

A Comprehensive Study of Women Character in the Selected Novels of Jane Austen

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Abstract: In Jane Austen's works, the role and expectations of women in the society are both reflected and questioned. This research outlines how Austen used her novels to represent the society in which she lived and how the society placed a sense of duty on women, specifically in terms of family, education, and marriage. Along with the representation of these duties, Researcher also focus upon on how Austen uses her protagonists, primarily in the novels *Pride and Prejudice*, *Persuasion*, and *Mansfield Park*, to question those standards and provide for her readers examples of women whom they could relate to and learn from as well. My major point of focus is how Austen challenges her readers to learn from the example set by her countercultural female protagonists. Finally, taking into account the ways which Austen reflects and challenges the roles of women, researcher conclude with a focus on how Austen emphasizes the importance of novels within her society, while also considering the impact that novel reading has in both the society in which Austen lived in that period of time.

Keywords: comprehensive study, women character, family, education, marriage Jane Austen.

1. Introduction

Authors' ability to have their readers put themselves into the shoes of their protagonists is what creates the influence and the power of novels, allowing some novels to live on through centuries of history.

This is the case with Jane Austen's novels. Since 1811 when Austen's first book was published, her books have not left contemporary society. Within the classroom, Austen's novels are frequently required readings for humanities or literature courses. In film, there have been 77 different adaptations to her six novels, whether they were motion pictures, television series, film adaptations or works based on her novels, producing more sequels, spinoffs and fan fiction than any other classic author. Some of these include a dog show called "Unleashing Mr. Darcy" based on *Pride and Prejudice*, a Spanish "novela" of *Persuasion* and several comedy series such as "Emma Approved" based on *Emma* (Warren 2). In publishing, each of her novels has never been out of print since 1832. *Pride and Prejudice* itself, Austen's most sold and well - known novel has sold over 20 million copies worldwide (Adam Frost 4). Her novels have been translated into approximately 40 different languages. All of that to say the test of time has proven that Austen's works have been influential both in the English society she lived in and to her readers still today.

Born in 1775, Austen was the youngest of seven children and one of only two daughters. Her father was Reverend George Austen, a clergyman of the Anglican parish, and he consistently urged Austen to read the novels in their family study. Though they were a family of simple means, her father bought for her paper and ink to allow her to start her writing at a young age. In the 1790s, Austen finished the first three drafts of her first novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Northanger Abbey*; however, because of personal problems and failures in publishing, it was not until 1811 that her first novel was ever published. In 1797, when trying to publish *Pride and Prejudice*, which was titled *First Impressions* at the time, the publisher

returned it to her, unread, with a stamp saying, "declined by Return of Post" (Kaci X 132). Along with other rejections and failures, Austen's father died in 1805, forcing Austen to move with her mother and sister, Cassandra, to their family home where her brother, Edward, lived.

Following these events, Austen finally successfully published *Sense and Sensibility* anonymously, then published *Pride and Prejudice* two years later. *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* were then published within the next two years (Kaci X 133 - 34).

At 41 years of age, Austen developed a disease that many think was Addison's disease. Despite her declining health, she continued writing until her condition made her unable to write any longer. She died in 1817 in Winchester, Hampshire, England.

Throughout her lifetime, Austen never married. Henry, her brother, published her final two works, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, following her death, and, in these, released a special biographical note in which he revealed to the public her name. It was not until the 1920s when literary scholars began to distinguish and accredit Austen's works as masterpieces, causing her popularity to increase in the eyes of the public (Southam 5 - 6).

Though Austen's writings do not fit necessarily into a certain genre of writing, many literary historians consider her writing that of "romance" in correlation with "comedy of manners" (Southam 3). At that time when she was writing, romance literature referenced novels whose focus was "prioritizing human emotions and imagination – as well as emphasizing the beauty of nature" (Kincaid 2), which differs from the novels that are considered romance today. Austen's plots all consist of a courtship between her primary protagonists, so the theme of each of her books do have a major element of love and marriage, underscoring the genre in which her novels have been placed. The genre of comedy of manners refers to a satiric exemplification of the norms of society where the main purpose of the writing is to make fun

of the social order and the complementary purpose is the happiness of the characters (Kincaid 3). Within Austen's writings, this reflection of the society that she lived in is clearly seen, along with her using satire to challenge it. Likewise, she outlines the expectations placed on women in her English society; using both satire and the situations in which she writes her characters, she mirrors these standards that were set for women, while also questioning them within her text.

In the present research, the primary areas of expectation that researcher focus on are the family structure and how that affected the livelihood of young women, the level of education required and available for women and the meaning and role of marriage in women's lives. In English society of that time, certain roles were typical for women. In Austen's novels, however, she pointedly addresses these expectations in the circumstances she creates for her female characters. Each novel has a female protagonist who has a certain circumstance that she was born with, typically including the family structure and their economic status, along with the ways that her social circle, her family and her culture has added pressure to the expectations that have been put on her. Like in society of that time, the female characters are hardly treated as strong, intelligent creatures that could think and choose for themselves; they were put in boxes and told not to break any of the rules of society. Therefore, Austen addresses the major issues that women faced with those daunting expectations. Austen provides her readers with circumstances similar to those which her readers may have faced in their lives; along with that, she writes her protagonists to adapt in her novels, but they always must go against their societal expectations, whether that is in a manner that is very extreme or just in a slight way. This is the primary method that Austen uses her novels to both reflect and challenge the standards placed on young women in her English society.

Within the family unit, young women had several areas of expectation, including marriage, beauty, duty and obedience. I will discuss how those standards affected the pressure that women felt to please and obey their families, together with what their sense of duty was as well. The primary book researcher focus on in relation to the expectation of family is *Pride and Prejudice*, in which researcher look at Elizabeth Bennet as the protagonist and how she defies her family's expectations in what they desired for her future. Austen provides Elizabeth as a character who is bold and outspoken, challenging her readers to act in the same manner.

Secondly, researcher focus the standard for education for women, specifically how their level of education lacked equality with men in what was available to them. Researcher address Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and how she used her work to call for equality between men and women in all areas of life, highlighting education as one of the key areas. Education, especially in that era, included virtue and morality, so researcher underscore how Austen reflects Wollstonecraft's ideas in her writing in causing her female protagonists to become more educated to, in turn, gain virtue of character as a woman, first and foremost. The books I primarily highlighted to exemplify Austen's value of education are *Mansfield Park*

and *Persuasion*. Fanny Price, the protagonist found in *Mansfield Park*, is the key character whose education Austen focuses primarily on, consequently causing her virtue to make her firm in her convictions within the novel as well. In *Persuasion*, the protagonist is Anne Elliot who, as a single woman, acquires virtue and independence for its own sake, not for the sake of gaining a male suitor.

Austen's use of these two women/characters is her way of questioning society's expectation for women's education.

Finally, the expectation for marriage is the concluding standard that I stress. A woman's duty was to get married, manage the household and raise the children. Researcher focus on the negative marriages that Austen depicts in her novels that influence her female protagonists, emphasizing the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice* and the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park*, contrasted with the content and equal marriage of the Crofts in *Persuasion*. These marriages are represented by Austen to show to her female protagonists either unhappy marriages based on marrying for economic stability or a positive marriage based on love and respect, challenging both her protagonists and readers to choose the latter.

Family: No Subsequent Connections Can Supply

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a class structure existed among English society. According to British historian Roy Porter, an Englishman gained his identity from where he was ranked socially, and this rank depended upon his profession, his assets and his economic status. An Englishwoman obtained her rank from the rank of her spouse (Porter 48). At the very top of the pyramid were the royals: the king, queen and their family. Below the royalty were the aristocracy, also called the peerage, consisting of dukes and duchesses, marquesses and marchionesses, earls and countesses, viscounts and vicountesses, and barons and baronesses. Aristocracy was primarily a hereditary title that came from birth; however, in some cases, women were able to achieve this status by marriage. Under the aristocracy were the gentry, broadly speaking "ladies" and "gentlemen," including baronets, knights, squires, and dames. The aristocracy and the gentry constituted the "upper classes." The gentry were landowners who typically did not earn money through manual labor. The exceptions for manual labor were officers of the army or the navy, people who worked in law or the clergy. If a woman was a lady, then she did not work for wages; in few special cases, a woman could be a governess, but usually only if the family was in a hard stint economically (Smith 72 - 73). This did not include the regular household chores and duties of the woman of the house; she was expected to manage the house and the staff. However, this was not considered labor because she did not receive monetary compensation for her duties.

The lower classes consisted of both the trading class and the working class; these classes derived their income from manual labor, which caused upper class society members to oftentimes look down upon members of these classes. Members in the trading class could, very rarely, achieve the status of a gentleman in their lifetime.

However, in Austen's time, the likelihood of a member of the working class to achieve a higher status was very low, though a woman might possibly be able to marry up one or two rungs to the status of trading class or even lady (Smith 73). This was frequently the goal of fathers, in order for his family to achieve greater economic stability and secure a prosperous future for his family after he is gone. Between the upper and lower classes, the disparity was extremely distinct and vast; consequently, members of the upper class oftentimes thought themselves to be superior to lower class members, causing upper class members to treat lower class members with less respect and dignity than members of their own class. A member of the peerage could live on rental income from his estate, interest on his investment and other sources of wealth that might total £10,000 annually, while a member of the working class might earn just £10 a year for his labor. This extreme distinction created an air of superiority from the upper class in many cases, "sometimes sealed by attitudes which almost denied that rich and poor came from the same species" (Porter 48). The very elite remained the English landowners with the aristocracy consistently being the most stable and the smallest group. In Austen's novels, the characters in her books are all part of the upper classes, though primarily from the gentry rather than the aristocracy. Because of their high status, the issues they face related to family, education, marriage and their role in society are only what people in English society in the upper class faced.

The kin of a family were seen as the means to preserve the social status of that family, which underlined the importance of the inheritance and dowry. For a family with male heirs, the greatest inheritance went to the eldest son, then younger sons received relatively less for their inheritance; the inheritance may consist of land and money or one or the other (Porter 56). In the case of entailed inheritance, a common practice among the aristocracy and in the gentry, dowry was the only means of transferring parental property or money to a female heir. The goal of the family of a woman was to obtain for her a suitor that would maintain her family's status or, ideally, allow the family to move up in rank (Barkley 215).

Although in most cases parents and young women were focused on economic matters with respect to choosing a spouse, Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer and advocate of women's rights in the eighteenth century, argued that within family life, "warmer passions" were necessary, including both the care that parents have for their children and also for one another. Along with that, parents have a duty to fulfill to their children to raise them with extreme dedication, physically and emotionally (Wollstonecraft 113 - 118). The key with this, Wollstonecraft said, was that it was not merely the job of the mother of the children; men also had the duty to be a husband and a father who was virtuous, respectable and caring. Even more, she asserts that a husband and a wife head a team, their family, who should add to society in a beneficial and positive manner, which should allow them to become good citizens and less selfish humans (Wollstonecraft 89 - 90). In relation to women as mothers specifically, the need for children to be cared for when they are infants is integral to the strength and resiliency of the

child later on in life. However, though this is the role of a mother, a father should not make this role the only purpose for his wife. This role, rather, is a means for a mother to establish a healthy and loving relationship with her child while also allowing her to gain wisdom and virtues, which should be encouraged by her partner (Wollstonecraft 113 - 115).

These ideals from Wollstonecraft were seen as radical during her time because it challenged the family dynamic as seen in most families in English society then. Austen represents this typical relationship between parents and their daughter within the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*. From the beginning of the novel, Austen displays Mrs. Bennet as a mother whose life goal is to find for each of her daughters a suitor who will give them the ability to have prosperous economic futures and to support her as well once Mr. Bennet dies and she, in turn, loses the right to live in their family home. In the novel, it is Mrs. Bennet who has more of a concern to get her daughters married than her husband, and she frequently address this in conversations with both her daughters and Mr. Bennet. In one conversation with Mr. Bennet, she describes their new neighbor as "A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year. What a fine thing for our girls!" (*Pride and Prejudice* 5). By creating Mrs. Bennet as a character who fulfills the typical relationship to a daughter that a mother had during this period, Austen uses this to sustain the idea that women were given certain standard to live up to within their family. Austen is asserting that all women were seen, even by their own families, as a means to maintain their family's social and economic status. This is perpetuated in her novel in order that she could create a female protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who would, in turn, refuse to accept this standard that was created by her mother and her society, challenge that norm by marrying in a greater part for love rather than solely for economic gain, and create her own future that would differ from her parents' marriage, which was the norm for their time.

This is seen in Elizabeth's rejection of Mr. Collins's marriage proposal. Mr. Collins, being a clergyman, belonged to the upper class, and although clergymen were not seen as extremely wealthy or successful, some were able to provide economic stability and a good fortune for their wife and family. To marry Mr. Collins would be deemed as an accomplishment in the eyes of people of the Bennets's status and especially to Mrs. Bennet herself. Most notably, Mr. Collins was the heir to Longbourn Estate, the Bennet family home, meaning that if Elizabeth chose to marry Mr. Collins, her family could remain in their home. However, Elizabeth, desiring a more enjoyable future and a loving marriage, turned down Mr. Collins's proposal, going against the desires of her mother and the expectations of her society to marry a suitable man that could provide a secure future. In creating this situation in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen challenges these standards for women by representing Elizabeth as a woman who came from a family with a dynamic that was typical to that of her day, but Elizabeth refused to concede her desires simply to remain obedient to her family. Elizabeth was determined to marry for more than a stable future for her and her family; she longed for love.

That being said, Elizabeth's father was not as strongly in favor of Mr. Collins as his wife was. It was quite the opposite. In his conversation with Elizabeth following Mr. Collins' proposal and Mrs. Bennet's insistence that the two marry, he says, "'An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do'" (*Pride and Prejudice* 56). Though their family dynamic was not necessarily warm and extremely loving, Mr. Bennet does show his desire for his daughter's happiness, and that is more than is evidenced by his reaction.

In doing this, Austen is showing to her readers that their sole duty in life is not to appease their parents. Austen, in actuality, is underscoring quite the opposite.

Her characterization of Elizabeth establishes an example for her readers of a woman who does feel pressure from her family to support them and be obedient to their desires for her future. However, she chooses her own longings over the approval of her family. This choice was not the norm for women in Austen's time, which is why she creates a protagonist for women to be able to look to, and possibly follow, in their own lives. Her goal in writing Elizabeth as a character who is determined, passionate and somewhat rebellious is to give her readers a first-hand account, although fictional, of a woman who does not settle and fall into dutifully obeying her family. She creates Elizabeth as a woman who would rather never marry and become a spinster than get married to a man she does not love, even if that meant disobeying her own mother.

Austen reinforces her point in the character of Elizabeth's closest friend, Charlotte Lucas. After being rejected by Elizabeth, Mr. Collins proposes to Charlotte, and Charlotte accepts. As a woman who is in her late twenties, Charlotte felt much pressure from her family to secure her and her family's economic future, so, consequently, she accepts the first proposal that she receives. Charlotte says, "I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins' character, connection, 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* 62). Though pressure was felt by both women, Charlotte, being several years older than Elizabeth and from a family whose income is lower than the Bennets's, had stronger reasons for feeling the need to marry soon and marry the first, and quite possibly only, man who asked for her hand. That pressure left Charlotte with few options, including marrying Mr. Collins, a man who she may not love or even enjoy but who could provide for her and her family a secure and stable future. Knowing that he could be her only option to secure this destiny, Charlotte agreed to his proposal, disappointing Elizabeth and setting aside her own happiness for economic security for herself and her family. Austen shows Charlotte as a character whom her readers may see as a familiar reality because of Charlotte's age and growing need for socioeconomic stability in her future, knowing that Charlotte's situation will likely be a miserable one; however, she does so to show that her choice to marry Mr. Collins is a greater fate than ending up alone. Austen offers a critique

and alternative for her readers through Elizabeth's decisions as an opportunity for social change to show that love is the most important element, though not the only element that matters.

Education: Introduced Properly into the World

Oftentimes, in Austen's day, this need and desire for economic stability was a primary purpose of marriage. However, in order for a woman to get married, she would need the education it took to attract the attention of a suitable man. Between the age of 15 and 19, a woman was said to be "out," meaning that she could be courted by a suitor.

Once a woman was out, her economic, social and educational statuses became extremely important to a man who was seeking a wife that would suit his lifestyle and benefit him economically in the future. The daughters of fathers with wealth, consequently, were oftentimes the targets of men who longed for a future of prosperity because once a woman was married, her fortune belonged to her husband. Therefore, in order for a woman to retain any fortune from her family or have an economically stable life, marriage was the only reasonable choice (Swords 78). For many women, that meant that much of her life revolved around developing skills and abilities that would make her "an accomplished woman" (*Pride and Prejudice* 21), so well-respected men would be attracted to her and interested in courting her when that day came.

Austen describes this idea of a woman developing certain skills primarily to be appealing to a future husband in a conversation amongst Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth Bennet and Miss Bingley. This ideal woman would have "a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, all the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved." In this scene, Austen pokes fun at these highly valued "skills" that seemed to be fairly trivial.

The skills mentioned in this conversation are not those of managing a house or raising children, capabilities that women were expected to have as a wife and mother. However, the skills that Miss Bingley describes were genuine expectations of women in English society, and these were the skills that men looked for in a future wife with the thought that those are what made a woman a good wife and, later a good mother. Therefore, becoming an accomplished woman was not for the sake of her own self but for the sake of a man to first be attracted to her then to, secondly, have the skills necessary to be a "pleasing" spouse.

Therefore, women's education during Austen's day consisted of "drawing, dancing, piano playing, penmanship, grammar, spelling, elementary arithmetic, sometimes French" (Swords 79). In most cases, young women were taught these limited skills by their mothers at first, then, as they grew older, they would either attend a boarding school or were taught by a governess in their family home. For young men, elite schools and universities, such as Winchester, Oxford or Cambridge, were available for education; however, young women had no public school or

university to attend. Other than being taught by their mothers, a governess or at a boarding school, the only other way a young woman could educate herself was by reading in her own time. Her family home might have a library, especially for the father and sons of the family, but it was likewise available for the daughters to have access to for further education, if the father and mother allowed it.

Austen's novels contain many examples of the educational expectations, or lack thereof, of the female characters. For example, education and novel reading are heavily addressed in *Northanger Abbey*. Catherine Morland's mother tries to teach her as she is growing up but makes Catherine less of a priority once her younger children need to be taught as well; therefore, Catherine, interested in activities like baseball, riding horses and playing cricket, does not care for learning from educational books when she would rather be reading novels containing heroines with exciting lives (*Northanger Abbey* 5). Her lack of education comes to haunt her when her novel - reading and ignorance causes her to believe outlandish stories about Northanger Abbey, stirring up trouble within the household. Though this is a prevalent theme in the novel, several novels contain more forthright examples of women's education and the situations her protagonists face make Austen's prevailing ideas clear.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth addresses the Bennet girls' lack a governess while speaking with Lady Catherine, who believes that Elizabeth and her sisters' educations were neglected because of the fact. In response, Elizabeth says, "Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle certainly might" (*Pride and Prejudice* 79). Austen addresses the social issue of women not being properly educated or receiving the same access to education as men by using Elizabeth Bennett as a woman who chose to use the resources that she had to educate herself, which, in turn, set Elizabeth apart from other women of her time.

Austen uses her protagonist as a countercultural agent to invite her readers to use the potential resources that they have at their disposal to educate themselves to be more than just an "accomplished woman." She calls her readers to be like Elizabeth, to read and learn more than just the minimum requirements to find a suitor of merit and wealth. Using Wollstonecraft's idea of women being "rational creatures" (Wollstonecraft 11), Austen's underlying theme of women being intelligent, though different than men, and having the ability to learn and be educated is what lies behind her plot. Austen uses her protagonists as examples for her readers to look at and follow in their own lives because it was likely that her readers were facing circumstances similar to her characters, and that is no coincidence. It was an intentional choice that Austen made to underscore her society's lack of education for women – a choice that called her readers to attention.

Though Austen was not necessarily a radical, her protagonists were clear examples of ways that her female readers could make small choices to stray away from the expectations that have been always placed on them. In this

case specifically, educating themselves and making that a priority was a good place to start.

A major source of education and societal guidelines for young women in the eighteenth century was conduct books written for women to outline the "desired model" of a woman (Hasley 431). British historian William St. Clair projected that in the years between 1785 and 1820, between 59, 500 to 119, 000 copies of advice or conduct books were sold to British families (Ford 2). These books, often called manuals, instructed women in the values that the writers thought women should have, including the particular "accomplishments" that they should possess, the purpose of reading, the potential dangers of unrestrained emotions and of thinking freely versus respect of religious authority, and sensible occupations for women. Manuals stressed educating women in the home because educational seclusion from the world would create women with more virtues and higher character (Hasley 431).

In Sarah Emsely's book titled *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, she highlights Anne as being Austen's most virtuous heroine, with Austen saying in her own letters that "she is almost too good for me" (Emsely, 145). Anne's character, Emsely says, is what sets her apart as an Austen heroine. With a situation like hers, where she lost her love and, seemingly, her only chance at happiness, rather than developing hardness and bitterness towards life, her attitude remains hopeful, which justifies her virtuousness. Austen describes Anne as having "an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding..." (*Persuasion* 5).

Despite her loss in life and her family's mistreatment, Anne continues to grow in her character.

Though in a theme of virtue and morality for women regardless of their situation in life is evident in each of her works, in Austen's English society the expectation of women to secure a stable future with a husband remained her chief end, whether a woman possessed a "proper" education or not. For women who did not marry, their options for future stability were few. A negative stigma was heavily attached to women who earned a wage through labor; this was deemed as "indelicate" and masculine during a time that delicacy and femininity were supreme traits to be found in a sophisticated woman (Halsey 432 - 35). Typically, women who came from a family with low fortune who struggled to find a suitor because of their economic situation where the women who sought work. Unmarried women had the option of becoming a governess, but this position was viewed as shameful for women who came from the middle or upper class, like the women in Austen's novels. Another option was for a woman to direct and teach at girls' private schools, but, because of the lack of education available for the majority of women, many did not have the qualifications necessary to hold this position. There were rare cases of women who worked in their husbands' businesses, bookstores or dressmaking stores or as a midwife, but even those jobs were more likely to be held by men. (Sword 77).

Women who did face the fate of never getting married

earned the title of “spinster.” Spinsterhood meant that a woman would be left out of many aspects of society and lose much esteem and standing in the eyes of the public. Though single women did legally have the right to own property, oftentimes they would encounter much prejudice from society if they chose to exercise their legal privileges in this manner (Neubauer 126). This prejudice existed because if a woman did not get married and, in turn, manage the household of her husband and oversee the private home life, she was seen as not fulfilling her expectation and duty as a woman. The one opportunity that single women did have was their ability to make and spend money in the ways they wanted to use it. Austen, being a spinster herself, was able to write and publish her own works as a single woman; likewise, because her time was not taken up by duties that a married woman had, she had the availability and opportunity to pursue her writing, giving her some independence over married women. However, that being said, the majority of women still longed to marry to gain the security that spinsters did not have (Neubauer 126 - 27).

Throughout the novel, the manner in which Anne’s family treats her shows that she is already seen as a spinster in their eyes. They are not overtly harsh towards her, but her words and requests usually fell on deaf ears. Neubauer describes her familial situation as Anne living a “life of unappreciated usefulness, forever at the beck and call of her disdainful family” (Neubauer 131). Despite the negative aspects and treatment that Anne faces in her situation of being unmarried within her family, she gains abilities that she would not have had, like her firmness of mind and maturity in decision-making, as exemplified in the accident with Louisa Musgrave. Anne has also gained the ability to discern the character of others because, throughout all of her time as a single woman, she has been growing in her own character and observing the motivations of others and their integrity as well. This is clearly shown in her meeting of William Elliot. At first, Anne is fairly curious about him as a person and intrigued by his interest in her; however, as she gets to know him, she grows suspicious of his nature and decides to let go of any ideas of a future with him (*Persuasion* 106).

Austen gives Anne this ability to read others so well as a demonstration of the positive attributes that Anne has gained as a result of her singleness. While spinsterhood was seen as a negative end for women during Austen’s day, Austen creates Anne as a heroine who, despite a lackluster home life, is wise and discerning, showing her readers that marriage does not have to be the only goal in their lives. Anne may end up getting married at the end of the novel, but throughout the entirety of the first half of the novel, she has accepted her fate as likely never getting married and, instead, has chosen to make the most of where her lot has taken her. Austen, as a single woman authoring this novel, is a reliable testament to this fate as well, having never married. This also underscores her credibility in creating Anne as a spinster at the start of the novel because she can create a heroine who is living in a similar situation as herself. Austen’s depiction of a spinster-like character in Anne allows her readers to see that spinsterhood may not be as negative a lifestyle as society has deemed it to be. However, even to Austen, marriage is still seen as the more favorable option – marriage between two people who

mutually love and respect one another, that is.

Marriage: Only the Deepest Love

Prior to Austen’s day, marriage had been primarily seen as economic and social agreements between families made by the parents of the pair to be wed, and the preference of either member of the pair was not taken into account, especially the woman. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, radical changes had begun to take place as Austen’s England came into being. Sword describes this change and this newfound basis for love in her essay:

Marriage was coming to be regarded as a lifetime, intimate, happy companionship based upon love, esteem, and compatibility, and both woman and man were to have voice in choosing the spouse. As positive as this new attitude seems, however, the woman was still subordinate to her husband legally and economically, and now as Rogers emphasizes, the woman was further bound to her husband by love as well. (Sword 80)

The desire for love and companionship to be a part of a marriage relationship was coming into being during Austen’s time, but it still did not constitute the primary component of a marriage. Amanda Vickery addresses this comradery within marriage in *The Gentleman’s Daughter*, where she describes the idea of marriage being a companionship between two people who have affection and respect for one another (Vickery 41). Vickery also asserts that this companionship, during the early nineteenth century, did not mean that the marriage had to necessarily have equality between the two people. Rather, couples merely presumed that the husband would be the master, and, when this was the case, marriages were the strongest. With this mastery, however, Vickery underscored that the belief was that the husband would not have an aura of dominance or dictatorship; his temper would be kind and respectful, maintaining that ambiance for his family and his household (Vickery 86).

Though the construct of marriage had begun to change at the turn of the nineteenth century, Austen displayed many different examples of both positive and negative relationships between husbands and wives. Each of Austen’s novels are centered around a courtship plot, where her primary female protagonist is facing a conflict of who to marry or what expectation to follow for her future marriage, and at the end of each novel, that protagonist makes a choice in regard to her matrimony. Her readers do not see the outcome of these marriages between her protagonists, but Austen provides insight to these differing marriage relationships.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* are an example of what many marriage relationships looked like prior to Austen’s day. It is evident that, throughout the novel, Elizabeth is keenly aware of the problems within her parents’ marriage. Mr. Bennet continuously pokes fun at his wife, making it very clear that he does not have high respect for her. Likewise, Mrs. Bennet is constantly seeking companions for her daughters and is not particularly concerned with what her daughters’ feelings are towards the men she tries to pair them with (*Pride and Prejudice* 5 - 7).

Their relationship is not presented as one where love and respect exist and flourish. This may explain why, as Elizabeth is looking for a man with whom to spend her life, she is not as concerned with the economic status of the man as she is with whether she respects, regards and is challenged by him. This meant that Elizabeth was willing to go against her mother's wishes in refusing the proposal by Mr. Collins, holding out hope that she would find a man worthy of her respect. To Elizabeth, rather than following the norms presented to her by her society and family, it was more important to find a man of her choosing, whom she loved and regarded.

In *Mansfield Park*, the marriage relationship between the Bertrams is not one of fondness or respect. Lady Bertram, who gained her title through her marriage with Sir Thomas, is depicted as a somewhat lazy, careless and uninterested maternal figure.

Austen goes so far as to say that she cares more for her dog than for her own children (*Mansfield Park* 277). Even when her husband announces that he will be leaving for Antigua for a period of time, though she is displeased, she does not show much emotion towards him or the situation. Oftentimes, Lady Bertram chooses to stay at home, causing Fanny, too, to stay home to keep her company, instead of going out with her family. As for Sir Thomas, he is a seemingly adequate and, at times, loving father who wants the best for his children and Fanny; however, he is also very stern and unapproachable, seen in his daughters' feelings that they cannot be honest with their own father. There is not much evidence for much regard for his wife. Rarely do they spend time together throughout the novel and for a large portion of the novel; he is away on business, showing that his primary interest, above his wife, is likely his work (*Mansfield Park* 35).

While Fanny lived with Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, she later visits her mother and father, and the marriage example they set for her even worse than the relationship of her aunt and uncle. Fanny's mother, like her sister Lady Bertram, has a similar disposition and attitude. Austen says that, "a situation of similar affluence and do - nothing - ness would have been much more suited to her capacity than the exertions and self - denials of the one which her imprudent marriage had placed her in" (*Mansfield Park* 395). In the Prices, Austen also gives an example of what a marriage looks like when it is based solely upon physical attraction or a desire to thumb one's nose at one's family (*Mansfield Park* 4). The imprudence of the marriage between Mr. and Mrs. Price is repeated throughout Fanny's visit, underlining the idea that Mrs. Price's marriage to Mr. Price was unfit and caused her life to be much more difficult than it should have been.

Mrs. Price, by necessity, cares for her children but clearly favors certain children over others. Mr. Price, on the other hand, is a rude drunk who hardly notices when Fanny returns home after being away for years, making Sir Thomas seem like the better father figure to Fanny of the two options.

Austen does not include what occurs after the courtship and

beginning stages of the marriages of her protagonists, but, as exemplified in the marriages of the Bennets and the Bertrams, she does display what can occur if two people get married solely for economic or social gain and future stability. Though Austen does not hold that a good marriage overlooks elements like socioeconomic status, she does hold those elements should not be held above happiness and affection. For both marriages, Austen makes it undeniably clear that both parties in the relationship do not have high, if any at all, regard for one another, and neither Mr. Bennet or Sir Thomas have respect for their wives or their role in their household. These marriages are key portions in these two novels because Austen is showing how negative marriage relationships can be if mutual respect and love is lacking. In this, Austen is providing these marriages as a cautionary tale to her protagonists and to her readers. In her novels themselves, the Bennets are an example to Elizabeth of what she does not want her future relationship to consist of, which is the reason behind why she declines the proposal from Mr. Collins and chooses to wait for a man whom she can honor and love. Because Austen demonstrates the mutual respect and love that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth have for one another, Austen offers her readers the hope that, due to their feelings, their future marriage will not look the same as her parents' marriage.

The marriage between the Crofts is one of companionship and the closest to a portrayal of equality that Austen provides in relation to the importance of the different roles in a marriage of husband and wife. Anne, herself, calls the relationship "a most attractive picture of happiness" (*Persuasion* 119), which was evidenced by those around the couple. However, the key component to their happiness within their marriage is the way gender roles within the Crofts' marriage differed from society's expectations. Rather than having the husband as the culturally dominant one within the marriage, both husband and wife have a role, and within each of their roles, no superiority exists. Unlike the negative examples that other protagonists of Austen are given to see, Anne is provided with an example of a marriage that is built on respect and a countering of the culture they live in by the companionship that persists in their marriage. Because Anne is unmarried as she witnesses the interaction between the Crofts, she is learning from them what she would want her future marriage to look like.

In her life before her eventual marriage with Captain Wentworth, Anne has been building her independence and her capacity to function, speak and succeed on her own. With the example of Mrs. Croft, Anne attains the ability to encounter a woman who has remained independent and unconventional even after getting married. Mrs. Croft has a "weather - beaten complexion" and "seems to have lived some years longer in the world than her real eight - and - thirty" (*Persuasion* 34 - 35). In the standards of society, her physical appearance would have been unattractive; however, Anne's noting of this attribute of Mrs. Croft's is evidence that she admires Mrs. Croft's life experiences, intellect and independence over her physical appearance. Even more deeply, Anne admires her subversion of the standards set by society for women to be dainty and fair and to remain within the household. Notably, Mrs. Croft also references Wollstonecraft's ideas when she compares "fine ladies" with

“rational creatures, ” taking Wollstonecraft’s own words (*Persuasion* 50). This implies that, like Wollstonecraft, Mrs. Croft believes that men and women should have equality in society, along with the idea that women are not treated as the intelligent and strong individuals that they are. Her attitude and beliefs are reflected in her marriage, and, with Anne admiring Mrs. Croft in the manner that she does, Anne likely holds similar beliefs in regard for greater equality for women in their world (Mullally 1 - 3).

In creating this marriage built on respect, love and equality in the Crofts, Austen gives her protagonist a model to follow. In reflecting Wollstonecraft’s ideas of equality between men and women, Austen is, likewise, calling her readers to seek marriages that are built on these same qualities. Austen represents the Crofts’ marriage as one that differs from their society’s convention of marriage, especially in comparison with the other marriages found in *Persuasion*, but that is the point of emphasis. Their choice to be countercultural with their gender roles in their marriage is what sets them apart, but it is also what gives their marriage the success and happiness that it has. Austen offers this suitable model for marriage for her readers to witness and, like Anne, desire to model their future marriages upon, inferring that when a marriage’s foundations are equality and respect, it is successful and happy.

2. Conclusion: No Enjoyment Like Reading

With these many expectations that Austen reflects and a challenge, Austen is demonstrating the power that she believes novels can have on her society. She emphasizes that even authors of fiction can use their characters to disrupt and question the norms for the social circle in which they live. This idea is reflected in *Northanger Abbey*, when Austen addresses the importance and value that novel reading has on people, including women.

“Oh! It is only a novel!” replies the young lady, while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. “It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda”; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best - chosen language.” (*Northanger Abbey* 21)

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, novel reading was perceived as a means of self - indulgence for women; women only read to entertain themselves, and the activity of reading was merely seen as a form of relaxation (Vogrincic 104). Some, including Reverend Fordyce, went as far to say that novel reading had dangerous adverse psychological effects on the readers, causing them to have unrealistic thoughts that would give them the wrong view of life, especially the wrong view of love. Others said that novel reading, though not as extreme as causing negative psychological effects, was harmful because the books were simply a “waste of time, damaging not only the mind and the morale of readers, but also their eyesight and posture” (Vogrincic 109).

With her bold stance in favor of novel reading in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen counters those who did claim novel reading to be a damaging practice for ladies with ideas that novel reading was beneficial to women, while novels were also beautiful works of literature. One contemporary critic asserted that Austen “glorifies what a novel should be: the unrestrained expression of words conveying the wide range of raw human emotion” (McCormick 2). Rather than being a work that simply provided women a source of pleasure and entertainment, Austen positions herself against the perception that novels were corrupting for women; rather, they were a resource for women to grow their minds, to develop emotion and to relate to others.

Kidd and Castano believed the reasoning for this to be the situations that occur within the differing genres of fiction; in popular fiction, the circumstances described typically have the goal of providing readers with a wide range of feeling and experiences while they are reading, tending to “affirm the reader’s expectations of others” (Chiat 3). Within literary fiction, however, readers are not given all the thoughts of the characters, so they have to make suggestions on what is going to occur next, frequently causing readers to be unsure of the motives of characters. The expectations of the reader are constantly being changed, which “support and teach us values about social behavior, such as the importance of understanding those who are different from ourselves” (Chiat 4).

This element is what is found in Austen’s novels. They contain elements of the reader’s inability to know what will happen next, surprise at the changing values of the protagonists and a capability of them to relate to the characters, allowing them to see that if they, too, made the choices and had the attitudes of the protagonists, their fates could be one in the same.

Here - in lies Austen’s belief about the value of novels. Because she believed them to be important to society and of value to women, Austen wrote in such a way that would do more than entertain her readers. She wrote novels that would impact them challenge them and force them to see the growth that their society did need, making them question how that growth would take place. Austen did not choose to write outlandish or otherworldly stories; Austen saw the potential impact of a story containing a female protagonist who dared to go against the society in which she lived. Whether she knew the impact that her stories would still have in today’s society, one will never know. However, what she did know was that her novels would be a call to action for her readers. Her novels played a key role in the world then and even the world we live in now.

In each of the three aspects of expectation and duty, in the family, in education or in marriage, Austen provides her readers with female characters who are faced with expectations for a “lady.” Though she may have not been a radical, Austen saw that women were so much more than the conventional roles that they were placed in. They were more than “accomplished.” They were even more than “rational creatures.” She saw their capability of becoming intelligent, of becoming powerful, of becoming equal. The true impact of her novels cannot be measured. However, what I can

measure is how her novels affected me personally and how it is evidenced in her novels that she was reflecting how society did place women in a box of what their expectations and duties were. Through that, she also challenged those expectations, attempting to tell her readers that they were more than those standards. With Fanny Price, Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, Jane Austen represents women as independent, strong, intellectual, wise and bold – and as more than just a lady.

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