the redeeming force in society that brings about the re-establishment of peace and harmony and the maintaining of order. The remainder of this chapter will focus on *Persuasion* and discuss Austen's portrayal of the positive depiction of the new heroic naval officers that seems to challenge the fixed attitudes to the social hierarchy.

As has already been stated *Persuasion* is Austen's most overtly political novel; the opening sentence reads:

SIR WALTER ELLIOT, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage. (*Persuasion*, p.1)

thus establishing Sir Walter, and his "book of books", as a perceived form of patriarchal hierarchy. It is only with the pages of his treasured book that Sir Walter can find 'occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one'. (*Persuasion*, p.1) Similarly, at the end of the novel, a further example may be identified with the debate between Anne and Captain Harville:

Well Miss Elliott, as I was saying, we shall never agree, I suppose, upon this point. No man and woman would, probably. But let me observe that all histories are against you – all stories, prose and verse. ... I do not think I ever

opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon a woman's inconstancy. ... But, perhaps, you will say, these were all written by men.

Anne replies:

Perhaps I shall. Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.
(*Persuasion*, p.235)

Here, Austen acknowledges that men have had the advantage over women ever since writing began, but she refuses to endorse the heretofore accepted norm. It is during this discussion that Captain Wentworth is in possession of *the pen*, writing, as the reader is about to learn, a very moving and sincere letter to Anne whereby he declares his love for her. Even by having the pen, Austen renders Captain Wentworth in a less dominant position as he confesses that he 'can hardly write'. (*Persuasion*, p.239) Gilbert and Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, see the pen as a metaphor for the pen of male patriarchal authority. However, when Captain Wentworth drops his pen, Austen suggests a fracture in the accepted ideology and can only be viewed as radical for its time. Symbolically, Wentworth has released his male dominance; historically the pen has always been a vehicle of male power and, still is, that is up to the point when Wentworth loses it. But change is limited, Austen is still tied to inherent traditional practices of propriety as Captain Wentworth operates within codes of social boundaries; he is compelled to communicate in the only way available to him, 'by such means as are within my reach.' (*Persuasion*, p.238) The social change that Austen desired will be a slow process for society to accept and buy into.

In *Persuasion* the inhabitants of England may be divided in to two distinct factions: the aristocracy and the navy. The unethical and unprincipled members of the aristocracy are in danger of decline or even collapse due to overindulgence, indolence and corruption. Conversely, the navy may be seen to pose a threat to the aristocratic family, Sir Walter particularly

despises sailors and is resentful that “men of obscure birth” have the honour and privilege of renting Kellynch Hall. Throughout the novel there are undercurrents of instability and decay via the imagery of death,¹⁵ albeit off stage, and illness. Marilyn Butler argues that the navy poses no threat to the aristocracy as they themselves were already gentry, having already been integrated into that social order; but this is in direct contrast to Sir Walter’s hostile view of the navy.

Austen’s own private social circle gave her the advantage of experience; she was able to write knowledgably as she had one brother, Edward Austen, who was part of the English landed gentry, and another two brothers, Charles and Francis, who, by 1810 were both Captains in the British navy. They had both seen action in the Napoleonic wars and had both received substantial amounts in prize money.¹⁶ The British navy had, since the great age of medieval exploration, played a key role in the rapid expansion of Empire by the early nineteenth-century. This was also a time of a growing sense of national identity and national pride was taking hold over the country. In *Persuasion*, Austen portrays the navy as a type of brotherhood, they are ‘brother-officers’. (*Persuasion*, p.97) She uses the family as a metaphor for her new society. At the end of the novel Anne is saddened that she has no “family” or “relations” that her *husband* could value, but she is compensated by ‘the prompt welcome which met her in his brothers and sisters’ (*Persuasion*, p.253) In Austen’s four previous novels the aristocracy’s authority is shored up through marriage, but in this novel Anne Elliot, who is of greater social distinction than Captain Wentworth, escapes the false hollowness of the aristocracy that is in a ‘state of stagnation’, (*Persuasion*, p. 179) and joins the naval family.

When Anne Elliot first meets with the Harvilles and Captain Benwick in Lyme, she struggles emotionally against a sense of loss, her ‘tendency to

¹⁵ Richard Musgrove, Fanny Harville, Mr Smith all die and Lady Elliot is dead at the start of the novel.

¹⁶ Prize money was a naval practice legitimised by an Act of Parliament in 1649 where a share of the spoils of war were divided amongst those who captured enemy ships carrying vast amounts of gold.

lowness' (*Persuasion*, p.97) at the thought of not being part of this set. Anne yearns for the new social circle, even at the cost of becoming Lady Elliot and mistress of Kellynch Hall. She has rejected the landed estate Mr Elliot will one day inherit. Anne's marriage to Captain Wentworth does not suggest a regeneration of the aristocracy as she will be incorporated into his world, as is Louisa Musgrove when she marries Captain Benwick. In Austen's new portrayal of the modern family there is no need of an 'Uppercross Hall, no landed estate, [and] no headship of a family;' (*Persuasion*, p.252). Radical indeed.

Initially Anne is saddened at having to leave her beloved ancestral home, but after only a short space of time, there is a realignment of her opinion as 'she was soon sensible of some mental change'. (*Persuasion*, p.121) The warmth and sincerity she sees in the naval brotherhood shows:

how much more interesting to her was the home and the friendship of the Harvilles and Captain Benwick, than her own father's house in Camden Place. (*Persuasion*, p.121)

Austen is proffering an alternative social construction, something different to the stale system currently in place. She uses the navy as the new societal model with revised values.

A major shift in fixed attitudes regarding marriage was the fact that these heroic naval officers embraced the idea of having a wife as an equal partner. The wives of the officers also break with tradition and do not assign any great value in the landed estate. Mrs Croft is both travelled and experienced and in her opinion 'Women may be as comfortable on board, as in the best house in England' (*Persuasion*, p.67) Mr Shepherd has high praise for her intellect, for she 'asked more questions about the house and terms and taxes' (*Persuasion*, p.21) and is overall more knowledgeable than her husband with business. Mrs Croft is a new type of female character; one

who enjoys the liberties and freedom no other female character has ever experienced in any other of Austen's novels.

In contrast to the coveting Elliots, the navy are also extremely cordial in their hospitality. Despite the cramped living space, the Harvilles are happy to host Captain Benwick as a permanent boarder. Even the restricted living space of the Harvilles has its appeal for Anne, for her the harmony and accord she witnesses is 'the picture of repose and domestic happiness'. (*Persuasion*, p.68) This hospitality of the navy is not just emphasised, at the same time Austen undermines the conventional protocols of etiquette of the hypocritical upper classes. The Harvilles genuinely consider 'the whole party as friends of their own' (*Persuasion*, p.97). Furthermore, contrary to the shallow 'give-and-take invitations and dinners of formality and display' (*Persuasion*, p.97) of the upper classes, the example set by the navy has 'a degree of hospitality [that is] so uncommon', (*Persuasion*, p.97) these are acts of benevolence from "the heart". Indeed, the Harvilles were vastly disappointed that:

Captain Wentworth should have brought any such party to Lyme without considering it as a thing of course that they should dine with them.
(*Persuasion*, p.97)

The generosity of the Harvilles, and that of Captain Wentworth's, for he has organised the dinner at the inn for the entire party at Lyme, is not done to impress or to for self-aggrandisement, it has much humbler and honourable origins. There is no pomposity or the standing-on-ceremony just as there are no hypocrites who flatter or prigs to be flattered in this much desired circle of friends. With the exception of the snob, Mary, we see decency personified and the glow of human warmth for one another. For Austen the naval set is a meritorious set indeed, a 'profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance'. (*Persuasion*, p.254) This is, in fact, the final part of the novel's concluding sentence and because women were not party to any of the *professions* and, given that Austen makes

no attempt to suggest otherwise, it can be reasoned that Austen is supportive of this social structure and content with it.

Even though *Persuasion* is predominantly concerned with social politics Austen continues to be didactic. The major lesson to be learned in this novel is to be learned by Lady Russell:

She must learn to feel that she had been mistaken with regard to both; that she had been unfairly influenced by appearances in each; that because Captain Wentworth's manners had not suited her own ideas, she had been too quick in suspecting them to indicate a character of dangerous impetuosity; and that because Mr Elliot's manners had precisely pleased her in their propriety and correctness, ... she had been too quick in receiving them as the certain result of the most correct opinions and well-regulated mind. There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and hopes. (*Persuasion*, p.251)

Lady Russell, as part of the old order, is proven to be fallible, and therefore wrong in her assumptions. One cannot find happiness in an unhappy union, and she did want to see Anne happy, but her fixed ideas and "bias" have blinded her and cannot reason in a logical manner. Austen has, in fact, written a very different narrative in *Persuasion*; she is using the art of persuasion on her readers in an attempt to improve social structures. The early eighteenth-century was a time of great social movement where old school and new school had different sets of values and principles. Jane Austen was neither exclusively conservative or radical but she did have valid criticism of the status quo. As Tanner comments 'The lesson that Lady Russell has to learn is not in itself revolutionary or subversive, but it does represent a radical assessment – and turning away from – many of the old values. (*Jane Austen*, p.249) If the English nation is in decline in *Mansfield Park*, in *Persuasion* the situation is in utter turmoil and in need of drastic action. Austen was writing to improve morals of both schools, old and new, in order to improve society.

Conclusion

October 2011 will mark two hundred years since Austen's novels first found publication and admiration among many of her readers, she continues to delight readers today, and no doubt, will continue to prompt critical debate. She often referred to her novels metaphorically as her *darling children*, this thesis has tried to show that Austen's six daughters, seven if we are to include Marianne, had, as a teacher, one of England's best. Today, the modern reader can learn how life was in eighteenth-century England through Austen's representations, as modern readers our relationship to the text has been distanced over time. Jane Austen lived through a time of tremendous social upheaval and uncertainties, she wrote to educate her readership to disseminate new ideas and to address moral laxity that had been in decline.

This thesis has encompassed the six major Austen novels and has evidenced that the prevalent concerns of the author were to criticise the corruptions of certain members of the middle and upper-classes in order to improve moral behaviour. I have argued that Austen was also concerned with women's position in society and their lack of independence under patriarchy. I have looked at the role of parents, but in particular fathers, and shown how that failure has damaging repercussions and consequences for both sons and daughters alike, and how negligent parenting has ramifications that effect society as a whole. In all six novels the fathers are portrayed with reduced authority, or they are neglectful of their duties, or simply ineffectual; Mr Dashwood has failed to provide for his wife and daughters, Mr Bennet shirks his responsibilities, Mr Woodhouse is both weak and ineffectual, Sir Thomas neglects both his duties and responsibilities as does Sir Walter but with the added failings of vanity and compulsive overspending, and Mr Morland is ineffectual.

I have shown how *Mansfield Park* was a complete change in tone and how that tone reflected the darker and more serious concerns of the mature author. As a grown woman Austen could no longer employ that “light & bright & sparkling” tenor that is evident in her first three novels, in *Mansfield Park* Austen had found the “shade” that was polluting society rather than the “shades of Pemberley”. I have also examined the detail of the narrative style of Austen to show how meticulous she was with her innovative techniques and how the characters learn for themselves and of themselves as they mature. Austen’s predominant female perspective gives the modern day reader a glimpse of Georgian and Regency life in a world dominated by males, and how society’s attitudes and assumptions operated. *Persuasion*, Austen’s last completed novel, has been shown to be her most radical text whereby she proposes a new social structure as well as good morals to adopt. The new hero is a man of military rank, well-schooled in the discipline division and well-principled on the moral front. I have shown how Austen was upholding of the status quo and that she did not find fault in the basic model, she found fault in its bias against women and in its stability.

Austen was a staunch believer in the educatory role of the novel; it was a constant motif in all of her novels:

... she ventured feeling in herself the right of seniority of mind to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study; and on being particularized, mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters,¹⁷ such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances. (*Persuasion*, p. 100)

¹⁷ This is probably a reference to the bible and the letters of the disciples who continued to spread the Christian faith as she includes “religious endurances”; the average modern reader would assume she refers to public or private letters.

Austen gave a representation of the world as it was in 1811 to 1817, and she gave these depictions as a realist writer. Her ideal world was a world where love and romance overcame the corruptions of society, a world where characters of both generations learn to conduct themselves in proper codes of decency. All of her heroines go through a courting process and a learning process. The modern reader can reflect of the intrinsic nature of good and evil, the offences may have only shifted in focus but each society will have its own codes in place and be able to relate to the text.

Austen's model family is a critique of the status quo, but Austen essentially modifies and fortifies that model. It is after exposing the weaknesses that she then reconstructs the family with the same hierarchical order, but one where the women are valued by men. The progression of her family structure is now distanced from property and this signals a shift from old structures towards new portrayals of both the home and the family. The family is no longer limited to blood relations and the home no longer shackled to the landed estates. By 1817 the family is a metaphorical extended societal family and its members all share common moral values, men value women, and wives hold an equal foothold with their husbands. Jane Austen throughout all six novels examines the relationships between couples, family members and generic community members; she evidences their failings and realigns their understanding.

Perhaps Austen's greatest contribution to the novel genre was the innovative narrative techniques. It is evidence of her genius artistry to weave at will with her character's consciousness whilst the detail plays out the teaching quality. The female consciousness is a vehicle for disseminating new ideas and invites, particularly the female reader, to contemplate before she commits herself to marriage. Austen refused to bow to conventions and marry for financial security, for her the sanctity of marriage should not come at the cost of individual happiness.

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