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# **Jane Austen and Regency England**

Bakalářská práce

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Prohlašuji, že jsem bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem všechny použité prameny a literaturu.

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor thesis focuses on the reflection of Regency England in the novels of Jane Austen. The aim of this thesis is to introduce Jane Austen as a novelist who has displayed and also criticized aspects of Regency England. In the centre of focus will be the society of gentry, mainly the position of women within this social class. This bachelor thesis will also discuss the importance of social life and marriage as a result of economic and social dependency.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen, Regency England, gentry, position of women in society, social life, marriage

## **Anotace**

Bakalářská práce se zaměří na odraz Anglie na začátku 19. století v románech Jane Austenové. Cílem práce je představit Jane Austenovou jako spisovatelku, jež ve svých dílech nejen odráží dobu, ve které žila, ale také kritizuje některé její aspekty. Pozornost bude věnována hlavně anglické nižší venkovské šlechtě a postavení žen v této společenské třídě. Ukázána bude též jejich ekonomická a společenská závislost a z ní pramenící důležitost role společenského života a manželství.

**Klíčová slova:** Jane Austenová, Anglie na začátku 19. století, anglická nižší šlechta, pozice ženy ve společnosti, společenský život, manželství

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This bachelor thesis focuses on the representation of Regency England in the novels of Jane Austen especially on the position of women in the gentry society. I have chosen this topic because of my admiration of Jane Austen's writings and her ability to engage the attention of generations of women (and some men). I have always enjoyed noticing both the major and seemingly insignificant rules of her world. And since her novels focus mainly on women I have also decided to direct my focus on the women of her novels, or more accurately on their position in society. The main aim of this thesis is to explore some of the principles Jane Austen's ladies are bound to live by.

The first chapter of my thesis is focused on the writer herself, her birth and upbringing in Steventon, her family, education and later years spent in Bath and Chawton, ending with the writer's health issues and her death. Later it offers brief view of her love interests and the chapter concludes with the summary of her writings and the circumstances in which they were written.

The second chapter of my thesis introduces the term Regency England and deals with the question of the extent to which Jane Austen offered an accurate picture of the world she lived in and whether criticism of the society can be found within her writings.

The third chapter firstly addresses the issue of dependency as the main force in the lives of gentry women. The absence of economic freedom caused by the law of entailment and the lack of working opportunities is presented in the lives of chosen characters as well as the ways in which it affects their behavior. The second part of this chapter deals with the oppression of women's movements as a result of the perceived danger of the roads. Later on the attention will be drawn to the social duties of gentry women which are perceived as a form of an employment. Apart from introducing the duties of women concerning maintaining their homes and relationships, society is viewed as a place which employs the characters by the constant need of keeping its conventions. Attention is also given to the significance of society as a place of courting.

## 2 JANE AUSTEN

### 2.1 LIFE

When a fascinated reader or a curious student tries to learn more about this English writer, he or she will soon discover the difficulty of such a task. There is only little we truly know about her life or her personality for as Kathryn Sutherland writes in her study:

*'Jane Austen's life, as a recoverable narrative, is almost exclusively a matter of family construction, with authority drawn either from the teller having known her or, more tenuously, claiming family relationship to her.'* (Sutherland In: A Companion to Jane Austen 2012, 25)

However uncertain the facts concerning Jane Austen might be, it is necessary to introduce at least some of them. Jane Austen was born on December 16<sup>th</sup>, 1775 in Steventon in Hampshire. She was a daughter of Reverend George and Cassandra Austen and the seventh of eight children. Jane had six brothers: James (1765-1819) and Henry (1771-1850) became clergymen, Francis (1774-1845) and Charles (1779-1852) both entered the Royal Naval Academy. Edward (1767-1852) was adopted as an heir of wealthy childless relatives, which provided him the luxury of not having the need to have a profession. George (1766-1838) did not live with the family and they hardly ever talked about him. The reason for such actions was that he was in some way mentally or physically impaired. He was probably deaf and dumb since Jane knew sign language as she mentions it in one of her letters. Jane Austen had one older sister – Cassandra (1773-1845). They were very close friends and because neither of them ever married, they lived together most of their lives. When they were apart, they maintained a lively correspondence. These letters were published after the death of Jane and they offer an important insight into the life and thoughts of this great writer. Cassandra is also responsible for the only known sketch of Jane.

As Brown writes in *Jane Austen and Her World*, even though Jane Austen spent some time in school, she gained most of her excellent education at home, from her father. (Brown 1966, 6) On the extent of her education, Brown points out the words James Edward Austen-Leigh used to describe his aunt in the *Memoir*:

*'She had excellent French, some Italia, a fair knowledge of English history, and some proficiency in music; her singing voice was a good one and she played the piano well with diligent practice maintained.'* (Brown 1966, 6)

Jane had access to a fair amount of reading material as her father had an extensive library. From an early age the soon-to-be writer was reading works of Shakespeare, Milton, Fielding, Scott, Richardson, Goethe and others. *'Jane read voraciously, and not only classical authors. ... Moreover, all the family loved novels, and those, with other books, were read aloud in the evenings.'* (Laski 1969, 25)

After the retirement of Mr. Austen, his oldest son James took on the duties at Stevenson and Mr. and Mrs. Austen, Cassandra and Jane moved to Bath in 1801. Four years later, in January 1805, Jane's father died and left his widow and daughters in financial difficulties due to the loss of his income. During the years 1805-1808 they lived with Frank Austen and his wife in Southampton. And in June of 1809 they moved to Chawton estate, one of the properties of Edward Austen. Jane spent the rest of her life here writing and rewriting most of her work.

Jane Austen had lifelong health problems, which caused her to become increasingly unwell during the year 1816. On May 24<sup>th</sup> 1817 she was moved to Winchester in hope of finding medical treatment. Even though there was longevity in her family, her illness claimed her life at the age of 41 on July 18<sup>th</sup> 1817. The cause of her early death cannot be determined with certainty, but through retrospective diagnosis of her symptoms as described in her letters many suggestions had been made. Some believe it was Addison's disease, others Hodgkin's lymphoma or tuberculosis. Jane Austen was buried in Winchester Cathedral five days later.

## 2.2 LOVE

Since finding love or rather a suitable husband is obviously an important topic of Jane Austen's novels, I will dedicate these following lines to the love interests of the writer herself. *'She had some local love affairs, of which the evidence is confused. They did not lead to a wedding.'* (Brown 1966, 8) However, the lack of any actual certainty concerning Jane Austen's romantic life encourages many different theories and studies.

One name which is probably worth mentioning in this connection is that of Thomas Lefroy. He was a young law student who came from Ireland to visit his relatives who were part of Austen's social circles. Tom Lefroy and Jane Austen met in 1795 and even though she mentions him in her letters to Cassandra, the degree of their attachment is highly speculative.

*'...there was no public recognition of such an attachment beyond a small amount of gossip among friends and acquaintances. Family tradition, however, asserts that Tom was probably the one great love of Jane's life.'* (Teachman 2000, 12)

Whether it was a serious relationship or just an innocent flirtation, Tom, who was to marry someone with slightly higher income than Jane's, was shipped back to Ireland where he later married and thus secured his social and financial needs. Although there are suggestions of more men being romantically involved in the life of Jane Austen, I will only mention Harris Bigg-Wither, the brother of three young women Jane and Cassandra often visited. When twenty-one years old Harris proposed marriage to Jane (in 1802), she was almost twenty-seven. Austen supposedly accepted his offer only to change her mind in the morning of the following day. As Teachman writes there is no evidence of her having romantic feelings towards him, but she was presumably for a brief moment lured by the idea of money, comfort and insurance of a home nearby her family which accepting such a proposal would provide. (Teachman 2000, 13)

However, her unmarried years were filled with children of her relatives and luckily for us her spinsterhood gave her enough time to write. *'That she never married was perhaps an enrichment of English literature since a husband and children might have absorbed all her time and devotion.'* (Brown 1966, 7-8)

### 2.3 ABOUT HER NOVELS

Jane Austen began her literary path at an early age. Her first writing attempts included stories and short plays which described in a satiric way various events of her life and were read or shown for the audience of her family. Jane herself chose twenty-nine writings from her early years which were later published in three volumes of *Juvenilia*. During her life Jane Austen wrote six novels which she often

rewrote and thus it is difficult to determine their chronology. I will therefore list them according to the order in which they were published, with brief notes commenting on the origin of each novel.

In 1811 her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* was published. It was first drafted as an epistolary novel under the name *Elinor and Marianne* in 1795 and rewritten later in 1797. Two years later, in 1813, the novel originally titled *First Impressions*, written during the years 1769-1770, was published, giving the world probably one of the most famous love stories of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Mansfield Park* (written in 1811-13) was issued in 1814 and *Emma* (finished in 1815) in 1816.

All the novels published during her life were released anonymously, identifying the author only as 'a Lady' and the secret of Austen's authorship was known only to the closest family. But as Debra Teachman writes in her *Student Companion to Jane Austen*, Jane's brother Henry made it an open secret since he was proudly and publicly sharing his sister's identity after the success of her first two novels. Jane however never acted as if she were famous and even refused to meet other famous authors keen to know her. (Teachman 2000, 15) Her last two finished novels, *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, were published posthumously in 1818 even though the latter was the first novel Austen ever sold to a publisher. She wrote it under the title *Susan* between the years 1798 – 1799 and sold it in 1803 for ten pounds to Messrs. Crosby and Co. but they never published it. About thirteen years later, Austen had the book bought back again for the same sum and she revised it to be later published as *Northanger Abbey*.

The rest of her work includes her unfinished novel, *The Watsons* (published in 1871) which was written probably about 1803; a satirical novel in letters: *Lady Susan*, written about the same time and also published in 1871; and a short part of her last unfinished novel, *Sanditon*, written in 1817 and published in 1925. In her work, Jane Austen used various types of novels - The Picaresque form, The Gothic Novel, The Epistolary Novel, The Novel of Sensibility, The Women Rights Novel, The Domestic Novel and The Courtship Novel.

### 3 REGENCY ENGLAND AND JANE AUSTEN

#### 3.1 BRIEF CHARACTERISTIC OF REGENCY ERA

Regency era refers to the time in English history when the insanity of George III made Prince Regent act in his place. The King's unfitness for his duties is believed to have been caused partly by porphyria<sup>1</sup> and partly by psychological factors. The death of his daughter Princess Amelia significantly increased his illness and finally in December 1811 a Regency Bill was passed in Parliament. Regency era ended with the death of George III in 1820, when Prince Regent became King George IV.

However, according to Ivor Brown, the term is often used to describe a wider period of time and it applies to '*social customs and new developments in the arts.*' (Brown 1966, 11) The term is not strictly used for the time George IV was acting in place of his father, but it has been used to '*describe in a general way the customs and conditions during some twenty years at the beginning of the nineteenth century*' (Brown 1966, 11)

#### 3.2 DEDICATION OF EMMA TO THE PRINCE REGENT

Close connection between Jane Austen and Regency era can be obviously deduced from the fact that she lived and wrote during that period of English history. But what is probably not so widely known is the fact that Austen has a close connection to the Prince himself. He was one of the admirers of Jane Austen's work and when he discovered the identity of the author, he '*made it clear that he would approve any request that might be made by the author to dedicate her next novel to him.*' (Teachman 2000, 16) This was naturally no request. When the acting head of England wanted a dedication, Austen was obliged to write one. She naturally disapproved of the immoral behavior and the lifestyle of the royal family and as it will be further demonstrated, she possibly even criticized it within her novels.

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<sup>1</sup>A rare hereditary disease in which there is abnormal metabolism of the blood pigment haemoglobin. Porphyrins are excreted in the urine, which becomes dark; other symptoms include mental disturbances and extreme sensitivity of the skin to light. (www.oxforddictionaries.com)

Therefore even though she had no choice in writing it, at least she used her wit to create a dedication which is seemingly an official form of expressing sincere words in honor of Prince Regent, but for those who are familiar with her feelings concerning his Royal Highness, the irony behind them is noticeable.

### 3.3 AUSTEN'S CRITICISM OF REGENCY SOCIETY

Another topic which offers broad diversity of opinions among those who have chosen to study Jane Austen and her writings is the extent to which she reflected the world she lived in and subsequently whether she merely described it or also criticized it. During the period of her life, there were many significant historical and political events – for example the American War of Independence, the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. She lived in times of Industrial Revolution, poverty of the masses and slave labor. And even though she was surely aware of the world beyond her social environment for she was well read, two of her brothers were in the Royal Navy and she had a sister in law whose first husband was guillotined, it may seem her novels reflect none of the genuine issues of her times and focus entirely on the busy social life of tea parties, balls and other activities leading heroines to finding suitable husbands. Ivor Brown in *Jane Austen and Her World* also mentions that Austen limited the world of her novels to only one social class.

*'Jane Austen looked out through her windows on farmland and its workers, but, resolved to write only of what she knew, she narrowed her outlook as a novelist to the people of her own class, the country gentlemen and their families. So in her books we see rural English life through their eyes which were mainly turned inward to their own condition and its comforts.'* (Brown 1966, 12)

As I came to understand it Jane Austen intentionally wrote about the familiar and well-studied society of her own class and used it to show some of the issues she saw in the world and even to express her disapproval. Hardy in her *Reading of Jane Austen* writes that although Jane Austen avoids direct criticism or any generalizations about class, wealth, or manners, the commentary *'is neither invisible nor absent.'* (Hardy 1975, 103) and she continues:

*'Her sharp and profound insight into social structures, relationships and roles creates a series of critical scenes. Generalization emerges, quietly, but accumulating power. Her social scenes make comparisons of interplay which have the disarming yet provocative air of illustrating without defining. Her light, bright, and sparkling comedy criticizes while it diverts.'* (Hardy 1975, 103)

Similarly, also, Ivor Morris writes about the question of Austen criticism:

*'Certainly the stirring note of revolt is never sounded in her pages. But where else would one find so keen an eye for the tyrannies of wealth and rank, the injustices inherent in social position and the striving for it, the pitfalls of formal manners, or the plight of the necessitous man or powerless woman, as these stories of attachment and marriage reveal?'* (Morris 1999, 153)

In her novels Jane Austen focuses her attention predominantly on women. She frequently shows the unjust position they had in society. This was another grand topic of her times. Some studies suggest Austen had embraced the social role of women in the Regency society. For instance Patricia Beer believes that even though Austen was in a position to have read *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* written by Mary Wollstonecraft's and published in 1792, it appears *'neither to have done so nor to have thought at all along the same lines.'* (Beer 1974, 25) Beer later writes:

*'She not only accepted the limitations of women's scope but seems in her own life to have found happiness within them, being content to see the males of the family winning their way upwards in exciting careers, developing her own talents at odd hours and in secret, taking it for granted that home and devoted ministrations to parents and siblings was a woman's portion, staying in brothers' houses as a useful adjunct in times of trouble...'* (Beer 1974, 25)

This assumption is strongly criticized by Barba Hardy who refuses accusations, which has been made on account of Jane Austen not being interested in feminism and proven by the lack of reference to Mary Wollstonecraft (Hardy 1975, 105). According to some, in a way Jane Austen can be even called a feminist and traces of her criticism towards the society which gives women strict rules to follow and no means of being financially or otherwise independent are to be found within her novels. Teachman, for instance, writes *'Austen does not overtly preach feminism*



*in any of her novels, but in each of them, the lack of adequate legal protection for women is a vital societal theme.* ' (Teachman 2000, 52)

However, as Vivien Jones observes, this critique of the traditional structures of society is not accompanied by suggesting a solution for her heroines. Women in the novels often revolt against the established conventions of society and refuse to accept a marriage which would offer them an economic security but not love, however such decisions lack any consequences. All of the heroines eventually find love which is usually accompanied by a large income. This happy-ending scenario proves Austen, according to Jones, being unable to think outside the traditional tendencies of the society.

*'This coexistence of a "feminist" awareness with an essential conservatism, of an impulse for reform together with a readiness to work within traditional structures, is fundamental to Austen's fiction...'* (Jones In: A Companion to Jane Austen 2012, 285)

Roger Sales and Debra Teachman even demonstrate Jane Austen's criticism exceeded her own class. They believe that in her novels, her critique of the ruling class can also be found, most apparently in *Mansfield Park*, which was written during the years of the Regency Crisis (1810 – 1812). In this novel the importance of moral behavior is emphasized together with the criticism of corruption and elopements. According to Teachman, *Mansfield Park* has the same functions as a microcosm of England (Teachman 2000, 83). For example, there is an absent leader and the eldest son becomes a regent of his house. He is however only enjoying the pleasures of his status. This theory is supported by Roger Sales who believes the letters prove Austen had more awareness of national politics than is usually recognized. Although there is no supporting evidence of Austen's intentions, there are similarities between Tom Bertram and the Prince Regent. (Sales 1996, 131)

## 4 WOMEN IN GENTRY SOCIETY

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Jane Austen was writing mostly about her own class, the gentry – the class of the country gentlemen and their families. And even though representatives of the lower class or the aristocrats are also to be found within the novels, the main characters always belong to the gentry. In the novels there are characters belonging to the upper gentry represented, for instance, by Mr. Darcy and the lower gentry of gentlemen without the ownership of land (Mr. Bennet). In the following chapter the position of women in gentry society will be explored focusing firstly on both their economic and social dependency. Later, attention will be paid to the daily duties of gentry women and the role of social life and public events with regard to finding a husband – a provider.

### 4.1 DEPENDENCY OF GENTRY WOMEN

One of the main difficulties of the Austen's ladies is, in my opinion, the lack of freedom, or more accurately, the dependency on others which leads them to the need to behave and make decisions in certain ways. Firstly, I would like to explore the economic dependency of gentry women since money together with a family one comes from and manners he or she presents seem to determine their social position within the Jane Austen society.

#### 4.1.1 Economic dependency

Money or lack of money plays an important part in the novels. Commonly the extent of one's fortune and the yearly income received is commented on either in specific numbers or by judging it as *moderate*, *comfortable*, *sufficient*, *a very small* or *a large one*, or *an income of independence and comfort*. Obviously what is considered to be a satisfactory income for one character would be an unimaginable one to live on for other. Such different views are presented in a conversation between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood which begins with Marianne being cross about Elinor's statement about happiness being dependent on wealth.

*“Elinor, for shame!” said Marianne, “money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned.”* (SS, ch.17)

Elinor explains that maybe what Marianne considers to be a competence would be her wealth. This assumption is later in the conversation proven to be correct when Marianne expresses as sufficient the amount of *‘about eighteen hundred or two thousand a year; not more than THAT.’* (SS, ch.17) Elinor responds with laughter and says one thousand a year is her wealth. Marianne defends herself by stating two thousand a year is a very moderate income for a family, since *‘a proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters, cannot be supported on less.’* (SS, ch.17) This idea of what Marianne regards as the basic necessities for a comfortable life may be mildly amusing, but it also reminds us that being in financial difficulties as part of the gentry was still far from the poverty of lower class. In this respect we can remember the fury of Mrs. Bennet when Mr. Collins asked which one of his cousins helped in the kitchen with the preparation of lunch. She was profoundly offended by his insinuation and informed him *‘they were very well able to keep a good cook and that her daughters had nothing to do in the kitchen’* (PP, ch.13)

In the novels most of the women have no money of their own. This is partly because they have no employment and also because of the frequently mentioned unfairness of the law which ordinarily excluded women in the matter of inheritance. This issue plays an important role in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Debra Teachman describes a legal device known as an entailment or strict settlement which was commonly used in seventeenth and eighteenth-century England to protect owned property for several generations. (Teachman 2000, 67)

*The way it worked was as follows: The person who owned the property outright could devise by his will or a settlement drawn up separately that his property would be inherited, intact, through the generations living at the time of his death, plus one. In other words, if a man (it was almost never a woman) who owned an estate lived to see his son, his grandson, and his great-grandson born, the strict settlement could (and usually did) declare that the estate must pass through the family, in that order, finally settling on the great-great-grandson that had not yet been born when the settlement was originally written. Once the original owner died, each succeeding*

*owner would only have the right to the use of the estate, not an outright ownership of it. He could live on the estate, collect rents from any tenants that might live on the estate, and use the income from the estate to maintain the estate itself as well as to provide for his family. He was not allowed, however, to sell the estate or any part thereof or to detract from the value of the estate in any way. He was required to keep it intact and in good order for the next generation. (Teachman 2000, 67 – 68)*

Teachman later explains the pronoun “he” in the description of the entailment was used intentionally since leaving an estate to women was, despite no legal obstacles, extremely rare. In case there was no entailment in force, Teachman continues, according to the common law, the estate was inherited by the eldest son of a family or, in case there were no sons, to be equally divided to the daughters of the family. In conclusion:

*‘As a result of that law and the customs that grew up around it, women and younger sons rarely received substantial inheritances from their fathers. Estates remained intact, ostensibly to protect the family and the family property as a whole, but only the eldest sons had much say about the manner in which estate income and property was to be used.’ (Teachman 2000, 68)*

At the beginning of the first chapter of *Sense and Sensibility* the consequences of such law are demonstrated. By the will of the late owner of the Dashwood’s family estate and because of the early death of their father, the Dashwood sisters and their mother are left only with an inadequate sum of money and their fate (yearly income) depends on the will of the inheritor. (SS, ch.1-2)

Another example of the workings of the entailment law can be found in *Pride and Prejudice* where Mr. Bennet has no son and is unable to ensure provision for his daughters after his death.

*‘Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed, in default of heirs male, on a distant relation; and their mother’s fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his.’ (PP, ch.7)*

According to Teachman, similar stipulations determining the eldest nephew or male cousin as an heir in cases where there was no son to inherit the property,

were included in most of the legal entailments. (Teachman 2000, 68) However upsetting this situation might be for women of Bennet's family, there is nothing to be done. Mr. Collins, who is a cousin of Mr. Bennet, is the legal heir of his property. Mrs. Bennet nevertheless does not hesitate to express her opinion on the matter.

*'I do think it is the hardest thing in the world that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure, if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it.'* (PP, ch.13)

Mrs. Bennet is ordinarily portrayed as a rather silly creature of a very poor behavior and maybe because she often fails to maintain the boundaries of propriety she is allowed to voice the justified anger many women surely felt. Although she expresses her rage and unflattering opinion of Mr. Collins she rapidly accepts the reality of their situation when Mr. Collins comes to Longbourn with the resolution to marry one of Mr. Bennet's daughters, which *'was his plan of amends—of atonement—for inheriting their father's estate.'* (PP, ch.15)

The law favored the eldest sons in the matter of money and that consequently made them privileged in other aspects as well, however, as it will be further demonstrated, they were also not entirely independent. The younger sons usually inherited little money and therefore they were to either marry a woman with a fortune or earn their money as navy officers, lawyers or members of the clergy. Being a woman in Jane Austen society was however even more difficult since there was no chance of their self-reliance. Women of the gentry, as it was mentioned previously, were scarcely considered in the matter of an entailment and they had no employment. Therefore their only chances were to either find a suitable husband or to rely on the hospitality of their family, married siblings or friends.

Sometimes the possibility of becoming a governess is presented in the novels and even though it may seem to be a way to self-reliance, only a woman with a good education would be accepted as a governess, her earnings would not be sufficient and, what is probably the most important issue in the Jane Austen world, her social standing would be significantly lowered.

*'...although a governess was not considered to be a servant in the same class as those who took care of the house and grounds, she was certainly not allowed to be on a social footing with her employers or their friends.'* (Teachman 2000, 51)

Accepting the position of a governess even for some time would, as Teachman also writes, threaten a woman's prospect of marriage. In *Emma*, a similar destiny nearly befalls Jane Fairfax, who is one of the characters entirely reliant on others. When her parents died, she was taken into the family of her father's friend. He had however his own daughter to provide for and was therefore unable to ensure Jane's financial security for the future as well. He believed giving Jane an excellent education and the possibility of becoming a governess one day was the best he could do for her. Later in the story it is revealed she had been secretly engaged to Frank Churchill, another character whose dependency is apparent. He was adopted by wealthy childless relatives after the death of his mother and as an heir he faced the challenge of always staying in their favor. His marriage to Jane would be most certainly evaluated as an improper one and he would risk the loss of his awaited fortune. Therefore their engagement was kept a secret.

Similar concealed relationships Austen actually shows as fairly common. Because even though the first born sons were appointed by the law to inherit the wealth of previous generations, an incorrect choice of a future wife could cost them this privilege. Generally marriage was viewed as a mutually beneficial arrangement and a way to secure or even increase family wealth or to gain a title. Naturally a marriage which would weaken the financial or social position of a family was not to be allowed. Therefore the only choice for a man who wanted to marry a woman with no money or low social standing without risking losing his fortune was to hide his intentions, wait and stay in favor with those who decided the amount of his income.

*'A prominent theme in her writing is that of young people waiting patiently or despondently for the means of marrying, or concealing their engagement so as not to offend those from whom they have expectations of wealth.'* (Morris 1999, 39)

In her novels Austen even draws attention to the tragic end to some of such engaged couples relationships. For instance Fanny Harville in *Persuasion* dies before the awaited promotion and fortune of Captain Benwick would allow them to get married. The case of a gentleman, who loses his fortune for love, or in this particular

case rather for the given word, is displayed in *Sense and Sensibility* where the secret engagement of Edward Ferrars and Lucy Steele plays an important part in the storyline. Lucy, whose parents died is making her living by staying in the homes of her friends and relatives. This essential dependency forces her to always behave to the liking of those whose hospitality she is currently relying on. Edward on the contrary is '*the eldest son of a man who had died very rich*' (SS, ch.3), but even he is not independent '*for, except a trifling sum, the whole of his fortune depended on the will of his mother.*' (SS, ch.3) When their secret relationship is finally revealed Edward has to choose either to end the engagement or to lose his fortune and the support of his family, his mother even states she never wants to see him again. But as it was stated previously, although Austen is showing the injustices of the society, she solves them in rather idealized ways which is also the case of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Due to this economic dependency it was essential for a woman of Jane Austen's England to marry a man with sufficient income to provide a comfortable life for her. Every woman was aware of this and it was therefore important to be well informed of a man's financial situation, for '*acquaintance with a gentleman should presuppose familiarity with his financial affairs*' and '*knowing a man implies knowledge of his bank balance.*' (Morris 1999, 35) Since marriage played such a substantial role in the life of young women in gentry society, it is also to be found in the core of each of the novels. Austen does not judge Charlotte Lucas who is realistic and decides to marry Mr. Collins, her '*chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.*' (PP, ch.23) However, her principal characters always refuse to base their marriages only on financial grounds. Emma proclaims marriage unnecessary for a secured woman, unless it is for love. She herself has '*very little intention of ever marrying at all.*' (E, ch.10) and even though none of the other main heroines is similarly secured, they always decline to marry without love.

Elizabeth Bennett is certainly conscious of the importance of her decision which affects not only her, but all her sisters and her mother as well for Mr. Collins was the heir of the family property. However Elizabeth, unlike Charlotte Lucas, is convinced marriage should be based on more noble grounds than the economic ones and refuses the proposal of Mr. Collins. Later she is even given the approval of her

actions by her father. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* even resists the will of her caretaker and a father figure when she refuses to marry Henry Crawford. At the age of ten she was taken from a lower class family to live with her wealthy relatives. Even though Fanny has only a slightly higher position than a servant within the Bertram family, she is still in a great debt to them for bringing her up, giving her an excellent education and providing for her. Therefore the denial of Sir Thomas's authority in the matter of a marriage proposal shows the courage of Fanny Price as well as the importance of the subject of her revolt.

In *Persuasion* the case of a woman who was once pressured not to marry a man she loved but whose proposal was considered disadvantageous is presented. The young Anne Elliot ended her engagement to Mr. Wentworth mainly because of the opinion of her godmother Lady Russell, who believed it to be an unworthy connection.

*'Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind, to throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in the profession, would be, indeed, a throwing away..'* (P, ch.4)

The decision of Anne is understood in the novel as a betrayal of love and a demonstration of the weakness of her character.

*'She had used him ill, deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others.'* (P, ch.7)

Anne Elliot however, almost immediately regrets her actions and in the rest of the novel the stability of her feelings and the improvement of her character are demonstrated. She refuses the marriage proposal of a prosperous man and stays faithful to Mr. Wentworth even though she is no longer bound to him by the promise of a marriage. According to the formerly mentioned custom, which is common to all of her novels, Jane Austen, after a series of incidents, misunderstandings and plot developments, leads the main characters to find forgiveness and their happy ending. In my opinion, this tendency to always finish the story of the lead heroine in the best



way possible can be seen as an intention of the writer rather than her naivety. Possibly the heroines are sheltered from the cruelty of the world they lived in as a reward for their bravery to stand up to its injustices.

#### 4.1.2 Dependency of movement

Another form of dependency which can be often observed within the novels is the one concerning movements of gentry women. In the novels scenes are frequently changing as the main characters pay visits to different families or attend various parties and balls. Heroines also regularly spend some time of the year in London, Bath or with their relatives. The ability to travel is crucial for a social life and all of the characters seem to be constantly on the move. Jane Austen familiarizes us thoroughly with the details of one's travel arrangements as well as the different types of carriages used during her times.

*'The youngsters were proud of the reckless speed with which they drove their light, one-horse gigs, which were apt to upset, "tittupy" things as they are called in Northanger Abbey. For taking families sedately to dinner-parties and dances there were the phaeton, the two-horse chaise, and the heavier, more imposing barouche. For long cross-country journeys, if the public coach was not available or was though common, a post-chaise could be hired with a change of horses at various stages.'* (Brown 1966, 17 – 18)

Roger Sales pays attention to the apparent difference between men who were free to choose when and how they would travel and women whose movements depended on others and had to be always carefully arranged. *'A donkey, sometimes with a cart, was often the only form of transport that women in the country could call their own.'* (Sales 1996, 159)

Women were furthermore not to travel alone. Lady Catherine, for instance *'cannot bear the idea of two young women travelling post by themselves. It is highly improper.'* (PP, ch.37) She believes *'Young women should always be properly guarded and attended, according to their situation in life.'* (PP, ch.37) And even the most independent of Jane Austen heroines, Emma, whose wealth and social standing together with an indulgent father allowed her to act and move more freely than any

other heroine, is conscious of her need for a walking companion, since a proper lady cannot walk alone. The reason for such arrangements was the danger which was believed to await women on the roads for similar concerns were common in the period. Ivor Brown writes there was ‘*a serious burst of rioting*’ (Brown 1966, 15) in 1811 as a result of the consequent unemployment. Roger Sales reminds that assaults on women were as common at home as they were on the road.

*‘It was nevertheless the attacks on women who were travelling that tended to come to the attention of the public. This conveniently buried the fact that the crime could be much closer to home, as well as reinforcing the notion that women should not travel alone.’* (Sales 1996, 158)

Patricia Beer writes ‘*seduction and rape were real hazards not only during the period she (Austen) was describing but long before and ever since.*’ (Beer 1974, 72) Austen however, according to Beer, presents this topic in a rather naïve or even humorous way. Heroines who decide to rebel against this kind of dependency and feel capable to walk alone are never harmed and young silly girls who would be more likely to be the victims of seducers are usually spared of such tragedy. Several tales of women who are exposed to the dangers of traveling are included in the novels. However, their misfortunes commonly happen outside of the main storylines and are only mediated to the main characters as well as to the reader through a narrative.

The danger of seduction is mentioned in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth Bennet is introduced to a true character of Mr. Wickham by learning in a letter written by Mr. Darcy he had almost seduced Miss Georgiana Darcy. It happened during summer when the young sister of Mr. Darcy went to visit Ramsgate. She was “on the road”, away from the safety of home, and therefore most vulnerable. Luckily Georgiana was saved by her brother before the planned elopement. In *Sense and Sensibility* an even more realistic end to most of such seductions is shown. Colonel Brandon tells Elinor Dashwood the tragic history of his loved one and also the story of Miss Williams, who was charmed and seduced by Mr. Willoughby during her visit to Bath. He later abandoned her while she was pregnant with his illegitimate child, which meant she lived in poverty and disgrace. Then there is also the case of Lydia Bennet whose silliness makes her unable to understand the

seriousness of her situation. However there can be no doubt Mr. Wickham chose to use Lydia because she was outside the protection of her home.

Austen also writes about the assaults some of the characters were exposed to. In *Emma*, for instance, Harriet Smith and Miss Bickerton are attacked by a group of gypsies on the road, '*which, though apparently public enough for safety, had led them into alarm.*' (E, v. II, ch.3) The whole incident is described after Emma is familiarized with it and more than a warning of an actual danger it, in my opinion, offers a satirical image of the feared jeopardy. The source of the trouble Harriet finds herself in seems to be the fact she was, unlike Miss Bickerton, unable to run away from a begging child who approached them, it was because '*she had suffered very much from cramp after dancing.*' (E v. II, ch.3) Miss Smith becomes terrified and her obvious powerlessness is subsequently the reason she is taken advantage of. '*How the trampers might have behaved, had the young ladies been more courageous, must be doubtful; but such an invitation for attack could not be resisted...*' (E v. II, ch.3) I believe Jane Austen tries to demonstrate in her novels that there is a greater danger in the opinion that women are helpless and in behavior which supports such presumptions than in the travelling itself. For this reason, possibly, the brave heroines who walk alone (Elizabeth, Jane Fairfax) are spared any danger.

## 4.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL LIFE

### 4.2.1 Hectic idleness of the ladies

Rarely does anyone in Jane Austen's novels have a profession. According to Robert Miles, people have nothing to do except to simply exist. (Miles 2009, 146) In his opinion the identity of the characters is not created by work but by their social status and belonging to a certain social class, not by the activity of a profession but the idleness. For example Lady Bertram is a wife of a baronet and therefore '*she has no need to be useful unless she chooses. Since she is content sitting on her sofa, she does not attempt anything more.*' (Teachman 2000, 83) But most of the characters seem to be fairly busy in their own and more active way.

*'The men are busy guarding and destroying their own game, and otherwise engaged with their horses, dogs and newspapers; the women are fully occupied with housekeeping, neighbours, dress, dancing and music.'* (Morris 1999, 29)

Even though there are characters who are employed in the navy, clergy or in business, Austen pays little attention to them and focuses on the employments of the social life. Barbara Hardy writes: '*It is hard to think of a busier social world than Jane Austen's, though she (notoriously) kept her social range much narrower...*' (Hardy 1975, 21) The pages on the novels are filled with visits of relatives, balls, tea parties, picnics, shopping trips, concerts, public readings, trips etc. '*The scenes and aspects of social life which she does show are active, crowded, and often noisy.*' (Hardy 1975, 21) Austen does not actually describe the work behind such social encounters, nevertheless it is obvious that the ladies of her novels did more than sitting on the sofa. Their duties were mostly to make sure everything was being done. For the actual work they employed an impressive number of different kinds of maids and servants. For instance there are *housemaids, waiting-maids, laundry-maids, nursery-maids, dairy-maids, chambermaids and regular maids* mentioned within the novels. Naturally the number of servants indicated the wealth and social standing of the family and '*it was an easy world for the wives and mothers who had sufficient means to employ all the staff they needed.*' (Brown 1966, 18)

Heroines with lower incomes were of course more involved in domestic duties. In her online study *Social Classes, Money, and Servants in Austen's Society*

Tracy Marks lists the common responsibilities of gentry women which were, for instance, to supervise the staff, plan meals, create and maintain recipes, manage accounts, make an inventory of supplies, decorate the home, run the home farm and kitchen garden or manage home renovations. To some extent ladies cared for the children and their education. They had to maintain their dresses and be informed about fashion. Part of the duties of women with higher social positions within the gentry class was also charity. (Marks 2007, [online])

Additional obligations of Jane Austen's heroines originate in the public nature of their lives. They are always surrounded by their family, friends, acquaintances or larger parties and that means they are always bound to behave according to the relevant convention. They have to follow particular ways of dancing, walking, talking, paying and returning visits or even courting.

#### **4.2.2 The role of social life in the matter of finding a husband**

Due to their economic dependency gentry women had yet another duty, possibly their most important one. They had to use the opportunities of public life to allure a husband. Instructions on how to achieve such a goal are introduced in *Mansfield Park*: '*Give a girl an education, and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to anybody.*' (MP, ch.1)

Young women were traditionally introduced to the society of adults around the age of seventeen. During her "coming out" a young girl was presented to the room full of potential husbands. With the knowledge of the economic reliance of gentry women in mind it is understandable that the success of this first public appearance was crucial. Before the newly introduced young lady had a chance to prove her worth by displaying the fruits of her education she was to attract the attention of public by her looks. In *Northanger Abbey* the description of Catherine Morland's preparations for her first ball demonstrates the importance of fashion and the visual presentation of a woman entering the society for the first time.

*'...our heroine's entree into life could not take place till after three or four days had been spent in learning what was mostly worn, and her chaperone was provided with a dress of the newest fashion. Catherine too made some purchases herself, and when all these matters were arranged, the important evening came which was to usher her into the Upper Rooms. Her hair was cut and dressed by the best hand, her clothes put on with care, and both Mrs. Allen and her maid declared she looked quite as she should do.'* (NA, ch.2)

As can be understood from the discussion between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* traditionally younger daughters were to be introduced to society only when the older ones were married or engaged. Lady Catherine is outraged at the fact that all of Elizabeth's sisters are out at once. Elizabeth justifies this by explaining her belief in the pointlessness of following this social rule. She feels it is unfair to younger sisters to be deprived of the amusements of society only because they have a sister who either cannot or will not marry early. She points out it is not in the spirit of promotion of sisterly love. (PP, ch.29) Nevertheless there is an evident distinction in the position of daughters in a family.

*'Eldest daughters led the way in society: they were given the more desirable seats at dinner parties; they led the way at dances and parties; they received the first invitations; they were introduced before their younger sisters.'* (Teachman 2000, 84 – 85)

Accordingly when Mr. Collins wants to marry one of his cousins he presupposes it will be Jane, simply by the knowledge of her being the oldest daughter. When Mrs. Bennet explains Jane is close to being engaged, he shifts his affections towards the next in line – Elizabeth. (PP, ch.15) In the novels a different way of addressing an eldest daughter can be also noticed. She was called Miss with the family name, whereas her sisters were called by their first and last name. This was presumably a way to inform the suitors which one of the unmarried daughters was the oldest and therefore the one they should be courting.

The education Mrs. Norris spoke about in the previously quoted passage from *Mansfield Park* is focused on the arts which helped women to attract the attention of men during public events. Mr. Elliot characterized good company in the conversation with Anne by the following words: *'Good company requires only birth, education,*

*and manners, and with regard to education is not very nice. Birth and good manners are essential...*' (P, ch.16) Young women were educated only to attract a husband and be good wives. They cultivated their abilities of conversation, manners and performing, for as Mr. Darcy describes in *Pride and Prejudice* an accomplished woman:

*'must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and 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...and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.'* (PP ch 8)

Elizabeth Bennet ridicules these requirements by saying there is no wonder Mr. Darcy is still searching for a woman who would meet them. However, it offers a notion of what was desired in a woman. Patricia Beer pays attention to the role of the above stated crafts in the matter of finding husbands and she points out *'the idea that a woman might cultivate her talents and personality for their, or her, own sake has no place in Jane Austen's scheme of things.* (Beer 1974, 64) For instance there is a general presumption that every young lady plays well on the pianoforte. Ladies of the novels are frequently asked to play after coffee or dinner to entertain the guests. Music seems to be, as many other aspects of the public life, an important instrument of evaluating the appeal of an unmarried woman.

*'Music as an accomplishment has a barefaced relationship to sexual status. Mrs Weston, who is married and pregnant, and Anne Elliot, who is on the shelf, do not give solo performances; the former has no need to, for the latter it is useless.'* (Beer 1974, 65)

Beer also notices Austen's main heroines are often neither too good at performing nor too eager to improve their abilities by practicing. *'They realise their own inadequacies but do nothing to modify them, nor do they ever hold back from performing.'* (Beer 1974, 64) Possibly it is because they do not believe the ability to play the pianoforte well should be considered as significant in the matter of finding women suitable for marriage. These heroines, who refuse to base their marriages on anything less than love, are aware that *'those who love them do not mind.'* (Beer

1974, 64) Austen's main characters seem to intentionally go against the rules of public courting as if to demonstrate they do not agree with the ways of society. They do not want a husband who would use such superficial criteria in his selection of a wife.



## 5 CONCLUSION

This bachelor thesis was focused on Jane Austen and the representation of Regency England in her novels. The first chapter was devoted to the writer herself. Some of the facts of her life were presented together with the brief account of her romantic relationships. The chapter was concluded with a survey of Jane Austen's literary work.

In the second chapter the connection between Jane Austen and Regency England was studied. At the opening of the chapter the term Regency England was explained as one not merely describing a historical period of the rule of the Prince Regent but as the term used to characterize the social customs, developments and conditions of the first twenty years of the nineteenth century. Later on the dedication of one of Jane Austen's novels to the Prince Regent himself was given as evidence of both her close connection to the Regency era and also as an example of her witty criticism of the immoralities of the ruling class. The question as to what extent her novels reflect Regency England and whether she included criticism within her novels was further explored. This part of the chapter proved that even though Jane Austen's novels are mainly focused on the social life of gentry and any direct criticism of the major issues of her time is present, there is in fact a great amount of criticism hidden within her work. It was shown she used the well-studied environment of her own class to expose the unjust ways of society mainly with respect to wealth, rank and the position of women in society. The possibility of viewing Jane Austen as a feminist was also introduced within this chapter. It was demonstrated that even though her novels show women revolting against the well-established rules of society there is a lack of consequences of such actions. This means that Austen, although having a certain feminist awareness, was unable to think outside the traditional structures of society. The end of the chapter suggested Jane Austen's novel *Mansfield Park* to be another apparent example of her criticism towards the ruling class.

The last chapter of this thesis was devoted to a closer exploration of some of the issues Jane Austen's novels indicate. Since women are the major characters of the novels this chapter was focused on them as well. I discussed the dependency of gentry women as a main force of their lives. Firstly attention was given to the economic dependency caused by the lack of employment and the law of entailment.

Different consequences of this form of dependency in the life of chosen characters were explored. The thesis both indicated the substantial role of marriage as a means of financial security for gentry women and also discussed the apparent revolt of Austen's chief heroines against accepting marriage merely as a result of their economic dependency. Attention was also paid to the dependency of movement which was studied in order to express another limitation Austen's women refuse to accept.

The second part of the last chapter offered an understanding of the importance of social life for the women of gentry. After proving that the ladies of Jane Austen's novels were thoroughly busy with their duties, social life was viewed as another form of their obligations mainly for its role in the matter of finding a husband. Society was therefore studied as a place where the public courtship took place. Attention was paid to the custom of "coming out" as well as to the use of public performing as a way of attracting a suitable husband and heroines of the novels were once again proven to be acting against the established conventions of society.

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