

JANE AUSTEN (1775 – 1817)

- *Sense & Sensibility* (1797 – 1811)
- *Pride & Prejudice* (1796 – 1813)
- *Mansfield Park* (1814)
- *Emma* (1815)
- *Northanger Abbey* (1798 – 1817)
- *Persuasion* (1815 – 1816)

Her novels have a very organised plot. She worked for many years on the novels before she considered they were ready to be read by the public. She wanted to produce a perfect novel and worked on the drafts over and over again. This contrasts with previous novels, which were much less elaborated and more linear. The transition from the 18th to the 19th Century's novel is an improvement on it.

Social and geographical context: Jane Austen was a transitional writer who inherited the previous age's legacy (Neo-classicism): rigid norms, tradition, etc. She was a forerunner of the principles defended by the pre-romantics. She dealt with ideas which were very important for both movements, although at times were opposite or overlapped. She fuses apparently opposite ideas.

She belonged to the middle class and was very lucky to have a wonderful father who wanted all his children to get a proper education, both boys and girls. This was very uncommon at the time. She was very cultivated and knew about many things. Her father was a man of church, the Anglican Church, and also very cultivated himself. He was very much against Evangelicalism (reaction against artifice of Anglican Church), against their excesses and their lack of self-control over emotions and feelings. This idea of concealing emotions and feelings is very neo-classical and is a constant item in her work.

They were a family that had never travelled abroad and had always lived in the same area: Hampshire and Bath. Those were two very small places, very private at that time and very far from London. Another very important subject of the time is the dichotomy between city and countryside. Place is a very important element in this kind of novels, as well as social class. Places have a very strong symbolism.

Her family life was apparently uneventful, although many little things happened to her that made her suffer. They moved many times because of their financial problems, and every time they moved meant another step down on class. This made her suffer a lot. Money is another very important element in her novels. Napoleonic wars were taking place at that time, and although they are never explicit they are present.

Her novels have been included into what was called 'Comedy of Manners' or 'Drawing-room comedies'. They deal not with religion or death or politics, they are about normal people's problems and the survival of the individual in a hostile society full of prejudices and very worried about appearances and class. Her characters are mainly high and middle class people.

She never married because, although having had many suitors, she did not love any of them. This is quite a revolutionary idea for a woman at the time. 'She was not a spinster, she was a free woman'. At that time educated single women could only dedicate themselves to teaching, writing or acting, professions which were not very well considered.

Jane Austen wrote some small pieces of fiction before writing her mature work. The most important are: '*Love and friendship*', '*Evelyn*', '*Catherine*' and '*Lady Susan*'.

There is a constant presence of apparent opposites in her titles. The key to happiness is putting together both

extremes; this is one of the most important elements for the Romantic Movement.

Love and friendship is a parody of improbable romances that laughs at the very sentimental heroines of previous times. It is against sentimental excesses of any kind. Very Neo-classical in tone, it deals with propriety, social behaviour, etc. It was very controversial at the time because the idea in it was that friendship was the basis of love.

Evelyn is the description of a dream, a reverie. This is a very much used technique by the Romantics. The final message is that you cannot trust somebody who cannot cope with difficulties. Someone who is not capable of having self-control in extreme situations is not worth our trust.

Catherine is a heroine that realises how you cannot trust appearances. She discovers that neither she, nor the people around her are what she had thought them to be. It is a social critique.

Lady Susan has a very feminist tone. It deals mainly with a woman and her sad story when trying to learn, to cultivate herself and the hostile society she has to live in. This work reminds us of Mary Wollstonecraft.

Jane Austen was very much influenced by Samuel Johnson (the man of letters of the 18th C). He represents balance, culture, reason, order, tradition, and hierarchy, social values and love for the city. She was, at the same time, influenced by William Cowper, who was completely the opposite of Johnson. He represents feelings and freedom, spontaneity and experiences, individual values and struggles. He was a lover of the countryside.

The most important of the literary convictions that she inherited from him was the concept of life and literature. For Johnson, who was very optimistic, the fact that we cannot predict our lives does not mean that we cannot control them, and that we cannot put some kind of order into them up to a point. Truth is always found provided you are in possession of moral sincerity and a reliable judgement. If you have the right kind of morals and the right kind of judgement you shall be happy. Their intention was to teach people, to instruct them and through their teachings make them want to improve themselves.

This is the reason why 'fiction' dealt with portraits of real life. The closer the portrait was to reality the better and the quickest it would reach people. This could seem to us quite a naïve idea because reality is not one; there are as many realities as people there are. The instructive object of this kind of works implied that language should be transparent and that words should mean what they meant and nothing else. Language is not a main element; it is a transparent means of communication.

The influence that William Cowper exerted over Jane Austen can be seen on two different convictions. According to Cowper, knowledge should be gained from life, from the experience you acquire living. Experience is more important than academic education. This idea will be present in Jane Austen's work. The second aspect is that he believed that nature was the key to happiness. Nature inspired the individual with the right kind of feelings; it improves oneself through good sensations. Nature its God's projection. This is an Evangelical idea and it is very much related to a very important, because of its influence, movement called Benevolism, which was at its peak on the second half of the 18th Century. One of the 'heads' of it was J. Shaftesbury. Benevolism is a reaction towards Hobbes' most dramatic and pessimistic ideas of mankind. For them, human beings are gifted with a moral and aesthetic sense inferred on him by nature. For the Benevolists nature implies a complete harmony of varied and opposite values. The importance of this movement is great, because apart from changing the idea of what human beings were, they advocated for insane people, women's rights, the working classes, etc. All this, affected the Romantics to a great extent.

As far as characters are concerned, in Jane Austen we will always find the same kind of characters. Christopher Gillie made a taxonomy of her work. In it, there are five types of characters:

- *The heroines*: they are different from previous periods' heroines who were very soapy, sentimental and did not seem to evolve psychologically. At this time heroines are normal women, not particularly attractive or pretty, but they show some evolution: they go from immaturity to maturity by means of critical self-discovery. They show two characteristics: endurance and generosity in contrast with previous heroines. Romantic heroines are not interested in public display, they are only interested in helping people and in noble actions, through which they improve as human beings.
- *The heroes*: they are a mystery to women because they occupied different spheres. There is a very complex psychology on this point. There were two different types of men: the hero, a man who is very respectful towards women, not particularly handsome, sometimes clumsy, and who is honest and serious minded. This kind of man respects women and worries about their problems.
- *The anti-hero*: is a very funny person, attractive, handsome, just the person every one wants to have at their parties. You cannot trust them, they only worry about themselves and do not respect women. Sometimes anti-heroes correspond with prime antagonists.
- *Prime antagonists*: they represent the main obstacles that the heroine has to save. They are not always hostile, they can even be friendly persons, nice and sympathetic. But they create confusion on the heroine.
- *Caricatures*: they can be very hostile to the heroine but they are too stupid to be dangerous. They help the reader to contrast their behaviour with the heroine's. They allow for parody and contribute to clear things up.
- *Minor characters*: they are distant characters that remain in the background of the story and very little is known about them.

Tony Tanner is another Jane Austen critic and has made another taxonomy of her characters:

There are three types of characters:

- *Guardians*: they are the old generation. They represent the 'old England', the aristocracy of the land, the official values of the current times.
- *Inheritors*: they are the young generation, those who depend on the guardians.
- *Interlopers*: they are the new emergent middle-classes. Most often come from the city and embody negative values.

According to Vivian Jones Jane Austen's novels can be divided into three different parts:

- *Introduction*: the main characters and settings are introduced to the reader.
- *The different characters interact*: they establish relationships up to a moment of crisis (climax)
- *Analysis of effects and restoration of balance*.

The main characters have a moment of anagnorisis (recognition of their mistakes) and they restore the status-quo or climax. This point usually coincides with the prime antagonists in a celebration of a very important assembly like a ball, a dinner party, etc, that can be very dangerous for the heroines. These kind of assemblies mean a danger for them because of the hypocrisy held by the people around. Confusion appears and it is difficult to survive in such a hostile society only worried about appearances.

V. Jones also says that the main characters learn by three different ways:

- Social interaction: the more relationships you have, the better, being isolated is dangerous.
- Introspection: reconsidering things, having an auto-critical attitude, etc.
- Observation: paying attention to all the things people say and do.

What place do Jane Austen's novels occupy in the history of Women Literature?

They were a literary subculture. Women Literature was not included in any academic canon together with Black or Jewish, etc. We can notice three stages, according to E. Showalter:

Women literature tries to imitate the dominant ideological values. They look up to these values. There is an internalisation of them: of femininity, duty, sensibility, intuition, spirituality, etc.

Women protest against these dominant values and speak against them, now they despise them. Political activism.

And then another stage of self-discovery where a female culture is born.

SENSE & SENSIBILITY

Critics of the 1970's were not very fond of Austen's work, in fact, they thought it was very Neo-classical and half way between burlesque and proper novel. The extreme separation of qualities like *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, etc., was radically despised saying that this attitude did not correspond to any real individual. There was too big a gap between both terms for them to consider she was depicting any kind of reality. Such an exaggerated confrontation of stereotypes does not give the desirable flexibility to a novel.

These **extreme separations**, relying on opposites, were an axiom of Neo-classicism and its purpose was to make things clear to people. Their work intended to teach people, they had a didactic intention, both in poetry and in prose.

Elinor and Marianne seem to embody the opposites, one is the representation of sense and the other of sensibility. Nevertheless we cannot say that each of them has both qualities in a higher or a lower degree. Qualities exist in isolation only as ideas, but in real life they co-exist, and this co-existence can result in one situation or other.

Sense and Sensibility were two very much debated words at the time. They evoke the difference between Neo-classicism and Romanticism, although both things were very important for both movements. Many books were written on the subject because a great controversy raised about their meaning. The implications of sensibility were much more complicated than those of sense.

For S. Richardson sensibility was a virtue because it allowed sensitive people to be detached from the materialism they lived in (industrialisation, money, appearances, etc.) But it also had negative connotations, it evokes hysteria, weakness, fragility, etc. The idea was to be sensitive but controlling your sensibility, otherwise it would lead you to illness.

Sensibility was displayed on women characters and presented as something that confronts women's feelings with their family responsibilities. The novel denounces how paradoxical it is to educate women to be sensitive and then criticise them for it. Women are stupid because they are taught to be so. This reminds us very much of Mary Wollstonecraft in her 'Vindication of the rights of Women' (1792) Austen was not as radical but shared these views.

Motherhood and education is very important in this novel, they go hand in hand. Women who had received the same kind of rational education were able to educate their kids properly. In the novel, mothers are

criticised, there is no balance, and either they have too little or too much. The **absence of fathers** is also surprising. They are either dead or absent. The absence of paternal authority is what leads to such confusion of the inheritors.

Austen's novels are very **symmetrical** and in this work we see how Elinor and Marianne are moved to marriages with good and rich men, but this progress is complicated by the appearance of two prime antagonists, Lucy Steele and Willoughby. The prime antagonists are married to other people and leave both sisters to a happy end. The marriages of the heroines represent perfection, harmony, in contrast with those of the other two couples which represent a kind of punishment. Nevertheless we will see later how the end of the story suggests to the reader that Marianne has been led to 'her happy end' not so much willingly.

There are a lot of **parallelisms** in the novel:

Elinor and Marianne's lives. Both are engaged in difficult social situations where they are tested. Marianne is tested when she meets Willoughby at the ball and Elinor when she has to stay in the same room with Edward and Lucy at Mrs. Jennings' house.

Then Willoughby and Edward Ferrars who face, each of them, three options of marriage:

They both had a previous engagement: Willoughby with Eliza Williams (C. Brandon's daughter) and E. Ferrars with Lucy Steele.

A financially advantageous marriage was possible for both: Willoughby with Ms. Grey and E. Ferrars with Ms. Morton.

And they both had a genuine attachment: Willoughby to Marianne, which he makes it known to Elinor although having married a different woman. And E. Ferrars to Elinor.

Both are cast off by their benefactor (W – Mrs. Smith, his aunt. E. F. – Mrs. Ferrars) But they have very different characters, and only the 'good' one participates of the happy end.

Tony Tanner says that *Sense and Sensibility* is very much about **secrecy and sickness**.

The novel is full of secrets: Colonel Brandon has to abandon the excursion but he does not tell why. Lucy tells Elinor the secret engagement. Willoughby never informs Marianne about his engagement with Ms. Grey, etc. Secrecy is taken as a social game. People felt bored so they need to create some shadows, some mystery.

Secrecy of feelings and silence is something imposed by society. However you were asked to be very social and talkative, but you were supposed to be reserved at the same time. *Quotation no. 1 and 2*

Marianne's **illness** is very important. Her behaviour is pathological but does not mean that it is exceptional. Many people at the time were suffering from the same (Cowper). Tony Tanner relies on a thinker like Foucault ('Madness and Civilisation'). Foucault gives evidence of the great increase of madness, nervous breakdowns, and melancholic states that took place in those difficult years. He establishes three main reasons for this:

One of economic nature: the new type of economy was responsible for all these cases of psychological weakness. An emerging country of tradesmen and free trade with no Government interference implied that many people started worrying about their financial situation. The gap between the poor and the rich was getting bigger and bigger.

There was also a fatal emphasis on reason and sensibility, but sensibility understood as regulated by the

official ideology. *Quotation no. 4.* Sensibility was not spontaneous it was an imposition upon individuals.

The existence and popularity of a very particular kind of novels, the improbable romances, had its part of blame in the increase of mental illnesses. Foucault says that these novels mostly affected women from the upper classes who had the money to buy the book and the time to read them. Their excess of emotive scenes and the excessive sentimentality was very pernicious for the people who read them. *Quotation no. 5.*

One cure for this illness was to expose the patient to nature to mitigate those excesses. Nature was healing; the contemplation of landscapes and the peace found in the country were very helpful in contrast with the city and the hypocrisy that polluted it. The society living in the city was ruled by money and appearances and had nothing to do with the previous agricultural world. Elinor places Marianne in the middle of nature confident that this would cure her.

Marianne's illness has a purpose in the novel. It makes clear that a nervous breakdown is something very common in the first two decades of the 19th Century and it functions as a denunciation of the imposition of sensibility upon women. It is also a subtle attack on civilised society that forgets about the spiritual sphere.

Marianne **rejects all kinds of social forms**, which she considers a masquerade. *Quotation no.6.* Social manners, for her, should project the individual true feelings. She is conscious, however, that some kind of rules must exist in society to find cohesion. There is a need to find a balance between privacy or individual freedom and social life.

It has been said that those who reject norms are usually more influenced by them. Willoughby is depicted in the beginning as a young lover who rejects and despises social norms, but at the end he turns into the opposite because of his greed for money. Marianne is more sincere although very contradictory. *Quotation no. 7.* In this passage we can appreciate that a Romantic character may not be so romantic if we analyse it. Financial matters reveal a lot about characters. Elinor is realistic when speaking about money, but Marianne is more materialistic.

Jane Austen's novels are full of **symbols** because of those highly organised plots. They make the reader imagine what's going to happen, establish connections, and they add complementary messages. For example: Marianne's hobbies are music and reading poetry; this is a sign of spirituality, spontaneity and keenness on showing. Elinor's hobby is painting screens; what means that she is fond of hiding, composing herself. The novel is not defending the fact that Elinor hid behind a screen it is denouncing the need to do it to protect yourself from society. The question is how much control should society be allowed to exert on the individual?

The tension that results from people having to be very private and sociable at the same time is clearly seen on the prominence that the novel gives to the gaze, to what is seen, to the eyes. *Quotation no. 10.* People are always aware that someone is watching them. This creates a great deal of anxiety on individuals. In a world with so many secrets, eyes have to be trained to obtain the correct perspective of things, the truth.

The wrong interpretation of insufficient evidence is also an important element in the novel. For example, when Elinor sees Edward's ring and thinks it's an evidence of his true love for her. Jane Austen was very critical of her society.

On the other hand, Marianne always makes sure that her intentions are made clear. She does all the wrong things at the ball when she meets Willoughby. She reveals her agony through symptoms of illness, which she does not attempt to hide.

Very often action is replaced by language. By playing with words, using irony, you can draw hints of what you really think of the things you cannot or are not supposed to do. Irony compensates the individual for the impossibility of action.

The novel systematically draws the reader's attention to **the importance of language**. Language conforms our vision of the world so it is never aseptical, it always carries a great deal of ideological content. The quality of life in a society depends on its language, on the way language has defined values, norms, etc. Language can also inflict a lot of pain and sorrow and this novel is pretty aware of this fact.

Marianne's consideration of language made her close to the Romantics. Language for the Romantic Movement implied the translation of unique thoughts into public norms, into something too standardised to show the differences that convey each and every individual thought. For the Romantics, language is a kind of falsification. The novel also sympathises with Marianne in the point that language should be used to express feelings rather than social norms. However she admits that there should be some cohesion so that we can prevent people misunderstanding our words, our behaviour. Precise definitions should exist to avoid confusion. Clarification achieved by differentiation is put to the test in this work. *Quotation no. 13*. This passage proliferates in comparatives and it results into a very confusing and heavy going thing.

In *Quotation no. 14* is Elinor speaking, very much aware of decorum and linguistic forms she tries to define the man she loves. In the beginning she does not want to reveal her love but the more she speaks the more she gets involved, and then she goes back again into composure.

Language can also be a means of manipulation. In the passage where Fanny convinces her husband that he does not have to help his family at all, she only uses language. *Quotation no. 15 & 16*. You must call things what they are (a house is a house and a cottage is not a house) Robert Ferrars systematically confuses commercial terminology with feelings. A valuable person for him is that who has money, that says a lot about himself.

Willoughby is very inconstant although very good at language when socialising but, when it comes to revealing his true feelings, he is unable to utter one word.

Elinor and Marianne usually show differences of opinion because they are projecting their own character. *Quotation no.16*. Elinor's opinion on Colonel Brandon is a lot different from that of Marianne. They use very different ways in order to convey their personal feelings.

Clarification through differentiation is something present in the novel, sometimes to criticise it and some times using it. There are some paragraphs in the novel in which this device is ironically used, like in the one where Willoughby is describing both sisters. It is full of comparatives and it results in a very confusing piece of information. In the 18th Century language is used as means of achieving the truth, and by the end of the Century, with the birth of Romanticism, language turns into an instrument to communicate feelings.

Quotation no.17 is another illustration on how language changes our point of view. Edward Ferrars speaks in a practical and utilitarian terms. Marianne, instead, uses more sophisticated terms, more Romantic. This also illustrates the co-existence of two ideological trends: Romanticism and Utilitarianism. This contrast puts forward the fact that nature can be both ways at the same time, it only depends on the point of view.

The two sisters have different attitudes towards **movement**. Elinor represents composure, stillness, and Marianne instead is very fond of sports, running, etc. This fact points to the transitional aspect of this period, Neo-classics were not very fond of movement and Romantics loved it.

Improvements are another important element in the novel. It states the improvements that have to be made to improve nature. They should be done to make a place self-sufficient, to make a community more comfortable, they should be undertaken for some useful purpose, just as Colonel Brandon did at Delaford. Mr. J. Dashwood, instead, makes his grove at Norland into a flowerbed just for the sake of it, to show off.

The weakest aspect of the novel is the end. Marianne marrying Colonel Brandon is somehow weird, difficult

to believe, very unrealistic. Is it a punishment for being 'so Romantic'? Is this what too much sensibility leads you to? Society exerted such pressure over individuals that sometimes they were abode to do things.

At this point in the Century, aristocracy is beginning to mingle with the emerging classes.

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