

English Literature of the Romantic Period, 1798-1832
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Jane Austen

In the second lesson in the third week of the NPTEL course on the English romantics, we will continue with exploring the fiction of the Romantic period. Our first author of study is Jane Austen.

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Jane Austen, 1775 to 1817, wrote at a time when many women authors had already appeared on the scene. She lived and wrote to the background of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, in the period of radical and rapid changes in printing and publishing and a slowly expanding British Empire. She was writing to the intellectual and cultural background of the ‘age of sensibility’, where as we have repeatedly been arguing, to respond to the suffering of another was a marker of being human, and of being civilized. Charity, compassion and sentiment became the key themes when speaking of the human race itself. Austen was undoubtedly influenced by this trend of thought. just as she was influenced by the writings of Samuel Richardson, Fielding and Samuel Johnson.



This is an illustration by Hugh Thomson (1860 to 1920), from chapter 12 of Jane Austen’s classic work *Sense and Sensibility*, where Mr Willoughby is cutting off a lock of Marianne’s hair as a keepsake: a sentimental move. It is a famous illustration and it’s just to set the ball rolling.

Writing in realist prose often tinged with sardonic humour and deep irony and concealing a deep understanding of the human ego and the dynamics of human relations, Jane Austen's novels were successful and hugely successful then and particularly successful in the 20th century, becoming the material for hugely successful TV series and film adaptations. Austen's principal themes have included romance, domesticity but also property, class and social order.

Austen's principal themes include romance, domesticity, property, class, and social order across her fiction. There is a considerable amount of emphasis on manners on social etiquette and civil society.

Domesticity and the home are also the sites of moral training – the critic Janet Todd has this to say about Jane Austen, “Moral purpose in the home and nation was essential to the war effort. In *Mansfield Park* Austen presents the military and the church as the two serious professions that potentially support the country in a difficult and sapping time, the one defending it abroad, the other stiffening moral fibre at home and establishing those principles for which men were fighting.” Todd has an important point. For those thinking Jane Austen was only interested in questions of manners and frivolity and flirtation, here is Janet Todd who is making the point that she is addressing questions of the military and the church.

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Women and Marriage

Our first principal theme when we study Jane Austen is women and marriage. Austen is traditionally known as a ‘romantic’ because courtship and marriage, often in the face of misunderstandings, poverty, social obstacles, are often central to her reading of the home and the social order. It is often that romance, courtship, marriage are caught up in a web of misunderstandings but also caught up in larger issues such as poverty, questions of ownership and social obstacles.

The courtship and the performance in civil society must be within the bounds the norms as determined by the social order and the woman must be conscious of her behaviour. Jane Austen's novels are quite similar to the conduct books of the period in their insistence on what was called proper behaviour. A balance between “prudence and romance, love and self-interest,” says Janet Todd, is essential for the Austen heroines.

Marianne's public behaviour in *Sense and Sensibility* vis a vis Willoughby is subject to criticism for being unfeminine. Elinor says about herself, "if there has been any real impropriety in what I did I should have been sensible of it at the time for we always know when you are acting wrong". Austen implies that Elinor lacks a certain feminine virtue here because a search for what she calls irresistible passion causes her to behave badly.

Being sentimental does not necessarily mean you put your sentiment out there for public display, you do not make a spectacle of your sentiment. The woman has to be interiorizing this. An excerpt from *Sense and Sensibility* follows:

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Elinor could not be cheerful. Her joy was of a different kind, and led to anything rather than to gaiety. Marianne restored to have life, health, friends and to her doating mother, was an idea to fill a heart with sensations of exquisite comfort and expanded in fervent gratitude: - but it led to no outward demonstration of joy, no words, no smiles. All within Elinor's breast was satisfaction, silent and strong.

Affections, senses, sensibilities, falling in love, all of these are defined by social norms limited by the social norms particular in the case of women.

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Elizabeth (P&P) experiences "affection" but never falls deeply in love. The Jane Austen novel is actually not an exploration of the woman's emotions alone but women's emotions as linked to the patriarchal setup which determine how much of an emotion or emotions women can show. Her novels interrogate the role of women within marriage, as inheritors of property but also as property, as we will see when we look at the famous, perhaps the most famous opening lines of any novel of this period, in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The woman's role in observing the norms of society often at the cost of individual development and progress, and subject to class and gender roles is also a key theme. Are the women free to grow mentally, intellectually is a moot point.

This also implies that women's agency, desires, forms of expression are constrained by the roles assigned to them: whether it is within the family or within the social order. Thus, whether Emma's character is nasty, arrogant and manipulative is a departure from the role she is

supposed to fit in as a woman. That is whether Emma, universally liked or disliked depending on whose side you are on, her manipulative arrogant behaviour, is it truly feminine becomes the concern.

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Occasionally, as in the famous moment in *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen even referenced current and controversial events such as slavery (“And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence. And while my cousins were sitting by without speaking a word, or seeming at all interested in the subject) and war (notably in *Persuasion*).

This means the woman asking political questions is being unfeminine, so the gendered reading of the Jane Austen canon, actually draws our attention to the problem that definitions of the feminine were invariably given by the social order and were restrictive. Now marriage as a theme occurs throughout her writings. Now while it is true that marriages appear to serve as the happily ever after logic Jane Austen does leave enough clues to indicate that this may not be entirely true. Sometimes women get married to men who are, and this is Mr Collins’s description in *Pride and Prejudice*, “conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly.” Romance in Austen is often tainted by the suspicion that men (such as Willoughby) have manipulated gullible women into marriage. Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* concludes with the Dashwood sisters eventually settling for security and sobriety, particularly Marianne, instead of romance. One moves away from frivolous, flirtatious romance to stability. That is a model of marriage that is being proposed, that you separate your desire for romance from the necessity of social order.

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There is, in a text like *Emma*, a tension between the sense of belonging a woman may choose (or not choose) to experience. Emma responding to Harriet who has suggested that Emma might be an old maid says and this is Emma saying, “I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine fortune I do not want, employment I do not want, consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s.”

What she is saying is that she does not want to abandon her spinster status, because she has more power over the house than anybody else.

Individualism and Property

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This question of the power of the house and property is central to many Jane Austen texts and that brings us to our next theme: individualism and property. In all major Austen novels there is the loss or the threatened loss of home and property. Catherine Morland, Fanny Price, Anne Eliot, the Dashwood sisters all of them have experienced some kind of threat to this ownership of property that they may have.

Susan Greenfield in a lovely reading of the question of individualism and property has proposed that “each sister copes with her lack of personal property by imagining she has a Lockean and property in her person. Each believes in her individuality, often, though not exclusively, figured as a particular quality of mind she herself has cultivated” and it is the inner landscape, the inner property that they wish to cultivate. For Greenfield, this is a major move. Individualism, which was identified by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* as a key factor in the emergence of the genre, is itself critiqued in Jane Austen.

Greenfield argues that “individualism is rarely available to those without property and thus rarely available to either Dashwood heroine”. In *Sense and Sensibility* Jane Austen would give us a detailed exposition of this link between individual and property:

Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more!--And you, ye well-known trees!--but you will continue the same.--No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer!--No; you will continue the same; unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion, and insensible of any change in those who walk under your shade!

And the famous opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single woman in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” What does this mean? For the human male to be fully developed as an individual you require two kinds of property: the property embodied in the land and the property embodied in the wife. In other words Jane Austen is inaugurating the link between individualism and property where property is of two kinds.

The woman as the social currency of ownership of individual growth of male pride, and of male individuality is the central theme, and surely that is a political argument.

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In Susan Greenfield's reading, where she stands outside the "insensible" house, Marianne consoles herself with sensibility. She cannot possess the house, but she can possess a superior sense of suffering. Women who do not have access to property, who are not owners, who cannot own property and display property, begin to develop the property of the mind. Interiority is a response to the absence of physical external extrinsic property.

The power of the imagination and the inner life of the woman is the key focus here and that marks a withdrawal necessary, withdrawal because they are not socially empowered. Janet Todd explains it thus: "throughout the novels the heroine's interior consciousness is presented as interactive with her physical being, cultural influences and external forces" (29).

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The point is Jane Austen's novel does encode real-life situations linked to money, value, promise and converts it into fictional romance. Critics like Mary Poovey who have examined the role of money and currency in *Pride and Prejudice* note how Jane Austen's is "a non-referential aesthetic," where the language refers to itself and not to any identifiable real event.

Here is an excerpt from Mary Poovey,

Like the breach of promise that Elizabeth associates with the resolution to thank Darcy, the event that brought the situation to a head – the passage in May, of the Bank Restriction Act - sanctioned a breach of promise, the act allowed the Bank of England to ignore the promise printed on the face of each of its notes to redeem paper notes with gold. So the bank restriction act in relieving the Bank of England of its obligation to pay disrupted what had previously seemed to be the referential nature of paper money; whereas the Bank notes had (presumably) once referred to the gold that backed them, after the Restriction, they referred, at best, to something else – the public's confidence that paper would function as money, at worst, as many people feared, the notes referred to nothing and thus had no value at all.

Mary Poovey argues that the breach of promise between humans is akin to the social context and the breach of promise by the Bank of England itself.

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Landscape

Continuing this exploration of social order, property and individualism in Jane Austen, let us take a look at *Sense and Sensibility*, Barton Cottage and the Dashwood family:

As a house, Barton Cottage, though small, was comfortable and compact; but as a cottage it was defective, for the building was regular, the roof was tiled, the window shutters were not painted green, nor were the walls covered with honeysuckles. A narrow passage led directly through the house into the garden behind. On each side of the entrance was a sitting room, about sixteen feet square; and beyond them were the offices and the stairs. Four bed-rooms and two garrets formed the rest of the house. It had not been built many years and was in good repair. In comparison of Norland, it was poor and small indeed! -- but the tears which recollection called forth as they entered the house were soon dried away. They were cheered by the joy of the servants on their arrival, and each for the sake of the others resolved to appear happy. It was very early in September; the season was fine, and from first seeing the place under the advantage of good weather, they received an impression in its favour which was of material service in recommending it to their lasting approbation.

The situation of the house was good. High hills rose immediately behind, and at no great distance on each side; some of which were open downs, the others cultivated and woody. The village of Barton was chiefly on one of these hills, and formed a pleasant view from the cottage windows. The prospect in front was more extensive; it commanded the whole of the valley, and reached into the country beyond.

In the case of texts such as *Sense and Sensibility* owning a cottage or owning a land is what gave you a sense of yourself, a sense of being you. The women who did not have a cottage like Barton Cottage hoped to acquire this via a marriage.

Properties linked to two specific landscape aesthetics: the prospect view about which we will have something to say and the question of control. Looking at a landscape spread out before you: vast Rolling Meadows, fields is what John Barrells referred to as a prospect view. The prospect view is central to how you visualize your property, that is you stand at a higher level and look down at the land and say that land is mine, it makes you believe that this expanse of land is what constitutes you. The question of a prospect view which is about the gaze is actually also about financial prospects.

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This is a picturesque setting complete with prospect view. John Barrell's account of the prospect view is intimately linked to questions of property and ownership, it is also loaded of course with sentiment, as a house and landscape which gives shelter from a cruel world and the horrific situation (socially) the Dashwoods, suddenly left penniless, find themselves in.

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Pemberley is also described in a prospect view in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Elizabeth encounters for the first time this wonderful landscape of Pemberley: its woods, its Park and its large landscape before it looks at the house itself. "They entered it at one of its lowest points and drove for some time through a beautiful wood stretching over a wide extent. Elizabeth's mind was too full for conversation but she saw and admired every remarkable spot and point of view." And here is the description "they ascended for half a mile and then found themselves at the top of a considerable eminence, where the woods ceased and I was instantly caught by Pemberley house situated on the opposite side of a valley,"

A prospect is where you stand and look at the land stretched out – you stand at a higher level.

Continuing with the description in *P&P*, "A large handsome stone building standing well on rising ground and backed by a ridge of high woody hills in front a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater but without any artificial appearance. Elizabeth's thoughts are recorded. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more" and after a while, "They descend the hill, crossed the bridge and drove to the door". She looks at the setting, the building and walks to a window and what does she do there? Elizabeth walks to the window to enjoy the prospect view.

"The hill crowned with wood from which they had descended receiving increased abruptness from the distance was a beautiful object. Every disposition of the ground was good and she looked on the whole scene – the river, the trees scattered on its banks and the winding of the valley, as far as she could trace it – with delight"

She is looking at the sweeping expanse of land, and "as they passed into other rooms these objects were taking different positions but from every window there were beauties to be seen, from every window there were beauties to be seen. The rooms were lofty and handsome, the

furniture suitable to the fortune of the proprietor”, and then she concludes, “and of this place thought she I might have been mistress.”

Elizabeth sees Darcy controlling grateful servants, fish, trees and land. She notes unruptured order and mastery, and wishes.

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To recap: does Jane Austen write only domestic fiction, or is Jane Austen only interested in women’s sentiments, conversations of a very frivolous nature? No, what you can see when we decode the prospect view in the novels that we have looked at *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, is that Jane Austen is making very overt political statements that the woman’s confidence in herself, the woman’s sense of herself comes from either having property or acquiring it via marriage or by lineage.

The question of the prospect view is therefore a question of the woman’s self. Jane Austen in our reading of her therefore is a clearly political novelist. Her interest in questions of slavery, her questioning interest of social order and social issues such as the breach of promise by the Bank of England and of course the aesthetics of landscape appreciation are gendered, and therefore her novels cannot be classified as simple gentle romances, far from it in fact.

Additional/ Recommended Reading

Poovey, Mary. “From Politics to Silence: Jane Austen’s Nonreferential Aesthetic.” in Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (ed) *A Companion to Jane Austen*. Wiley Blackwell, 2009. 251-260.

Greenfield, Susan. “Moving In and Out: The Property of Self in *Sense and Sensibility*”, in Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (ed) *A Companion to Jane Austen*. Wiley Blackwell, 2009. 91-100.

Janet Todd. *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*. Cambridge UP, 2006.

John Barrell. “Public Prospect and Private View” in *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan, 1992. 41-62.