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Plot Devices in Jane Austen's Novels:

Sense and Sensibility

Pride and Prejudice

and

Persuasion

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
at Massey University

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1981

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ABSTRACT

This thesis evaluates various plot devices occurring in three novels by Jane Austen. The novels studied are Sense and Sensibility (1811), Pride and Prejudice (1813), and Persuasion (1818). I have chosen novels from different periods of Jane Austen's career as a novelist. One of the novels, Pride and Prejudice is regarded as having a virtually flawless plot, while both Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion are considered to have major plot flaws.

To evaluate Jane Austen's use of plot devices, I have isolated the main devices in each novel. Each chapter of the thesis is devoted to one type of plot device. The plot devices analysed come under the headings of Journeys and Character Positioning, Revelations, Elopements, Illnesses, Alternative Suitors, Minor Characters, and Conclusion. At the end of each chapter I have summarised the main points and compared the devices discussed in the chapter. The conclusion is divided into three parts, dealing separately with the three novels.

In my analysis of plot devices I have looked particularly for consistency of characterisation, and for plausible events. As I expected, Pride and Prejudice has a very carefully constructed plot. Chance and coincidence play their parts, and Jane Austen does not try to disguise this. In Pride and Prejudice Jane Austen displays her ability to vary the devices used to bring Darcy and Elizabeth together, using holidays, illnesses and social gatherings. Furthermore, Elizabeth and Darcy are not always surrounded by the same characters. As the settings and characters change, so too do the reactions of Elizabeth and Darcy towards each other. Each incident is well realised and consistent with the characters' personalities.

Sense and Sensibility has one major plot flaw. The subplot concerning Marianne, Willoughby and Colonel Brandon is far

from perfect, and despite some mitigating circumstances (such as the obvious care expended on the description of Marianne's illness) it remains unsatisfactory. However, the novel does not deserve to be disregarded, as some of the plot devices are very well written (and on a par with similar ones found in the other novels studied).

Persuasion is also a flawed novel. The revelation made by Mrs Smith has received harsh criticism, yet it plays a very minor role in the plot of the novel, and is unfairly regarded as a clumsy piece of deus ex machina. The least satisfactory part of the plot concerns the elopement of Mr Elliot and Mrs Clay at the end of the novel, and it seems that Jane Austen has sacrificed characterisation to achieve a moral patterning of marriages. There are, however, some very fine plot devices in Persuasion, particularly the renting of Kellynch and the letter from Wentworth to Anne.

In conclusion, it seems that Jane Austen is generally very careful to create events which are plausible (even if fortuitous). On the occasions where some character consistency has been sacrificed, Jane Austen has done so for the sake of the moral pattern. This is not always acceptable, particularly in Sense and Sensibility and Persuasion. However, it does not often occur, and the plots of all three novels are remarkably well constructed.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis evaluates devices of plot occurring in three novels by Jane Austen - Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion.

I have chosen one novel (Pride and Prejudice) which is regarded as having an almost flawless plot. The two other novels are widely held to have major flaws in their plots, thus providing an interesting contrast with Pride and Prejudice. Furthermore, the novels studied come from three different periods of Jane Austen's career as a novelist. Sense and Sensibility, published in 1811, is an early novel. Although Pride and Prejudice is published only two years later in 1813, it is a more mature work. Persuasion, published posthumously in 1818, is Jane Austen's last completed novel.

My first task was to locate the various plot devices, determining how they occurred and recurred through the novels studied. I then evaluated Jane Austen's use of those plot devices drawing comparisons between the three novels, and seeing how well the devices were employed. As it is difficult to establish the exact dates of writing, I have not tried to measure Jane Austen's development as a writer by taking Sense and Sensibility as a starting point, and Persuasion as her ultimate achievement. Such an examination is not in the scope of this thesis.

In my analysis of Jane Austen's plot devices I have looked for consistent characterisation and plausible occurrences. In each chapter, similar plot devices have been examined and, after analysing each one separately, I have compared devices of the same type to ascertain which are the most successful and why.

I would like to thank Dr Russell Poole of the English Depart-

ment, Massey University, for his invaluable help in supervising the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr Glyn Strange who was involved in the initial stages of the thesis.

My gratitude also goes to Joy Watson, who typed the manuscript.

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