Textual intimacy: ethical education for characters and readers in Jane Austen’s novels

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Textual Intimacy: Ethical Education for Characters and Readers in Jane Austen's Novels

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

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Thesis Topic: This project examines four of Jane Austen's novels, focusing on narrative technique that positions readers to experience ethical dilemmas similar to those which serve to educate the heroines.

Jane Austen's texts explore the epistemological issues of how subjectivity and imagination distort perception. Of particular importance is the communication process. Attention to language in all of its forms suggests Austen's acute awareness of the linguistic nature of human experience. Because Austen valued honesty and integrity, her texts demonstrate the necessity of cultivating these qualities to achieve enriching, intimate relationships. Language becomes the means through which characters are able to evaluate each other and to discover 'truth'. While the characters in the novels gain understanding, readers are similarly instructed because the narrative positions readers to become intimates of the characters. Since novels selectively create a textual reality, they become examples of the problems they raise. Characters and readers are taught to value compassion, and to maintain a generous, open-minded attitude in relating to each other.

Narrative technique and reader response in *Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice, Emma* and *Persuasion*, indicate that as Austen's skill developed, her narrative manipulations of reader response gained subtlety. While readers may be aware of the education process occurring within the text, Austen's creation of a mirroring experience for readers may be overlooked.
17/4/94 Dreamed:

Fact and Fiction

Ideas and words chase each other
And sometimes catch.
But never can they join to form
A perfect match.
To hope absolute meaning
Defines a word
Is quite absurd.
And one suspects
That once in text
Fact and fiction merge.
Story and history
Share one diction.
And converge.
Jane Austen, 1775-1817

from the portrait by Cassandra Austen, c. 1810
(pencil and water-colour), 11.4 x 8 cm
adapted from a post card based on the original in the
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The assistance I have received in all areas of this project defies adequate recognition. I would especially like to thank Dr Katherine Newey for her sensitive and efficient supervision through the research, writing and preparation of this thesis. Dr Anne Lear also provided invaluable guidance. Dr Joseph Pugliese, Dr Dorothy Jones and other members of the English Department gave freely of their time and expertise. Lynne Wright (Co-ordinator of the Faculty Librarians), Catriona McGurk and Susan Jones as well as many members of the Library staff shared their professional knowledge, tireless energy and enthusiasm whenever called upon. No task was too trivial; no question too trifling. I would also like to thank Nora Walker and members of the Jane Austen Society of Australia for their support and access to their resource library. Bob Corderoy, John Gray and Gary Stewart helped to de-mystify computers and facilitate my entry into cyberspace, allowing me to contact a world-wide-web of Austen scholars. The Yarrows and Parros contributed their literary criticism, hospitality and continuing friendship. I would also like to express my gratitude to my family for their practical help and encouragement, and especially to my mother and father, to whom this thesis is affectionately dedicated.
ABBREVIATIONS AND NOTES USED IN THIS DOCUMENT

The following abbreviations will be used in the footnotes and throughout this document:


**NA** refers to *Northanger Abbey*

**P&P** refers to *Pride and Prejudice*

**E** refers to *Emma*

**P** refers to *Persuasion*

Numbers appearing in parenthesis following quotations or textual references indicate pages in the R. W. Chapman, Oxford UP editions of *The Novels of Jane Austen* in 6 volumes. Unless otherwise indicated, pages refer to the novel under discussion in that chapter.
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CHAPTER ONE

Narrative Intimacy

i. Jane Austen: language, ethics and uncertainty

When Jane Austen entered the ethical debates of her period concerning the moral stature of women, the nature of knowledge, and the principles of conduct that promote dignity in the pursuit of happiness, she placed her case within the constructs of novel fiction. This served to locate her arguments squarely within the domain of language and its part in defining both real and imaginary experience. The emergence of the novel as a legitimate literary genre coincided with recognition that reading fiction influenced values by producing individuals who could be contained and controlled. Moreover, people pursuing intimate relationships were felt to pose little threat to the political power structures of the State. Austen's subject matter focuses precisely on the formation of intimate relationships between characters who must learn to understand themselves and others. Not only has this task challenged human beings since writers like Austen defined relationships based on compatible ethical standards and personalities, it lays a foundation for achieving self-realisation. Through a mirroring response to ethical issues raised in the text, the novels serve to instruct readers, for Austen was well aware of the powerful influence that literature could exercise in shaping characters not only within the pages, but of readers themselves. Her texts emphasise that individuals are responsible for much of their behaviour, and the values governing their interactions. The best characters learn through experience, and the most important lessons reveal how knowledge can be gained.

\(^1\) Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction, A Political History of the Novel* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), pp. 34-36. Fiction as a political tool is discussed convincingly throughout this book, particularly in the introduction and first chapter. See also Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, (University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. 236: ‘...the fundamental assumption of romantic love...is that the personal can be kept separate from the social, that one's “self” can be fulfilled in spite of—and in isolation from—the demands of the marketplace.’
By recording her observations in the novel genre, Austen confirmed her belief that the written word could be invested with power; fiction itself providing a political force. While she was influenced by Enlightenment ideologies, emphasising order in society, revolutions, particularly in France, raised serious questions about authority. Although many critics have placed Austen's political views within the conservative camp, compelling arguments suggest that Austen, and other contemporary women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Fanny Burney, and Maria Edgeworth, to name a few, were determined to make their own voices heard as they sought equal rights and social justice otherwise denied them. The conflicting readings of Austen's texts could also reflect different categories of political activity as well as her own ideological biases. If these women writers understated their criticisms or avoided articulating issues that would challenge patriarchy's social structures, through the combination of artistic skill and comic irony, Austen's novels reward self-assertion and validate her heroines' quests for justice and recognition.

[The] surface of the novels Jane Austen wrote presents the smooth pattern of social life in the country, as led by a leisured English middle class in the beginning of the nineteenth century…Austen's gaze penetrates, however, through the externals of the social customs and behaviour she knew so well, to the bases of human conduct.

Austen was critical of much that motivated behaviour, and especially an iniquitous social order that denied opportunities to so many of its members. In describing the psychology and emotional responses of her characters, she establishes the importance of subjectivity and individualism, helping to re-define power, based on relationships between men and women as moral and intellectual equals. Not surprisingly, epistemological and hermeneutic questions provide central problems for her heroines, and her readers. Reflecting the turbulent era spanned by Austen's life, her novels explore issues raised by the transition from classical certainty of ‘man’ as the measure of all things, to the romantic age where individual differences

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5 Nancy Armstrong develops this in Desire and Domestic Fiction. It is also treated by Allison Sulloway, Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood, and Claudia Johnson, Jane Austen Women Politics and the Novel.
and subjectivity laid the foundations for relativism that have dominated thought ever since.

Language's influence on perception bears upon the determination of ethical principles. '[We] can no longer speak of reality and realism without considering how the world is altered and created when it is put into words.' As the meanings and usages of words evolve, understanding the reality they seek to describe must also undergo subtle transformations. Because words acquire different shades of meaning as they are used and interpreted by different people, Austen's characters evaluate and discuss each other's remarks and letters in order to discover facts and values. The climaxes of self-discovery in each of the novels examined here focus on the significance of written text in creating reality, and on characters' ability to decipher meaning in all forms of communication. While post-structural theories suggest that truth itself is only relative, and the very process of communication loaded with uncertainties, Austen identifies areas of conduct that she feels deserve to be regarded as principles worthy of emulation. Austen's texts need to be read with an historical awareness of her belief in certainties and solidities of meaning, regardless of what post-structuralist theory suggests about indeterminacy. There appear to be absolute ethical truths which Austen's texts confirm. Her novels highlight the need for compassion and understanding, and especially honesty in human relations. If, indeed, reality is hard to define, precision with language and direct, genuine interactions are necessary for healthy, intimate associations. When characters learn how to deal with each other honestly and sensitively, they are rewarded. Readers are kept in little doubt as to the outcome of the tales since the comic, compassionate narrative voice treats characters and readers with the same honest, sympathetic humour.

This paper will examine how Austen uses narrative technique to engage readers with her texts and the ethical issues they raise. Since the focus of this examination is on reader response, the discussion will avoid reference to historical background, and critical theory not immediately relevant. While current objections to the concept of universalising experience are recognised, it is still possible and instructive to examine how Austen invites readers from diverse backgrounds to enter the fictional worlds she creates. Moreover, her presentation of her ethical principles argues convincingly for their value because her novels promote conduct that she felt would enrich human experience. She lived in a world where there were basic beliefs, and her commitment to them is conveyed to readers through her subtle and entertaining manipulation of language.

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ii. Making belief

A number of techniques are employed to help readers in applying the lessons of Austen's texts to real situations. Realism, for example, is achieved through careful handling of time as it is manifest in narrative fiction. The ‘duration’ of the action is confined to periods between six months and a year, which David Lodge suggests ‘…is about the shortest time in which to portray the development of a meaningful relationship…’ The tempo or pacing captures the feeling of real life, especially since many scenes are conveyed in conversational episodes which closely approximate real time. Characters exchange ideas in their own voices, using their own, individualised language. Generally, events are presented only once, either through direct narration or as the characters experience them. Reflecting real life, repeated events may be compared mentally by characters, as the narrative allows insight into a character's memory. Readers also may recall and re-assess previous scenes with heightened understanding. The ordering of textual experience is almost entirely free of flashback and likewise very rarely reveals characters or narrator speculating about the future. By focussing reader attention on the text's present, readers are compelled to become intimately involved in the scenes and with the characters which encourages a sympathetic and compassionate response, even when the behaviour of the characters reveals questionable or wicked motivation. Because Austen's handling of character remains accurate and true to life, villainy may be better understood although it is always censured.

Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values. It is against the disc of an unerring heart, an unfailing good taste, an almost stern morality, that she shows up those deviations from kindness, truth, and sincerity which are among the most delightful things in English literature.

The novels clearly indicate ethical behaviour that protects and promotes emotional well-being and dignity. Careful handling of narrative provides readers with information and moral guidance to ensure that correct values are identified and applauded. Reader response is guided by narrative comment; stylistic techniques in the prose, and treatment of the characters within their plots.

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The creation of convincing and believable characters, behaving in probable ways as they face circumstances that would be familiar to real people, allows Austen's fiction to speak with authority. While Austen's texts are specifically directed toward a readership sharing her class, race, and cultural experience, realism created in the fictional construct provides an easily applicable model from which a wide range of readers can be educated. Her success in producing a range of fictional identities that seem more real than many human beings is confirmed by a character in Kipling's story ‘The Janeites’ who comments ‘… ‘er characters was no use! They was just like people you run across any day…’\[^9\]This kind of reader response reflects Austen's successful delineation of character. In presenting personalities and behaviour that conform to realistic expectations, Austen enhances the credibility of her texts as useful representations of problems shared with readers. Sympathetic involvement instructs readers about understanding behaviour and the values it reveals, thus facilitating the educational possibilities of transferring textual experience to reality.

The care with which Austen develops her characters displays the compassion she hopes to demonstrate to readers. Villains are exposed before serious harm can befall the heroes and heroines, or their most nefarious acts are committed elsewhere. Once the dangers are discovered or averted, those responsible are ushered off stage, not only to keep them from committing further infamy within the immediate text, but to prevent readers' dwelling on their misconduct. Austen is not vengeful, nor does her handling of her characters indicate that she felt anything but genuine regard for them. It is doubtful that a finer discriminator of fools has ever put pen to paper. Mr Collins, Mrs Elton, Mrs Bennet, Mrs Allan and Harriet Smith are

...all in a certain sense, common-place, all such as we meet every day. Yet they are all as perfectly discriminated from each other as if they were the most eccentric of human beings.\[^10\]

The sublime and the ridiculous receive amused and sensitive treatment from their creator, who strongly censures unbecoming conduct, but adjusts textual destinies to protect limited characters. If Austen's moral lessons centre around the need for compassion, sympathy and generosity in dealing with others, her characters benefit from authorial magnanimity. Readers, too, experience the kindness of an author who

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reserves the dignity of her creations, regardless of their moral failings. Truth may be
slippery, and the words used to define it may not allow absolute certainty. But care
for the feelings of others, and determination to live up to one's personal values
remain fundamental goals for achieving moral integrity. Austen's sympathetic
treatment of her characters demonstrates her own values which extend compassion
to textual creations, serving as an example to readers in their dealings with real
people.

iii. Austen's didactic purpose

The narrative voice creates a compelling influence over a reader's relationship
to text, which Austen sensitively exploits to shape reader response. But involving
readers with the novels is only one element of her strategy. By producing
entertaining and artistically satisfying works of fiction, Austen also hopes to succeed
in stimulating her readers to think about the issues raised in the novels. The narrative
voice she creates demonstrates a number of characteristics designed to achieve this.
While rarely speaking in first person, it colours material with irony and amusement,
enhancing reader involvement by sharing its heightened wisdom and perception. The
narrator remains largely invisible, and so becomes a ‘sub-conscious’ voice. Since
humour and irony suggest interpretations that extend the potential meanings of an
event, readers who are aware of the ironic possibilities revealed by the narrative tone
will find expanding dimensions and complexities as they analyse the text. Besides
the epistemological and hermeneutic issues raised in the novels, such complications
of textual interpretation provide opportunities to practice the very flexibility required
for successful problem-solving in life.

In addition, the use of a ‘sub-conscious’ narrative voice may indicate an even
more ambitious and daring project. Since the narrative establishes an intimate
relationship with readers by the nature of its focus on the internal worlds of the
characters, the voice itself contributes to this intimacy because it shares similarities
with readers' internal monologues. Knowing what others think is rare, and often
difficult to articulate. Austen's texts articulate and share, creating an intimacy that
compliments reader competence11. Because Austen's outlook is comical and
compassionate12, readers are encouraged to adopt a similar attitude. By adding the

11 Austen's often quoted couplet 'I do not write for such dull elves/As have not a great deal of ingenuity
themselves…' from her letter of 29 January 1813 states the case, confirmed by artistic standards she observed
12 In ‘Regulated Hatred’ Harding argues that life for an isolated genius requires self-control. The novels may be
Austen's strategy for coping. But the tone and the humorous sympathy with which the plots unfold, and the
treatment of characters provide strong indication of Austen's positive attitude. Surely the underlying themes
narrative voice to the chorus of voices that readers carry with them, treating others sympathetically becomes another behavioural option. Indeed, after reading Austen, life's ironies and her own unique delight in human nature, for all its absurdity, seems to temper attitudes so that readers become more conscious of the real world's delight and pathos. Providing readers with text that centralises heroes and heroines whose moral growth allows them to achieve greater understanding and care, and by presenting their tales from the perspective of a caring and understanding narrator, the didactic nature of Austen's novels gains dual impact. Yet, the narrative instruction rarely draws attention to itself, permitting thoughts to become part of the reader's repertory of responses because through their engagement with the texts readers are trained to respond. It would seem that without conduct books' obvious pedantry, Austen achieves a more profound and valuable realignment of reader values since the values are not expressed as directives, but are encoded into the structure of the narrative.

iv. Narrative voice

When Austen's heroines and heroes finally consummate their courtships after navigating the obstacles presented to them, readers have been witnesses to the process of successful communication which relies on honesty, compassion, and especially a grasp of language allowing characters to express themselves well enough to be understood, and to understand. Language permits exchange of ideas, and definition of the self, facilitating the intimacy of emotional and intellectual sharing that enriches experience. Since people interact most often through language, physical closeness may or may not indicate a meeting of minds, and perhaps for this reason is largely excluded from Austen's novels. Command of language becomes the ultimate tool for building social cohesion and the empowering weapon to fight ignorance. Conversation and letters provide insights into character. People become acquainted through verbal interaction, exchange ideas through discussion and through reading. Appropriately, a novelist privileges the written word. As will be seen, text and textual interpretations of characters and by characters in the novels, hinge on their skills as readers and critics of text. Readers, too, are confronted by the same interpretive problems because they experience the text as yet another linguistic puzzle. In addition, Austen presents her fiction in a

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13 James Thompson Between Self and World The Novels of Jane Austen, (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State UP, c.1988), ‘With all its variants, intimacy is used eighty-four times in Jane Austen's fiction.’ Thompson goes on to discuss Austen's portrayal of various forms of intimacy, along with its perils and rewards. (pp. 162-7).
prose style combining graceful clarity with the expressive flexibility of poetry. Her skill in using language is perhaps the single most seductive quality of her fiction. Individualised speech patterns allow characters to express ideas in unique voices. Lodge quotes Bakhtin in asserting

For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words, among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed. He works with a very rich verbal palette.

Austen's dexterous handling of her characters' idiolects, while maintaining the narrative voice, paints clearly a richly coloured world on her 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory…' States of mind also find appropriate registers of language, and some characters find silences when their emotions are beyond verbal expression. Narrative passages also acquire linguistic patterns similar those of characters involved in the scenes. Letters become monologues. Discussion of a letter's contents reveals the minds of those who respond. Such awareness of the importance of language in defining reality suggests that Austen may well have believed that ‘…all human experience [is] contained in some form or another of existing linguistic structure.' The matching of like-minded characters is graphically revealed by J. F. Burrows, whose computer analysis quantifies Austen's accuracy with language in creating personalities.

Michael Toolan refutes Ann Banfield's suggestion that third-person narration becomes 'unspeakable' because the narrator is not an identifiable speaker nor is the reader an identifiable addressee since a genuine I and you are absent. Austen's narrative techniques suggest her deliberate structuring of a voice which helps to establish reader intimacy with the text. Since she rarely uses first person intrusions, and allows first-person episodes only when characters' letters are presented in full, the tendency to identify a narrator of the main story is reduced. However, it is possible to recognise a narrative voice deliberately constructed to address the reader.

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14 Lodge After Bakhtin, p. 7.
15 Letters, p. 469.
17 For example, he notes a ‘…suitably close resemblance between the idiolects of… [Darcy and Elizabeth],… whose disputes are conducted on even terms and whose eventual rapprochement is entirely credible.’ J. F. Burrows, Computation into Criticism, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) p. 83.
and engage reader involvement in the text. Because Austen's plots focus on small groups of people interacting, the narrative emphasises characters' verbal exchanges, compelling readers to feel that they are included in the scenes. Small scale encourages an intimate relationship between readers and textual events, particularly when small groups of people allow individuals to participate. Non-contributors make their silences felt, and the dynamics of personalities can be developed. Since Austen's focus is the individual personality in interaction with others, her scenes invite readers to become on-lookers, positioned intimately by the narrative that reveals thoughts and feelings unavailable in real life.

Austen's fictional characters are among some of the most convincing in all literature, and part of their appeal confirms their creator's understanding of personality and its manifestation through behaviour. Few writers have so accurately created individualised language for their fictional creations. Not only are the character voices individualised, but the use of free indirect speech encodes character thoughts into the narrative, manipulating point of view and imperceptibly changing reader perspective to share a character's interpretation of events. The subjective nature of perception and its encoding in language is revealed in the increasing subtlety with which narrative technique manipulates reader response. While Austen's early novels exploit a narrative voice that allows ironic distancing from textual events in order to inform readers with insights unavailable to characters, the late novels increasingly depend upon a narrative that is subsumed into the prose style. Occasional narratorial intrusions in first person occur almost like joking reminders that the narrator is part of the text. The narrative frequently moves into the consciousness and even subconsciousness of characters until, in *Persuasion*, conversations are reported with dismissive narratorial remarks while the heroine's emotional world is conveyed through sensitively selected detail and in prose that captures her volatile mental states. Striving to extend reader awareness beyond presentation of intimate exchanges between characters, the novels reveal the characters' dynamic internal worlds, which are often in conflict with their perceived responses.

Establishing substantial and intimate relationships requires characters to identify companions who share similar ethical principles. Learning how to interpret behaviour, and to perceive with accuracy and intelligence becomes the main educational experience of each heroine and hero. Their journeys toward wisdom are further enhanced by the emphasis placed on language as a tool for creating understanding. Many critics have observed that Austen's characters often reveal
their moral stature by the manner in which they use language. Precision with words confers authority and reflects a character's capacity to manipulate ideas. But other forms of communication are also examined. Austen's early works tend to focus attention on literary genres as well as forms of speech, while the later novels incorporate non-verbal signals and an astute consciousness of other systems used to convey messages. It appears that Austen's awareness of communication's complexities intensified as she matured. Her later novels tend to become crowded with voices that disrupt exchanges, interfere with communication, or prevent wisdom from being heard. The ironic in-jokes shared between reader and narrator in *Northanger Abbey*, the witty repartee that characterises *Pride and Prejudice*; and Emma's self-assurance delicately backlit by narrative innuendo are all but absent in *Persuasion* where irony has become biting satire and fools exchange banalities with all the aplomb of salon intellectuals. Indeed, to be heard means to be read, and it is finally not words at all that convey the most important messages. Although some critics have attacked Austen for closing her novels just as the lovers are united, and without revealing an intimate scene, true intimacy, arguably, is betrayed by any attempt to express it in words. The great irony for this great ironist seems to be that while character can best be determined through conversation and other verbal exchanges, over time, the feelings engaged by such exchanges elude effective rendering. Feelings, finally, mean more than words because they transcend linguistic expression.

\[v. \text{ A brief view of four novels}\]

Although Jane Austen's present stature in the literary canon attests to the enduring qualities of her artistic achievement, there are readers who find her works, and the attitudes attributed to her, unappealing. Austen's own fascination with differing interpretations and responses to her novels is indicated by her record of remarks made about them. For readers who remain critical and unsympathetic, Katherine Mansfield's reply seems appropriate:

Can we picture Jane Austen caring—except in a delightfully wicked way—...that people said she was no lady, was not fond of children, hated animals, did not care a pin for the poor,

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19 Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), ‘It is hard to think of another major novelist whose diction provides, to a comparable extent, a key to the qualities held to be desirable and, ultimately, to the moral attitudes behind the novels.’ (p.55) Mary Lascelles *Jane Austen and Her Art*, (London: Oxford UP, first published Clarendon Press 1939 reprint 1974) provides a wealth of evidence to support the contention that characters reflect themselves in their linguistic style. See the chapter 'Style' pp. 87-116.

could not have written about foreign parts if she had tried, had no idea how a fox was killed...—was, in
short, cold, coarse, practically illiterate and without morality? Mightn't her reply have been, 'Ah, but
what about my novels?'

The novels selected for this study reflect Austen's mature work, and have been chosen because they shed light on her development of narrative technique. A version of *Northanger Abbey* was completed in 1798; sold to a publisher in 1803 as *Susan*, and later revised, to be published after the author's death. Austen began *Pride and Prejudice* when she was twenty-one. She polished and edited it from 1796 until its publication in 1813. *Emma*, completed in just over a year, is an example of Austen at the peak of her creative powers. *Persuasion* is her last completed novel.

The novels will be discussed in chronological order of composition, to demonstrate how narrative voice assumes an increasingly powerful role in engaging reader sympathy, and in positioning readers to share the moral problems confronting the heroines.

Austen's early novel, *Northanger Abbey*, examines naive Catherine Morland's difficulties in meeting real life's challenges when armed only with the hackneyed conventions of Gothic fiction. Catherine's inexperience is conveyed through her unsophisticated language use: she asks what she wants to be told; she expects to be told the truth; she expects the truth to be simple and unambiguous. Catherine spends much of her time falling into the traps set by imprecise communication, especially since so many of her associates abuse language by mindless nonsense, or through deliberate deceit. Henry and Eleanor Tilney provide good guidance for Catherine because their moral integrity and precise language use instruct Catherine and readers. A frequent discussion topic for them is language itself. Skilled communicators can and do employ irony, humour and exaggeration to enhance their messages, which sometimes baffles Catherine. Fortunately the narrator of Catherine's story makes the story-telling role obvious. By exposing the machinery of novel fiction, readers are shown how structures and conventions limit and restrict imagination. Indeed, by exposing Gothic and fictional conventions, Austen suggests that all language depends upon agreed, prescribed usage. Learning to understand accepted usages, and extending comprehension to allow for poetry and art becomes an educational project for the heroine. Irony, humour and poetry may be regarded as games with the process of communication, but deception is clearly unethical.

Pride and Prejudice's perceptive and witty heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, requires little assistance in determining what is real. An enthusiastic student of character, she thinks herself infallible in assessing personality. By setting herself up as an expert analyst, she spends a good deal of time being shocked: her best friend, Charlotte Lucas accepts Mr Collins in marriage; Mr Bingley leaves her sister Jane without a word of farewell; Darcy is in love with her when she frequently behaves impertinently toward him; George Wickham wins her affection even though he is a dangerous rogue. Elizabeth's tale of misguided intelligence remains amusing because the absurdities of the plot are matched by the absurdities of the narrative presentation. The language and playful use of balanced sentence structure allow readers the pleasure of tipping the scales of sense and nonsense so that syntax becomes a tool for humour, permitting ridiculous deductions to be derived from otherwise rational circumstances. Elizabeth is a skilful communicator, and her delight in 'whims and inconsistencies' is shared with the narrator who tells a tale sparkling with ironic absurdities.

Eventually discovering the errors of her judgement and her dangerously inflexible attitudes, Elizabeth must re-evaluate evidence in the light of new testimony from Darcy which substantially alters Elizabeth's and readers' interpretation of events. Elizabeth is capable of getting at the truth once it is available. She errs because, by suspending her critical judgement, she has allowed herself to be misled; and her entrenched hostility toward Darcy prevents her from recognising his genuine feeling for her. When his actions demonstrate his real concern, Elizabeth is prepared to admit her mistakes and the greater difficulties of finding truth. She learns that her confidence in interpreting reality, particularly of another's character, must be tempered by reserve and sympathy since language forms the greatest part of human interaction, and so much of what is said, reported, written and observed can be misunderstood, overlooked, undervalued, or changed over time. Elizabeth also discovers that wit and humour, complicated by irony, contribute not only to amusement but sometimes to confusion. The narrative aligns readers with Elizabeth so they can appreciate her judgements, perhaps to the extent that readers will share her surprise when she discovers her mistakes.

Emma, is more perilously entrapped because she actively invents truths in the belief that she knows what is good for others, and that hers are the only games. Emma's treacherous undertaking is further complicated because the narrative in which she exists has polished its machinery to a smooth surface. The narrator is
largely invisible and Emma herself becomes the propelling consciousness for the plot. She is unaware that she is a victim not only of the text, but the plots of others, including her creation, Harriet Smith. The novel, *Emma*, examines how characters socialise; how they analyse each other as they use and abuse language, and how their realities are structured by their linguistic tools. Frank Churchill's anything but ‘frank’ behaviour, Jane Fairfax's reserve; Miss Bates's loquacity; Mrs Elton's pretentious posturings; and the tedious banalities of Mr Woodhouse, Isabella and Mr Weston develop a picture of a world filled with conversation, narratives and social power determined in part by linguistic skills. Only after Emma insults Miss Bates about her language use does Emma begin to understand that people's feelings must be protected; that a character's worth is determined by their honesty and ability to preserve genuine and intimate human contacts. Emma is clever and excels in solving games, charades and other puzzles. But such abilities fail to help her understand the mysterious motives of her companions. Deceptions of any kind prevent understanding. Emma realises that clever tongues can play linguistic games, but finally genuine feeling is of greater value, and must be expressed in actions.

In the last novel, *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot speaks little although she is intensely aware of communication processes. Group dynamics permit numerous superficial contacts; conversation being only one of many interactive systems. *Persuasion* asks fundamental questions about the kinds of values that people adopt. Since the plot revolves around the Elliot family's desire to maintain appearances and a lifestyle which their selfishness destroyed, things matter because money talks. The tedium of materialistic pursuits is conveyed to readers by a narrative that allows the selfish egotists many opportunities to expose their moral and intellectual penury. While the wise and eloquent heroine observes activities, along with readers, the narrative reveals her sensitive emotional reactions. Many passages unfold in stream of consciousness, drawing readers directly into the heroine's mind. Anne must turn to literature and poetry for comfort, guiding readers to value ideas and fine expression of them. This novel presents a study of communication forms: from the *Baronetage* that readers and Sir Walter read simultaneously in the opening, to translated Italian on a concert program. Letters are presented as crucial evidence; as ‘passports’ for social climbers, and as expressions of genuine feeling. The narrative describes body language, tones of voice, movements of groups and characters as they facilitate and interfere with communication, creating a text that reads like a catalogue of signalling systems. And yet, so much of what is being conveyed is without substance; without feeling. Isolated and external to the action is ‘only Anne’ with whom readers are positioned to observe, interpret and if not judge, at least determine that much of the
concerns are petty and selfish. Eventually Anne's qualities are rewarded when she is reunited with Captain Wentworth. This novel, as well as the others, achieves closure when the hero and heroine understand each other and place value on their ability honestly to communicate their feelings; to esteem the sound ethical principles that underlie their conduct.

v. Conclusions

In the course of the novels, other relationships are explored: siblings, friendships, and the influence exerted by members of extended families. Readers share the intimate interactions of characters through the narrative focus on their styles of communication, gradually shifting from the verbal games of spoken exchanges to the actions that speak of emotional states which words seem incapable of conveying. Indeed, the intimacy of intellectual and emotional understanding defies expression in language. By providing models of these kinds of relationships, and by revealing the process of discovering genuine feeling, Austen's novels offer readers practical experience in analysing and understanding character. Furthermore, the novels describe ranges of personalities and value systems, presenting to readers role models at all points of the behavioural and ethical spectrum. That the highest rewards accrue to characters who demonstrate care, honesty and integrity affirms Austen's belief in these ethical principles, and readers are taught to appreciate their value. Her texts present the potentials inherent in a less than perfect world, partly as an escape, but mainly as a goal toward which real people may strive. Mary Poovey defends Austen's effective creation of fictional worlds where love can triumph and where characters learn how to recognise partners whose moral qualities will serve to build lasting, mutually supportive relationships because wish-fulfilment fiction loses none of its social relevance or political clout. Furthermore, Poovey argues that fictional solutions to social problems present ideals that can become realities only if people recognise them as possibilities first.

It is noteworthy that Austen's romantic closures are, nonetheless, ambiguous suggesting that even happy conclusions resolve only some textual problems. The narrative voice adroitly side-steps authority by offering a whispered raspberry to readers who think all's well that ends well. Such persistent narrative

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23 Poovey writes ‘… it is precisely the gap between imaginative desire and social reality—a gap that still exists—that makes the escape into romance attractive to all readers...’ The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), p. 206. See also Susan Morgan Sisters in Time, (New York and Oxford: UP, 1989.)

irony implies that even within the structured expectations of comic romantic fiction, nothing can be certain and indeed, certainty itself jeopardises the pleasure of the narrative role. If Austen's texts teach anything, they teach the dangers of dogmatism. Remaining open to possibilities becomes the greatest romantic adventure.

*Northanger Abbey* provides a good introduction to the epistemological and linguistic territory Jane Austen explores in all of her texts. Besides the uncertainties and excitement that provide stimuli for travellers in uncharted experience, this novel promises to augment reader suspense and delight with its Gothic potentials. Readers may well anticipate a nightmare saga of terrors and tribulations since the narrator immediately establishes a comparison between the heroine of this tale and heroines of other horror stories. What readers discover becomes, in fact, much more fascinating.

§§§§§
CHAPTER TWO

Northanger Abbey: Narrator and Reader Share a Gothic Adventure

i. Pinning the tale on the teller

A good place to begin examining the narrator/reader relationship is in Jane Austen's early novel, Northanger Abbey, which was begun in 1797-8; completed in 1803 although not published until 1818.\footnote{Harold Bloom, ed., Modern Critical Views Jane Austen, 'Chronology' (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 218-219. See also the article by A. Walton Litz 'Chronology of Composition,'Jane Austen Handbook' ed. J. David Grey, (London: The Althone Press, 1986) pp. 47-50. Litz presents a concise, convincing discussion of Austen's literary career and a logical account of Northanger Abbey's creation and subsequent publication.} The delay between completion and publication adds to some of the controversy concerning the compositional order of Austen’s novels. More importantly, Austen’s own perceptions and attitudes towards her career as a novelist experienced major changes as her command of the genre matured. The direction of her development may be gauged by comparing how narrative technique is evolved and refined over time. Despite some of the narrative difficulties exposed in this relatively early work, Northanger Abbey loses none of its appeal and offers interesting insights into Austen's handling of narrative voice to create a compliant relationship between the reader and the text. Language and its impact on perception becomes a subject, joining readers to characters as both explore the mysteries of interpreting communication. Characters and narrator devote much attention to analysis of writing and speech found in novels, histories, letters, journals and the daily conversational exchanges that comprise so much of social intercourse. The complexities and mysteries inherent in decoding language, and the more challenging task of understanding motivation and personality, overshadow the Gothic terrors Austen's novel ostensibly presents.
Critics disagree about the exact identity of the narrative voice in *Northanger Abbey*, some claiming that first-person comments represent Jane Austen speaking in her own voice, while others believe the comments represent the author ironically playing with reader credulity. Still others consider Henry Tilney to be Jane Austen's spokesperson, citing his wit and imagination as indications of qualities valued by his creator. Such uncertainty raises a fundamental question: whose story are readers reading? It will be suggested here that all of Austen's novels benefit from readings which recognise a narrative voice distinct from the author. An invented narrator would protect the integrity of the narrative separate from the author and increase the number of potential interpretations supported by the text by capitalising on ironic perspective, regardless of who is seen to be the subject or object of irony. Austen's narrative techniques suggest her deliberate structuring of a character voice which helps to establish reader intimacy with the text. Since the narrative is almost never neutral, irony, humour, sarcasm, amused sympathy and other tones of voice influence reader response. Such colouring of the narration strongly suggests a personality and perspective from which narration is being conveyed. Austen's skill in handling the narrative voice developed throughout her career, enabling her prose style and linguistic sensitivity to enhance intimacy between readers and text. Progressively narrative manipulation withdraws further into the textual background. In *Northanger Abbey*, however, the narrator maintains a high profile throughout the novel, controlling reader response by playfully altering distance from textual events. Thus, readers become aware of how their perspective is controlled to change their understanding and interpretation.

ii. Heroines are made, not born

In most editions, the first words that a reader of *Northanger Abbey* encounters are contained in a paragraph titled ‘Advertisement, by the Authoress…’ While there was a practical reason for this explanation in view of the novel's late publication relative to its submission, there remains an additional significance in the ‘authoress’ appending this remark to the reader. Eighteenth century novelists often addressed their readers directly as a convention to establish the fictional basis for their works. If novels required another half century to find acceptance as a legitimate literary genre, the author's need to avoid prosecution for slander suggested a greater incentive to distance fictional identities from the ‘real’ world. From Horace

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26 All page references refer to *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, R. W. Chapman (ed).

Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* which opened with first one, and in subsequent editions, two introductions guaranteeing creation of a mysterious distance and even more intriguing relationship between the tale and the reader, this Gothic convention became a popular device for fiction writers. An author could introduce the novel and him/herself to readers, or at least assume a persona for the task of telling the tale. It is in keeping with Austen's parodic purpose to begin the novel with an authorial comment to the reader. Her abiding interest in determining what is real and what is imaginary may also be reflected in her ‘advertisement’ when Austen observes that in thirteen years ‘places, manners, books, and opinions have undergone considerable changes’.(10) Reality alters even as it is described, a theme closely examined in *Northanger Abbey* as well as Austen's other works. The ‘Advertisement’ was written by a mature, polished novelist who could see how time had altered society, readers, language and her own attitudes. She recognised that the adventure of fiction included stories and characters who enjoy an immortality denied their living readers because while textual events remain frozen, interpretations reflect the dynamic processes of thought that evolve over time.

In Chapter I, entirely devoted to narrative exposition, the reader learns Catherine Morland's unsuitable case history for a young lady destined to be a heroine. The narrator mentions that much was ‘against her’, including

> Her father was a clergyman, without being neglected, or poor, and a very respectable man, though his name was Richard—and he had never been handsome. (13)

The irony occurs here on several levels. First, Catherine's apparently caring and supportive parents are contrasted to the abusive or negligent families in which Gothic heroines often find themselves. If readers anticipate a conventional Gothic tale, they might prepare themselves for a disappointment at worst, or, at best, a potentially disastrous impediment to the story's progress. Second, the narrator confirms the humorous tone already suggested with her inclusion of Mr Morland's failings as a Gothic father listed in a string of ‘negative’ attributes of which his most damning characteristic seems to be his name. This detail should warn readers that the

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28 Throughout this paper, I will assign feminine pronouns to the narrative voice, fully cognisant of the assumptions inherent in linking the narrator with the historical author. First, it is likely that Jane Austen, an understated but none the less consistent spokesperson for feminist views in her own age, would have taken exception to the use of masculine pronouns commonly applied to her work by critics living before the current de-sexing of English. Second, since Jane Austen's focus in all of her novels is on the heroine's struggle to achieve self-realisation, and since much of the text is devoted to analysis and presentation of her thoughts and feelings, it seems much more in keeping with the subject of the narrative to use the feminine pronoun. Third, Jane Austen was herself a woman. It seems unlikely that she would assume or create a masculine identity to tell her stories. As Anne Elliott argues at the conclusion of *Persuasion*, ‘Men have had every advantage of us telling their own story...the pen has always been in their hands.’(P234). Finally, Austen's narrator's create an intimacy with readers deserving more personal reference than 'it'.

storyteller has some prejudices about insignificant matters; a sense of humour; or both. From the start, the narrator expects readers to be informed about Gothic novels, and able to follow allusions to other forms of text. Thus narrator and readers share a detached perspective empowering them to understand Catherine's fictional world better than she does because readers and narrator perceive Catherine in the context of her role as attempted Gothic heroine. Catherine's mother is a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and what is more remarkable, with a good constitution...[because] instead of dying in bringing [Catherine] into the world, as anybody might expect, she still lived on—lived to have six children more...A family of ten children will be always called a fine family where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number...(13)

Again, a reader who is comparing the Gothic potential of *Northanger Abbey* to similar novels, in particular Anne Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*, would be struck by Catherine's questionable 'misfortune'. Since a Gothic tale is intended to create emotional intensity by exploring realms of terror, so much humour threatens to undermine the entire fiction.

Andrew Wright suggests that this narrative description of Mrs Morland indicates

a double pretence here...that the author is another in the long line of sentimental novelists, and the calculated illusion that the audience will be composed of readers of this genre

Austen’s heroine enjoys emotional support from her family who are portrayed as sensible and responsible. Family friends who extend their Bath invitation wish to promote Catherine’s welfare and happiness. Such kindly treatment of the heroine enhances the very non-Gothic nature of her text. Humour creates this delightful intimacy between readers and narrator. Since Gothic conventions are absurdly improbable, and become tediously predictable, the narrator's winking assurances that this tale will fulfil reader expectations supplies an even more intriguing mystery: How will expectations be met when the machinery of narrative is constantly dismantled? Austen's narrator demonstrates that fiction's linguistic basis is more compelling and fraught with uncertainties than the Gothic terrors of conventional

29 Andrew H. Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels A Study in Structure*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1964), p. 39. He postulates two distinct narrators to tell the story; their creator leaving readers the task of deciding which narrator is speaking. (p. 40).
horror stories. By creating an awareness of the narrative process, readers are encouraged to enjoy their superior position as well as a sympathetic concern for the characters whose destinies within the text already have been determined. Distortions of time through analeptic compressions and proleptic speculations remind readers that they are dealing with invented fantasy, conveyed by a playful companion. Besides readers remaining conscious of the fiction-making process, the narrator’s sympathy for Catherine’s feelings enhances reader involvement with the heroine. The Morlands are plain in appearance. Catherine was ‘…as plain as any…’ Her mental abilities are also dismissed since she finds little pleasure in the accomplishments considered essential to heroines. Catherine's personal and physical shortcomings throw into high relief the wonderful superiority of heroines like Emily St Aubert from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, who besides being beautiful, kind and self-effacing, plays music, writes poetry, paints, and draws. If Catherine begins to pale as material for a heroine, she shines as a mirror of ordinary readers.30

Paragraph two moves Catherine's case history forward to her ‘mending’ appearance at fifteen. Her attitude toward books is described thus:

…provided that nothing like useful knowledge could be gained from them, provided they were all story and no reflection, she had never any objection to books at all.( 15)

This remark takes on greater significance later when discussion of novels becomes an important insight into the characters' values. Ironically, Catherine, a character in a book, seeks only story without theme, while Catherine's quest is essentially a discovery of theme. Moreover, Catherine's education centres on her confusion about language, which is demonstrated in her expectation that the world of fiction bears an exact relation to the real world, and that people say what they mean. Communication can occur on several levels at once: a lesson Catherine must learn through experience. Readers share her trials because the narrative allows readers to follow Catherine's progress ‘…in training for heroine…’ (15). Besides developing a sympathy for her as she confronts the textual challenges of the plot, readers must also evaluate the ethical issues with which experience confronts her.

30 Wallace Martin writes, ‘Fictionality and access to the consciousness of characters are the primary conventions on which realistic narrative is founded…By calling attention to devices used in other narratives and exposing their artificiality, the writer clears a space in which departures from convention will be taken as signs of authenticity.’ *Recent Theories of Narrative*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1986), p. 71.
From fifteen to seventeen, Catherine ‘…read all such works as heroines must read…’ (15). Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare are quoted to indicate that literature can supply fictional heroines as well as readers with values and ideas to sustain them. Readers are told that ‘In many other points she came on exceedingly well…’ but failed in one crucial particular: Catherine lacked a lover because no families in the neighbourhood contained eligible young men.

But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way. (17)

Catherine will not only have to overcome the failings of her inconsiderate neighbourhood, she must pursue her struggle to become a heroine despite a narrator who tells the story while debunking the story-telling role. The narrative process is foregrounded because the narrator constantly reminds readers of the fictional machinery that manipulates characters and tale. This humorous tone and gently teasing attitude encourages readers to laugh at themselves as they try to take seriously the business of reading a tale ostensibly meant to alarm them. Such ironic treatment of the genre encourages readers to assess not only the probability of fictional events, but also the ways reality is constructed through its presentation in literature. As Catherine and readers must learn, Gothic fiction ‘…insists on a doubleness…which is…menacing and ambiguous…’ thus providing an accurate reflection of problems facing people in the real world.

This self-conscious narrator continues to tell her story, juxtaposing extraordinary expectations of Gothic romance with the mundane circumstances of real life. For example, while journeying to Bath, Mrs Allen thinks she has lost her clogs, but is mistaken.

It is now expedient to give some description of Mrs. Allen, that the reader may be able to judge, in what manner her actions will hereafter tend to promote the general distress of the work, and how she will, probably, contribute to reduce poor Catherine to all the desperate wretchedness of which a last volume is capable… (19-20).

Here by directly addressing readers, the narrator anticipates reader response and even suggests the future of her tale, specifically describing the likely contents of the last volume; thereby drawing attention to plot structure of a Gothic novel. If the reader wanted to lose himself or herself in the fictional world, the narrator prevents

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such escapism. Readers are prodded into consciousness by their vigilant companion who keeps them awake by whispering, ‘Are you asleep yet?’ Austen structures the experience and refuses to allow this fiction its independence. By deliberately alerting readers to the games novelists play with language, she directs readers to appreciate the potential danger of playing games with belief. *Northanger Abbey* examines the power of language and the abuses of such power when fiction-makers create irresponsibly.

Chapter II opens with a narrative reference to ‘our heroine’ which is the first of many sprinkled through the text to join narrator to readers in their shared concern for Catherine. Henry Tilney's first comments make conversation the topic of conversation, thus presenting himself to Catherine and readers as an interesting, amusing, and original thinker. He refuses to role-play unless he expresses recognition that he is doing it, similar to the narrator's self-conscious role-playing. Readers have already been subtly prepared for his entrance because they have met with no characters who conform to expectations. It is significant that Henry tells Catherine

> ‘I am authorised to tease you on this subject whenever we meet, and nothing in the world advances intimacy so much.’ (29)

Here, Henry is consciously exposing the rituals of courtship. Besides, the advancement of intimacy is a main subject in all of Austen's novels, and *Northanger Abbey* examines the matter with the same intense scrutiny it receives elsewhere. Since shared confidences allow the playful teasing Henry describes, the narrator's playful teasing creates a similar intimacy with readers. Just as the narrator has drawn readers into the process of creating the narrative by revealing fictional conventions as they are employed or discarded, Henry confronts Catherine with the games of social interaction. Readers and heroine are educated to understand the methods of manipulation employed to shape their reactions. Catherine and James Morland’s intimacy with the Thorpes and Tilneys is compared and contrasted throughout the text. A revealing demonstration of how genuine feelings derive from honest, compassionate communication emerges in Catherine's developing relationship with Henry and Eleanor. Catherine's appeal originates from her artless honesty; Henry's from his clever originality and perception. To guarantee that readers align their sympathies correctly, the Thorpe case history is briefly narrated at the close of Chapter IV, followed by a delightful abnegation of narrative responsibility.
This brief account of the family is intended to supersede the necessity of a long and minute
detail from Mrs. Thorpe herself, of her past adventures and sufferings, which might otherwise
be expected to occupy the three or four following chapters; in which the worthlessness of lords
and attorneys might be set forth, and conversations, which had passed twenty years before, be
minutely repeated. (49).

Since the narrator can tease readers into recognising that their expectations will be
disappointed, and that the disappointment will be a mutual relief, readers must feel
gratitude and perhaps amusement when the narrator can so accurately articulate the
absurdities of Gothic and novelistic convention. It is appropriate, therefore, that as
ultimate proof of the growing friendship between Catherine and Isabella, the narrator
reveals they ‘read novels together’ (37) just as the reader is doing. The narrator then
launches into the famous defence of the novel that concludes Chapter V.

Such an emphatic defence, bristling with superlatives, sweeping
generalisations and egotism is quite in keeping with the point of view maintained by
the narrator throughout Northanger Abbey. Observant readers would enjoy the
diatribe, realising it reflected the narrator's view since many popular novels of
Austen's time were full of nonsense, as is the case today. The narrator finds it
imperative to defend characters for engaging in an activity they share with readers.
Defence of the novel might well have been justified in an era when such influential
literary men as Samuel Johnson considered novels to be morally corrupting and
particularly dangerous for women to read. A digression of this kind emphasises the
storyteller's autonomy: she can tell the reader what she likes, when she likes.
Moreover, narrator and reader can share this kind of confidence, as well as a regard
for novels since both are engaged in the process of interpreting text. Why should
readers of novels be ashamed of enjoying the ‘…greatest powers of mind…the
liveliest effusion's of wit…conveyed…in the best chosen language’(38) when non-
fiction of inferior moral and literary value as found in the Spectator could be read
with pride?

If the heroine of one novel be not patronised by the heroine of another, from whom can she
expect protection and regard? (37).

The absurd irony of fictional characters patronising each other; bestowing protection
and regard, allows the narrator to beg the question of readers, as though they should
be prepared to sympathise more readily with the fictitious victims of bad public
opinion. Because the reader is a reader of novels, the fictitious character gains
greater credibility if she too is a reader of novels. Indirectly, the narrator's outspoken defence demands that this work be regarded as an example of the intelligence, wit and artistry that deserves to be read and enjoyed. This was certainly part of Austen's plan when she joined the world of fiction to the world of non-fiction. By presenting a convincing reality, Austen is increasing the potential of fiction to help readers understand the real world.

With very little ado, Austen proclaims the dignity of her genre as well as the authority of her own command over it—both at a time when such gestures were rare. Unlike her predecessors, Austen pointedly refuses to apologise for novels.

The narrator follows this defence with a ‘specimen’ of Isabella's and Catherine's ‘warm attachment…discretion, originality of thought and literary taste’. Readers are thus made aware of the selection process through which the narrator has constructed the tale. Likewise, readers follow the conversation and may regard the narrator's assessment in an ironic light, since the comments of the two characters reveal little originality. However, compared to Mrs Allen's conversational limitations, Isabella and Catherine demonstrate improved levels of discourse when they discuss books and reading because interpreting text requires analysis of language and thought that depends upon abstract reasoning. In addition, Mrs Allen fails to excel in other levels of communication, for readers are told

Catherine's silent appeal to her friend, meanwhile, was entirely thrown away, for Mrs. Allen, not being at all in the habit of conveying any expression herself by a look, was not aware of its being ever intended by anybody else...

If Catherine is handicapped by Mrs Allen's obtuse and limited ability to communicate, she is further confused by John Thorpe who exaggerates, contradicts himself, deliberately lies, and ignores her direct and unequivocal communication. When he alarms her during their outing by describing the dangerous condition of the carriage in which James and Isabella are riding, Catherine is forced to consider how 'to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing' (65). But she is growing wiser, realising that Thorpe ‘did not excel in giving those clearer insights, in making those things plain which he had before made ambiguous’ (66). Thorpe not only endangers Catherine by his manipulative and overbearing social behaviour, he deliberately misleads her through inaccurate use of language. Catherine is beginning

32 Johnson, p. 28.
to understand the complexity of communication, which is further complicated by humour. Joking, irony and wit add dimensions to communication that require knowledge of a speaker's personality if real meaning and implied meaning are not to be confused. Readers are systematically trained to interpret correctly by the narrative commentary, allowing for the irony and humour that close intimates can share. For example, Catherine finds John Thorpe conceited, and his ‘talk’ dull. On their second carriage ride, she is misled into joining the party to Blaize Castle much against her better judgement when Thorpe assures her the Tilneys, with whom she had an engagement, have gone driving. The narrator gives readers a poetic insight into Catherine's mind by reporting

Thorpe talked to his horse, and she meditated, by turns, on broken promises and broken arches, phaetons and false hangings, Tilneys and trap-doors. (87).

Since the narration reveals Catherine's thoughts, readers can understand her state of mind and follow her logic. Here, the alliteration gently and economically associates Catherine's disappointed expectations of meeting the Tilneys with the Gothic potentials of a real castle, as well as the dangers of broken promises and traps of misunderstanding. Direct narrator comment closes Chapter XI:

And now I may dismiss my heroine to the sleepless couch, which is the true heroine's portion; to a pillow strewed with thorns and wet with tears. And lucky may she think herself, if she get another good night's rest in the course of the next three months. (90).

Similar passages are strewn through the story to prevent the reader from forgetting that this is fiction conveyed by an agent who demands recognition. Gothic conventions are highlighted by the narrator's deliberate reminders of how heroines behave in similar circumstances. The effect may be detrimental to the reader's total immersion in the fantasy presented. However, the relationship created between reader and storyteller reflects an intimacy and shared confidence much more valuable than the voyeurism offered by fiction presented through an omniscient and impersonal narrator. Exploiting another convention of the Gothic novel which allows the heroine to share secrets with a confidant, Northanger Abbey's most successful confidences occur between the narrator and reader.

Alistair Duckworth discusses narrative technique in Northanger Abbey, observing:
The entry is as much a wry self-criticism as a criticism of other fictional works… Jane Austen recognises that she is part of the folly of mankind and that her subjective vision is not necessarily any greater than that of the very authors she has from time to time parodied... Though the persona is himself undercut, much of what he says remains valid... [W]ithin the self-admitted fallibility of the narrator, there is a measure of valid outlook, a criticism of aberrant social behaviour, and a requirement for objective values.  

If Austen's irony and satire undermine her narrator's position, they can only contribute to pleasure for readers who must sustain belief in spite of a fiction that reminds them it is only pretending to exist. *Northanger Abbey* joins the narrator to the readers in their efforts to preserve the integrity of the text. Austen depends on the cooperation of her readers: they enjoy the self-mockery because they choose to read it. The humorous treatment of characters and narrative presentation encourages the intimate involvement of readers with the text because a shared joke succeeds in charming.

**iii. ‘...the best chosen language...’**

With characters and situations well established, attention focuses on how their relationships will develop. The resolution of the misunderstanding between the Tilneys and Catherine is achieved through honesty and acknowledgment of feelings. When Catherine sees Henry at the play, the narrator describes her feelings as ‘rather natural than heroic’(93) and dismisses a list of fiction's conventional responses by reporting she ‘took to herself all the shame of misconduct’. After Catherine has an opportunity to explain herself, the narrator asks ‘Is there a Henry in the world who could be insensible to such a declaration?’(94). Here the narrator extends the meaning of the character's name to encompass events in the real world because of this single, fictitious incident. Readers of *Northanger Abbey* thus comprise a linguistic community who have shared the experience presented in this fictional scene which enriches their associations with a proper noun.

Narrative games with language continue to demonstrate keen awareness of the communication process. The opening of Chapter XIII, (97) for example, compresses time as the narrator lists the days of the week and indicates that necessary events have been ‘stated’. Isabella's attempt to persuade Catherine to forgo her walk with the Tilneys in order to join the Clifton party is reported in direct

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speech, then through narration, sustaining Isabella's distinctive speech patterns and vocabulary.

...Isabella became only more and more urgent; calling on her in the most affectionate manner; addressing her by the most endearing names. She was sure her dearest, sweetest Catherine would not seriously refuse such a trifling request to a friend who loved her so dearly...‘I cannot help being jealous, Catherine, when I see myself slighted for strangers. I, who love you so excessively!'…'(98).

Readers have become so familiar with the principal characters that indirect report is sufficient for readers to recognise the speakers. Narration slips gently from report to direct speech, producing a seamless transition. Such subtle manipulation of reader perspective allows the narrator to place readers where they will gain the desirable moral position since sympathies are easiest to engage where a character's motivations can be understood. Catherine withstands peer pressure to meet her commitment with the Tilneys, leaving the voluble John Thorpe defeated, symbolically unable to complete an improper simile. (106).

Catherine's time with the Tilneys is rich in educational possibilities. The subject of novel reading is again opened, along with attention to precise use of words, the comparative factual and fictional content of history, discussion of landscape perspective, and an interesting narrative dissertation on the advantages of ignorance in young women:

Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant...A woman especially if she have the misfortune of knowing any thing, should conceal it as well as she can.

The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author;—and to her treatment of the subject I will only add in justice to men, that though to the larger and more trifling part of the sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire any thing more in a woman than ignorance. (110-111).

Henry's status as hero may be questioned since he appears to be engaging the affections of a rather naive Catherine. Besides the reference to the ‘sister author'34 the narrator's ironic and acerbic comments are followed by a long list of conversational topics embarked upon by the Tilneys and Catherine. The wealth of

34 In Jane Austen Women Politics and the Novel, Claudia Johnson identifies Fanny Burney as the ‘sister author', and notes that Burney ‘...adopts the narrative vantage point of marginal figures, and the way patriarchy looks from that angle is none too comforting.’ pp. 24-25.
subject matter and its diversity conveys the breadth and depth of the Tilneys' education and especially the exciting possibilities that life presents, contrasting to the limited range of interests offered by the Thorpes or Mrs Allen. The narrative praises of imbecility must be seen as ironic comments. Henry's eagerness to instruct Catherine, and her willingness to learn prove that ignorance is no virtue. Heroines must deserve the heroes who finally win them, and characters seek the company of their ethical equals. Readers are shown how the sharing of common interests helps cement solid relationships.

Another playful narrative treatment of language occurs when Catherine learns of James's engagement to Isabella.

…[Catherine] knew not what to say, and her eloquence was only in her eyes. From them however the eight parts of speech shone out most expressively, and James could combine them with ease.(120).

By consciously exposing the tools of the writer's trade: the very parts of speech; figurative language, and the flow of conversational topics, reader awareness of the communication process is raised, not only between characters, but between readers and the printed page. Northanger Abbey presents Catherine with an opportunity to match fiction against the mysteries encountered in the real world. While she errs in expecting to find the unlikely conventions of Gothic horror stories, the mysteries of Isabella's fickle heart, or Captain Tilney's intentional mischief reflect the kinds of confusing surprises with which real people must deal. Duplicitous behaviour, deceit, lies, even humour and irony can make communication and understanding difficult or impossible. In learning how to unravel these real problems, Catherine and readers develop their skills for living.

iv. Removing the black veil

Chapter X of Volume II opens with Catherine's humiliation:

The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. Most grievously was she humbled. Most bitterly did she cry. It was not only with herself that she was sunk—but with Henry. Her folly, which now seemed even criminal, was all exposed to him, and he must despise her for ever. (199).
Through realising the disparity between Gothic convention and the real world, Catherine is at once humbled and enlightened. Her error of judgment in applying fictional solutions to realistic problems is confirmed when Henry behaves with kindness. His care and sympathy transcend Catherine's expectation and demonstrate the compassion that marks a true hero. When Catherine concludes that human nature may not be delineated in the charming works of Gothic novelists, and that ‘…among the English…there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad…’(200), she is finally achieving the objective and sensible perspective that will help her to understand real people she will meet in the real world.

Catherine's maturing outlook is confirmed by the narration of her sleepless night after being told she must leave the Abbey.

Yet how different now the source of her inquietude from what it had been then—how mournfully superior in reality and substance! Her anxiety had foundation in fact, her fears in probability…(227).

Readers share Catherine's plight and the indignity of such an unwarranted eviction. Her lassitude at home is less baffling to readers than her family for the obvious reason that narrative has supplied information to readers that other characters are unable to access. When Catherine attempts to write to Eleanor, the narrator states

…never had it been harder for her to write than in addressing Eleanor Tilney. To compose a letter which might at once do justice to her sentiments and her situation, convey gratitude without servile regret, be guarded without coldness, and honest without resentment—a letter which Eleanor might not be pained by the perusal of—and, above all, which she might not blush herself, if Henry should chance to see, was an undertaking to frighten away all her powers of performance; and, after long thought and much perplexity, to be very brief was all that she could determine on with any confidence of safety.(235-6).

What Gothic or fictitious trial could compare to meeting the demands of communication when, as Catherine realises in trying to compose this letter, so much and so little can be entrusted to words? Her sophistication in undertaking this task, and her solution to the problem demonstrate that experience has been a good teacher. It is particularly important that Catherine's greatest concern is to protect the feelings of those who will see the letter. She is as aware of Henry's emotional needs as he was of hers when she was discovered to be a victim of her own folly. Such mutual sensitivity and regard for another’s
feelings forms the basis for relationships that Austen's heroes and heroines achieve when their stories conclude. Not marriage, but equality and reciprocity of care demonstrates the ultimate reward of trust and honesty in dealing with others.

Near the conclusion of *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator observes:

> The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity. (250).

Kathleen Tillotson makes reference to this particular passage, describing the joining of writer, characters and readers ‘within the same charmed circle’.

For a modern reader it seems, such comments destroy the illusion of the novel's autonomous reality; but without them we miss...the writer's traditional role as host, welcoming us at the party and saying good-bye at the close...35

Since *Northanger Abbey* presents readers with a guided tour through the backrooms, secret chambers and hidden trap-doors of novel fiction, the narrator's comment about the compression of pages maintains this narrative focus. Textual content as well as the physical reduction of pages available indicate that the novel is approaching its conclusion, and in yet another tribute to reader consciousness of the reading process, the narrator points to the imminent events that will close the story with an appropriately anticipated ending. Was there any doubt that Catherine and Henry would be united? Catherine is too ingenuous and naive to provide a vantage point from which to view the events or moral issues raised in *Northanger Abbey*. Readers should sympathise with her: she is quite lovable. The other characters are either corrupt or too far off-stage to allow sustained reader identification. However, the narrator is consistently jogging the reader's elbow and directing reader attention, even to the point of distracting readers from the task of maintaining integrity of the narrative. Most compelling is the reader/narrator relationship. Duckworth acknowledges the narrator's importance, making the point that:

> ...Austen has progressed by a series of *nons*. Her ideal moral outlook is *not* Tilney's rationalism, *not* Catherine's benevolent ingenuousness, *not* her undisciplined imagination…

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[An] ideal locus is discoverable, in which ingenuousness and acuity, sympathy and logic are reconciled, and from which both complacency and alarmism are banished. But the locus of this ideal—the grounds—is not in the novel. It is implied, and affirmatively implied, but it remains outside, or behind, the characterisation, as a property of the narrative consciousness. The reader comes to perceive the presence of standards of behaviour and a fixed point of moral outlook, but he is apt to feel that his arrival at such a perception has left Catherine far behind.

It seems that the ideal moral perspective suggested by Austen's structuring of the novel combines the narrator's ironic, detached self-conscious artistry with Catherine's guileless honesty. Readers are positioned to applaud Catherine, sympathise with her vulnerability, and appreciate the textual and moral dilemmas which she must negotiate. Thus readers enjoy the real ‘Gothic’ adventure of taking a journey toward experience in the company of the greatest monster of all: Ignorance. The ignorance in Northanger Abbey is embodied in Catherine herself, whose problem is in trying to create a heroic subject role to play. Catherine, of course, is not an intentional monster. Her inexperience; her trusting and gullible nature, and especially her initial confusion about the relationship between language and knowledge expose her to dangers. She is, fortunately, in the hands of a playful, protective creator. Dark forces gather against her, but her own goodness of heart and desire to be good guide her, and her readers, safely through the educating process. Catherine must learn to assess language along rational, empirical scales of probability and experience. Her readers too, in sifting the narrative as it is conveyed, are also ‘in training for heroine’ and hero because all language reflects perspectives that vary with the positions of the viewers. Even best friends, as Catherine learns of Isabella, and the reader discovers of the narrator, can sometimes be misleading.

v. ‘...I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern...’

Northanger Abbey is among Jane Austen's earliest experiments with narrative technique, and it exploits a narrative voice that Cathy Comstock identifies as the ‘Nosy Narrator’ who

…like a concerned next-door neighbour...means well but...[pokes] her nose in at all the wrong times and in all the wrong places...
Poor timing or poor placement sometimes characterises events in reality; not in art. When Austen's narrator comments, it is with the approval and by the design of her creator, who skilfully directs entrances and exits. The narrator speaks at important moments in the text: its opening; conclusions of chapters where the dramatic situation has arrived at pivotal points of action, and when the plot reaches serious crises. The narrator's intervention heightens dramatic tension by confirming both reader's and character's states of alarm. Likewise, the narrator's voice reassures readers that the story-teller remains in control. At the conclusion of Chapter VIII Catherine determines to spy on the General as he makes his nightly visit to his wife's prison, but readers are told: ‘The clock struck twelve—and Catherine had been half an hour asleep.’ (189). Another example occurs at the opening of Chapter XIV:

Catherine was too wretched to be fearful. The journey in itself had no terrors for her; and she began it without either dreading its length, or feeling its solitariness. (230).

Readers are spared worry, for the heroine is not afraid, even though the comments acknowledge that in any other state of mind, Catherine would have been fearful. Such a partnership of reader and narrator ensures their survival even if the heroine or other characters seem to be in mortal danger. Language sustains this relationship.

Northanger Abbey explores a theme that interested Jane Austen throughout her writing: how to know what is; and how to behave honourably in view of what is known. Fiction, truth, and the role of imagination in determining which is which are all closely examined through presentation of various forms of communication. Catherine's and Isabella's shared enthusiasm for Gothic novels provides an obvious opportunity to scrutinise the novel form. Consequently, Austen's parody emphasises the dangerous failings of unrealistic fiction as well as the more dangerous simplifications of character and character analysis that accompany the unrealistic stock heroes and villains of romances. When real people are regarded as simplistic, misunderstandings become unavoidable. Catherine's initial inexperience, under Henry's judicious instruction, is gradually informed by exposure to strategies for interpreting the complex and often contradictory communications encountered in reality. Her education is conducted by Henry, but the text for the course derives from many sources.

Katrin Ristkok Burlin describes four levels of language explored in Northanger Abbey: the ‘best chosen language’ of responsible, professional novelists; the cliches of sentimental romance; the ‘fictions’ of normal social interaction, and
reliable communication based on honesty that provides a ‘corrective’ to misunderstanding. Northanger Abbey is not merely a novel about novels: it is an anthology of communication genres; each one requiring careful interpretation. Besides the obvious sentimental novels referred to explicitly, Catherine and the reader encounter letters; participate in a discussion of proper subjects for ladies' journals; anticipate a mouldering manuscript that turns out to be a laundry list, and indulge in lengthy discussions on the merits and failings of history texts. Gossip; hearsay evidence; and innumerable conversations also require much analysis if their truth is to be discovered. Even with the best intentions, all forms of communication are complicated by inaccuracy or inability to capture nuances of meaning. Furthermore, communication reflects character; and may be motivated by intent opposed to, or divergent from, apparent content. Catherine, whose chief appeal is her disarming honesty, has to learn to ‘read’ all communication with care to discover meaning, especially when deliberate deception can endanger her understanding. Sometimes benign characters may, through the power of language, mislead those relying too much on their imaginations, as Catherine learns to her shame. At Northanger Abbey, Henry Tilney indulges in creating his own Gothic fantasy, and allows himself to

...take advantage of the novelist's power to control—even to infatuate—his audience...But what is most significant about this fiction is that at the crisis of his narrative, Henry abdicates his authorship, telling his heroine “to use her own fancy” to complete it...When Henry fails to enclose this fiction, it breaks lose and invades the rest of the novel.

While intuition may provide forewarnings of dishonesty or deceit, there is always the risk that unsubstantiated suspicions may also mislead. Catherine's uneasiness about the General and her disbelief that Captain Tilney could actually have designs on the engaged Isabella are just two examples of how feelings should be acknowledged. They can eventually lead to truths. The real world becomes a nightmare when Catherine fails to exercise common sense in response to her ‘own fancy’. Reinforcing the lessons of the novel, General Tilney's conduct is even more seriously compromised by his inability to distinguish John Thorpe's fictions from truth.

The problem of understanding others, of accounting for the unaccountable, is what Catherine is in the novel to learn. She needs to for the very reason that life is unaccountable, people are not logical,


40 Burlin, p. 100-1. In the last sentence of the novel, the narrator ‘...leave[s] it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience.’ (NA p. 252) It may represent the narrator's similar ‘abdication’ although it is at a safer place.
words not literal, and meanings seldom accessible and clear...The relations between the burlesque of
other kinds of fiction and Catherine's education is intrinsic to Austen's vision...Austen mocks
sentimental and Gothic conventions because they are unnatural and therefore incredible.

Austen's purpose, as always, is to help the reader improve understanding and
increase skills of perception. According to Burlin, the reader ‘is drawn into the
process of fiction-making' through the creative demands fiction reading places on
the reader's imagination and intellect. Insights gained through wrestling with
problems presented in fiction will help readers contend with similar challenges in the
real world, and Austen's creation of realistic characters facilitates the application of
fictional solutions to real problems. Henry, as mentor to Catherine, also
demonstrates an important educational approach which mirrors that adopted by
Austen in relation to her readers. When Catherine states to Henry, ‘I only ask what I
want to be told,’(151) he refuses to interpret reality for her, and instead encourages
her to rely on her own observations and reasoning powers—to ‘guess for herself’.
(151-2).

Henry's delight in words and their precise use and misuse is the most important way he
communicates his sense of the variety and subtlety of the familiar world...[Henry himself] is
proof that real people are more interesting than characters in books, and that people, when they
are in books, may have something of the complexity and elusiveness that shapes them in
reality.

Thus, while Henry educates Catherine, the reader also experiences changing
perceptions, which result from analysing the text. For example, information withheld
by the narrator affects response to the text when it is revealed. A good illustration is
provided by General Tilney, who behaves badly toward Catherine, and seems to
have been hard on his wife, in some ways justifying Catherine's unfavourable
impressions of him. Readers feel Catherine's discomfort while in his presence, and
share her bewilderment when he dismisses her without explanation. She has to learn
by experience, and so do readers. Later, with the happy resolution of Eleanor's
marriage allowing the union of the heroine and hero, the General's misconduct can
be forgotten if not forgiven. Near the conclusion of the penultimate chapter, the
narrator announces ‘I have united for [the characters'] ease what they must divide for
mine...’ (247). Readers are again presented with the powerful machinery of fiction-

41 Susan Morgan, ‘Guessing for Ourselves in Northanger Abbey,’ Originally from In the Meantime: Character
and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction, (University of Chicago Press, 1980). This citing from Jane Austen,

42 Burlin, p. 106.

43 Morgan, ‘Guessing for Ourselves in Northanger Abbey’, pp. 121-123.
making at work. Here, the narrator leaves ‘…it to my reader's sagacity…’ to supply explanations that the narrator prefers not to trouble herself to record. If some critics find this clumsy, it confirms the sustained self-conscious narrative role.

Duckworth explains what he regards as Austen's problematical resolution of the narrative satire in this way:

In *Northanger Abbey*... Jane Austen fails to dramatise a moral outlook in the novel's resolution. In recognition of this, I believe, as much as from a desire to reintroduce a parody of the romantic novel, she had her narrator enter the novel in person in the last two chapters to ask, ‘what probable circumstance could work upon a temper like the General's?’, and then provide the most hackneyed of devices to unravel the plot...  

I would argue that Austen is pulling the rug out from under Gothic fiction, reader expectation and the narrator. It is her consummate statement of authorial control and ironic amusement. Catherine is taught to evaluate communication in order to discover truth. Readers of fiction are reminded to be wary of ‘truths’ presented in fiction. Unlimited power as demonstrated by the novelist can be abused unless it is guided by conformity to the laws of physics, probability, and common sense. And of course, the narrator who chaperoned readers on this Gothic adventure sees readers safely back to reality at its conclusion. Catherine and Henry may live happily ever after, but the narrator has the last word. This is appropriate, since readers too have been enriched through the experience of this shared fiction.

Readers will have learned a good deal more than Catherine by the time the adventure for the fictional heroine has ended. First, readers do not make this journey alone: a companion, in the form of the narrator, has been provided. Readers have been privileged to observe Catherine while at the same time the narrator has kept readers well-informed. A running commentary of narration and anticipatory narrative remarks guide reader response and encourage reader involvement. Second, Catherine's education is reinforced by the narrator's relationship to the reader. Just as readers may sympathise with Catherine's entrapment in the fictions told to her and of her, readers are similarly entrapped in the fiction they read by choice. Austen's irony is double-barrelled since Catherine, a created heroine, is punished for taking Gothic fiction too seriously, and the reader is entertained while reading a satire on

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44 ‘The introduction of the narrator into her work in these last pages may be illuminated from Robert C. Elliott's work on satire: *The Power of Satire*. (Princeton UP, 1960 esp. pp. 220-22.) Elliott has shown the dual nature of all satiric works, their social value and their dangerous power. As the genre develops, he argues, the author often detaches himself from his persona, who is allowed to do the dirty work but is then himself satirised, by the author. This procedure we have already seen working with Henry Tilney, and something of like nature is also happening at the end of the novel.’ Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate*, p. 102.
the Gothic novel that depends upon Gothic conventions for its satire to work. Catherine confuses the fantasy of fiction with the ‘real’ world. Readers, in attempting to escape the ‘real’ world by reading Austen's Gothic novel, are constantly reminded that they are being told a story. Like Catherine, readers are returned to reality, because the author intended to teach readers how better to understand reality, and even the means of escaping it through fiction.

Susan Morgan believes that in creating Catherine Morland, Jane Austen was presenting a limited, fallible and therefore real character who needed ‘imagination, which overleaps the borders of self.’

[Austen's] point is precisely that life is not like novels of terror, not because life is orderly but because novels of terror are. They are conventional and formulaic even (and particularly) in their horrors. And it is because life is not, because it cannot be understood or lived according to a set of conventional emotions or, on the other hand, according to the plain good sense of Mrs. Morland, that Catherine needs her imagination. Life is various and strange.45 Catherine is taught to use her own powers of perception and reason as well as her imagination. Her reward becomes the happy ending that confirms her successful initiation into maturity and a more sophisticated understanding of reality. Readers too have gained a similar experience in grappling with the characters' fictions and the text itself. If Catherine's appeal derives from her goodness, she is also full of enthusiasm and vitality, qualities shared by the narrator. Such energy is irresistible. Through spending time in the company of such spirited adventurers, readers enjoy a pleasant, instructive diversion. Along with Catherine, readers have gained some insight into human behaviour, and particularly the intricacies of communication.

Northanger Abbey explores the line between fantasy and reality that is defined by the communication process. Language, fiction's raw material, becomes its own subject as characters, narrator, and author playfully compel readers to examine the mysterious relationship between linguistics and perception. The narrator appears as a magician, deliberately pulling rabbits out of hats before an audience fully expecting to see rabbits and hats. In the later novels, the magician leaves centre stage, and allows the magic to create its own effects. Characters and narrator may still examine language and novel technique, but no longer with the heavy-handed parody that draws attention to itself by satirising elements it shares with its model. In Pride and Prejudice, the machinery of novel fiction is less obvious, while the

epistemological theme becomes a central concern to the characters since lies, gossip and hearsay evidence form an ever-changing social reality within which all characters must seek to function. Finding the truth, and behaving honourably remain challenging, particularly when attitudes become inflexible.
CHAPTER THREE

*Pride and Prejudice*: Sense and Nonsense

The want of elegance is almost the only want in Miss Austen…[It] is impossible not to feel in every line of *Pride and Prejudice*, in every word of Elizabeth, the entire want of taste which could produce so pert, so worldly a heroine…Wickham is equally bad…If [Jane Austen] had a little more taste, a little more perception of the graceful, as well as of the humour, I know not indeed anyone to whom I should not prefer her…46—Mary Russell Mitford (1814)

Every time I read ‘Pride and Prejudice’ I want to dig [Jane Austen] up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone47—Mark Twain (1898)

…Now comes the greatest miracle of English literature…[This] country parson's daughter of barely twenty-one breaks covert with a book of such effortless mastery, such easy and sustained brilliance, as would seem quite beyond reach of any but the most mature genius…48—Reginald Ferrar (1917)

*Pride and Prejudice* killed more people last year than any other novel. Lab reports verify…that reading it caused cancer in dogs [and] that each page of *Pride and Prejudice* is equivalent to smoking three packs of cigarettes…49—Darren Gardner (1993)

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The conflicting opinions displayed in this small sample of responses to *Pride and Prejudice*, and the possible irony with which a number of them are expressed, highlight the central concern of Jane Austen's popular novel: discovering the nature of truth. Readers must evaluate their experience as it is shaped by the narrative account which presents to them problems similar to those confronting the fictional characters, for readers become the subjects of this experiment designed to deceive them into thinking they are only on-lookers. The issues raised in this retitled version of *First Impressions* fascinated Jane Austen throughout her life. As her original title suggests, impressions must be refined by experience. The change to *Pride and Prejudice* directs critical attention to these complicating attitudes because they prevent objectivity. Austen creates a text that subtly teaches readers by aligning their sympathies with an attractive but misguided heroine. When her enlightenment finally occurs, readers share the painful yet rewarding experience of acknowledging that vanity impairs compassion and denies wisdom.

The following analysis will demonstrate how narrative technique positions readers to undergo an educational process similar to the one confronting the main characters. After a close examination of the novel's opening to reveal how narrative voice operates, reader response will be explored, since in keeping with Austen's epistemological theme, characters and readers will be required to sharpen their perceptual skills in order to distinguish fact from fiction.

### i. First impressions: informal introductions

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

Volumes of criticism have been devoted to interpreting the implications of this deservedly famous opening line. Taken together with the dialogue which follows, it provides a logical framework upon which much of the novel's humour and its major theme will depend. This first authoritative sentence establishes a confident narrative voice, making proclamations on issues that require more flexible treatment than such a pronouncement indicates. Sentence structure, balancing between what

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50 In 1800 a four-volume novel by Mrs Holford was published under this title necessitating a change of title for Austen's manuscript. See Frank W. Bradbrook's introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*, (Oxford UP, 1970), p. viii.


appears to promise a logical presentation of truth turns, unexpectedly, into an absurd, irrational deduction. Such games with reader expectation contribute to much of the text's humour. Even the paradox suggested by the fourth and fifth words anticipates the novel's playful study of truth, the uncertainty of universals, and the challenging process of acquiring knowledge. Tone, juxtaposing sense with nonsense, even the cadence of the sentence structure established here colours all that follows. Penny Gay says

This opening voice immediately establishes a lovely conspiratorial relationship with the reader...[where]...we are going to be saying one thing about our characters and implying another. 53

This ironic rapport encourages readers to interpret events in a context conscious of the discrepancies between reality and appearance. The opening sentence's fluency and confidence sweep readers into this fiction's ‘...light, bright and sparkling...54 world, permitting little time to ponder or seriously question such authority. In fact, irony suggests at least two levels of meaning, so the apparently straight-forward declarative sentence provides a richly contradictory plethora of readings. But such an opening salvo may be overlooked, initially, since first impressions are often formed during anxious introductions, reflected in the text by the brisk dialogue that follows. ‘Truth’ is reiterated in the second sentence, confirming society's prejudiced attitude with the observation that the gentleman is regarded as ‘rightful property’, indicating a questionable concept to be examined in the text. Moreover, gentlemen are property owners, rather than ‘owned’ so the irony reverberates in an understated social comment. Readers are encouraged to accept such ideas through Austen's use of a narrative voice expressing them with aphoristic economy. Because the prose style matches balanced form with a highly developed sense of absurdity, humour and truth combine to offer several levels of interpretation. Readers must trust the narrator, and yet be wary of deception or ambiguity. Dogmatic certainty is targeted throughout the

53 Penny Gay, ‘The “I” in Jane Austen,’ Sensibilities, No. 5, (Oct 1992), p. 13. Martha Satz offers a fascinating close textual analysis of the opening sentence in her article referred to below. Of particular interest is her observation that ‘The second part of the sentence plummets the reader from the lofty plain of philosophical considerations and language to the mundane terrain of financial and nuptial matters. The descent is so precipitous that the reader is tempted to discard the abstract considerations raised in the first few words.’(p. 176). Joanne Morse's comments in the ‘Afterward’ appearing in the Signet Classic edition (pp. 327-328) on narrative voice are also interesting. ‘Yet, for all its aplomb the opening sentence rings faintly of anticlimax; truth is a large term for what is, after all, a small subject—gossip and matchmaking. There is a hint here that society magnifies trivia, but the sureness of style bears down objections.’ In An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), John Odmark comments that ‘The word order undercuts the validity of the assertion being made, since an illogical conclusion follows upon what appears to be a statement of fact.’ (p.62).

54 Chapman ed. Letters of Jane Austen, Thursday February 4, 1813, p. 299. This is Austen's own description of her novel.
novel since inflexible belief, especially when based on insufficient evidence, endangers understanding. Characters will learn this lesson if they are wise enough; readers are invited to enjoy observing the education process.

Mr and Mrs Bennet's exchanges, scintillating with Mr Bennet's delight in his wife's absurdity and her exasperation as she consistently misunderstands his irony, indicate that the narrator accurately described Mrs Bennet's universe. Her discussion of trivia is presented verbatim, while Mr Bennet's search for facts is given through indirect discourse, allowing readers to better understand her limitations, while the indirect report creates a distance and perspective reflecting Mr Bennet's attitude toward his wife and her concerns. It also suggests that his comments can be summarised by a narrator who permits Mrs Bennet's loquacity to speak for itself. Chapter I concludes with the first of a number of pen portraits positioning readers to view Mr and Mrs Bennet as comic figures, trapped in their own perceptual worldscapes. Mrs Bennet is dismissed in the narrative account closing the chapter, while Mr Bennet is ‘odd’. Such narrative summary reduces their importance.

A number of narrative techniques, employed throughout the novel, are revealed in the opening. Readers experience text that shares many similarities with scripted drama. First, because the scene relies on dialogue, its theatrical presentation is enhanced. Spoken communication establishes the importance of verbal exchanges as characters reveal themselves through their conversational flexibility and fluency. Second, characters' individualised speech eliminates the need for narrative comment to indicate who is speaking. Third, readers experience text time as present time, an effect achieved through omitting anything superfluous to the action. Later, time compressions maintain the dramatic urgency of the present with frequent narratorial comments like: ‘After a week spent in professions of love…Mr. Collins was called from…Charlotte by the arrival of Saturday.’(139); ‘Four weeks passed away…’(147); ‘With no greater events than these…did January and February pass away.’(151); ‘In this quiet way, the first fortnight of her visit soon passed away.’(169) ‘The first week of their return was soon gone. The second began.’(229). By maintaining action in the present, the distance between readers, characters and textual events is reduced, enhancing reader involvement. Lodge suggests the ‘duration’ of the action is confined to periods between six months and a year representing ‘…about the shortest time in which to portray the development of a


meaningful relationship…’ The narrative, therefore, includes significant scenes and skips over those periods in which nothing important occurs. Such pacing illustrates Austen's care in maintaining the forward momentum of the action until the climax of Elizabeth's enlightenment. It also creates an intimacy between reader and narrator through focus on character development. Absence of detailed descriptions of scenery, finery, and the physical environments in which characters operate concentrates reader attention on behaviour, feelings and thoughts.

Chapter II continues the presentation of a tightly structured conversation, directed by Mr Bennet whose

… comments and introductions are as efficient as any from a narrator could be, and are more dramatic, so the scene goes as briskly as if one were reading a play, though more clearly, and with more information, in a shorter time, than any play could bear.

It also provides several examples of discrepancies between report and reality. For example, despite assurance to the contrary, Mr Bennet ‘was among the earliest of those who waited on Mr Bingley’. The number of people Mr Bingley collected from London for the assembly contradicts expectations. When Mr Darcy is first met, and found to be rich, he is greatly admired until his manners appear proud and ‘above being pleased’. Then he is considered to have a ‘disagreeable countenance’ confirming Mr Bennet's remark ‘One cannot know what a man really is by the end of a fortnight…’ Such comments indicate that public opinion is changeable and character assassination can begin even before character can be defined. Moreover, hearsay evidence and gossip carry weight and cross distances, creating realities regardless of accuracy. How characters determine the credibility of stories and sources of information fundamentally influences their ability to realise their goals.

Darcy's insult to Elizabeth initiates the action of the plot, and is emphasised by its textual treatment. Immediately after comments revealing the changing opinions of Darcy, his behaviour is critically contrasted to that of Mr Bingley. Mrs Bennet's dislike is mentioned as a result of his ‘…having slighted one of her daughters.’ The incident is presented as a brief analeptic episode, carefully prepared by narrative allusions to it. Darcy's insult seems to have been deliberate since he catches Elizabeth’s eye, stating within her hearing that she is ‘not handsome

58 W. A Craik, p. 88.
enough to tempt me...’(12)\textsuperscript{59} This thoughtless comment provides a basis for her assessment of Darcy's character since his own conduct toward her reveals what she later describes as ‘selfish disdain for the feelings of others...’(193) Elizabeth's pride in the justice of her assessment is a serious fault, for she remains resolutely blind to Darcy's changed attitudes and behaviour. The narrator mentions that ‘She told the story however with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition...’(12). Thus the potential damage of Darcy's insult is deflected by Elizabeth's treatment of it, and it is conveyed to readers through narrative report\textsuperscript{60} Significantly, Elizabeth turns the incident into a story: she uses control of language and narrative to maintain her self-respect and to entertain others.

Chapter IV discloses characters at Netherfield and Longbourn discussing the social episode just concluded. Elizabeth and Jane analyse their own attitudes as well as those of the Netherfield gentlemen and ladies. Direct speech retains Elizabeth's witty repartee. Readers are positioned to align their sympathies with the Bennet sisters rather than the Bingley sisters because readers witness directly the candid exchanges between Elizabeth and Jane. Their analysis is more penetrating in its direction than the Bingley sisters' conversation, and reveals an insight into the relationships between sisters who share ideas and respect their differing viewpoints. The Bennet sisters often discuss their feelings precisely because they differ, each learning from the other. Such attempts to define experience through conversation emphasise the importance of language in their relationship and in their desire to understand the complexities of communication, especially when hearsay evidence gains authority in the absence of direct experience.

The difficulties the characters undergo in estimating each other are also experienced, to some extent, by each reader as he is introduced to, responds to and estimates the characters. The reader is asked to overcome his own first impressions, to conquer his own prejudices and to

\textsuperscript{59} Patricia Beer observes ‘Beauty, not mind or character, is what the men in Jane Austen's novels—the men she approves of as well as the villains—actually consider first... Many scenes exude the spirit of a Miss World Contest...’ \textit{Reader, I Married Him, A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot}, (London: MacMillan Press, 1974), pp. 46-7.

\textsuperscript{60} Bernard J. Paris explains Elizabeth's mortification in these terms: ‘She is accustomed to think highly of herself, and...Darcy places himself well above her and interprets her not dancing as a sign of her unattractiveness to other men...The implied author's analysis is rather misleading here. Elizabeth's telling the story is not the manifestation of a lively disposition. It is a defensive technique which serves several purposes. It distances her from her hurt feelings, it denies the significance of the event by turning it into an object of laughter, and it gains an immediate revenge on Darcy by making him ridiculous in the eyes of others. Jane Austen at once creates and is taken in by Elizabeth's facade.’ Bernard J. Paris \textit{Character and Conflict}, (Michigan State University: The Harvester Press, Ltd., 1979), p. 122.
refine his own perceptions, as he reads of characters who succeed or fail to do precisely these things.  

At an assembly given by Sir William Lucas, Charlotte and Elizabeth enter into an animated discussion of problems associated with fixing affection when understanding a person's character requires time.

Occupied in observing Mr. Bingley's attentions to her sister, Elizabeth was far from suspecting that she was herself becoming an object of some interest in the eyes of his friend. Mr. Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty...he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she had hardly a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes.(23)

This narrative revelation combines several important thematic elements. Elizabeth, unaware of the attention she is receiving, has managed to attract Darcy's interest while Darcy reveals how attitude influences perception. His research relies on direct observation. He admits that he may have been wrong, and readers are told 'as a step towards conversing with her himself, attended to her conversation with others.'(24) Darcy demonstrates that he is prepared to change as he interprets reality, and he seeks to understand Elizabeth through her use of language. He recognises that entering into conversation involves delicate discriminations requiring far more discernment than required to enact the social ritual of seeking a dance partner.

Jane becomes ill at Netherfield so Elizabeth determines to visit her, ignoring a number of social conventions by walking, alone, in the mud and rain. She is received politely, but is convinced that the company hold her in contempt. Darcy 'said very little...[He admired]...the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion...’ (33). Readers, through narrative report, are better informed about Darcy's feelings than Elizabeth, who reads his silence as similar to the censure she interprets from the behaviour of the others.

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62 'The second tenet of this novel supposes that evidence-gathering and judgment-making are dependent upon the subject or perceiver...almost any evidence can be given two contradictory interpretations.’ Martha Satz ‘An epistemological Understanding of Pride and Prejudice’ (p. 173). Satz quotes Susan Morgan In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 6: ‘In Austen's epistemology the observer is part of the process.’ Cited from Jane Austen Women and Literature New Series, Vol 3, Janet Todd, ed. Darcy's changing views on Elizabeth's appearance represent one example.
Elizabeth's perspective now becomes central to the narrative. Her appeal for readers has been carefully constructed, reflecting Austen's handling of plot through ‘…subversion of economic realities and of male power that permits us to enjoy Elizabeth's rebellious exuberance…’ In addition, readers may sympathise with Elizabeth because she is misguided. Astute readers may see her errors as the result of perfectly understandable mistaken judgement. Besides wit, energy and imagination, she gains reader sympathy because she is sensible, compassionate and honest. Many narrative comments attest to her charm. One example occurs when Elizabeth's impertinent behaviour toward Darcy is reported

…there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody…(52).

Her teasing is thus shaded with gentle, narrative approval. Subtle manipulation of reader response is also evident when Bingley's sisters are reported to have ‘…indulged their mirth for some time at the expense of their dear friend's vulgar relations.’(37). Such phrasing and word-choice suggests the narrator's disapproval of the sisters' hypocrisy. Readers, perhaps already captivated by Elizabeth, will be in for a surprise since confidence in her judgement positions them to accept her interpretations of events as accurate.

Readers may be unaware that Elizabeth's observations contribute to the fortification of her prejudices because narrative presentation encourages readers to accept Elizabeth's interpretations on matters that seem unequivocal by presenting good arguments to support her views. For example, when Charlotte suggests Darcy visits Elizabeth because he must be in love with her, the narrative provides a number of logical explanations opposing this motive, concluding with Charlotte's uncertainty about the meaning of Darcy's ‘…earnest, steadfast gaze…’ which Charlotte herself thinks might also mean nothing more than ‘…absence of mind,’ (181). In addition, Elizabeth's witty, expressive and eloquent command of language offers compelling reason to align reader judgement with her since she thinks, reflects, and delights in contemplating the causes and effects presented to her by experience. Her intelligence

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64 '…Elizabeth…achieves the most delicate balance between the requirements of self and of society. Her manners are easy and playful, but she takes serious things seriously and is careful of the feelings of others. She does not always say what she thinks, but she knows her own mind, and she tries not to mislead or be forced into a false position by the demands of the occasion.' Paris, p. 107.

65 Fergus discusses Austen's didactic intent to ensnare readers in the same epistemological traps as the characters. (p. 90).
encourages readers to trust her deductions, which are often correct.\(^66\) When Elizabeth misinterprets evidence, her process of arriving at the wrong conclusion is still fascinating because she thinks logically and sensibly, and readers are aware of her generally sound judgment. For example, she has good reason to consistently misinterpret Darcy's conduct while she visits Netherfield. If Elizabeth errs in understanding Darcy, her failing is shared by other characters as well as readers since all experience is open to varying interpretation. Narrative focus on Elizabeth's thinking process allows readers an insight to an original, amusing and convincing consciousness. Since much of the text is presented from Elizabeth's perspective, understanding her permits an understanding of the novel, and narrative commentary provides information for readers that suggests the limitations of Elizabeth's analysis. A good example of this is provided in the narrative handling of silences during dialogue. Information about tone of voice, emotional states of the characters as they contribute or refrain from participating in discussions shapes reader response. After Elizabeth comments that ‘…one good sonnet will starve love entirely away’ (44), the text continues

Darcy only smiled; and the general pause which ensued made Elizabeth tremble lest her mother should be exposing herself again. She longed to speak, but could think of nothing to say. (45)

Darcy's non-verbal response suggests some possible interpretations of his meaning; Elizabeth's inability to speak is explained more thoroughly. The emotional drama of these scenes is heightened by their presentation which focuses on the internal responses of the characters, and the misunderstanding that derives from such silences. The scene, and the chapter close with narration

…Elizabeth returned instantly to Jane, leaving her own and her relations' behaviour to the remarks of the two ladies and Mr. Darcy; the latter of whom, however, could not be prevailed on to join in their censure of her, in spite of all Miss Bingley's witticisms on fine eyes. (46)

Italics emphasise Miss Bingley's derisive attitude and remind readers of the earlier comments. Fine eyes has become an in-joke, not only between characters, but between narrator and readers. This reliance on verbal intimacy occurs throughout the novel with characters echoing each other's remarks, and the narrator quoting characters, creating a bond between readers and text which exploits reader awareness of characters' language usage. For example, Elizabeth mentions to Wickham ‘…the

\(^{66}\) Austen's techniques for encouraging misjudgments are so effective that a reader dazzled by Elizabeth's charm may overlook some of her lesser mistakes or inaccuracies even in a second or third reading…’ Fergus, p. 93.
implacability of [Darcy's] resentments…’(80) and the narrative conclusion of the novel describes Lady Catherine expressing herself with ‘…all the genuine frankness of her character…’ in responding to news of the ‘pollution’ (388) brought to Pemberley by Darcy's bride. Words, phrases and attitudes are joined through association, and the ideas they describe are reinforced through repetition. Thus reader sensitivity to linguistic idiosyncrasies is deliberately developed through the text, and is economically employed because language usage consistently reveals character and values.

During a discussion that develops among the Netherfield party, observing Darcy's attraction to Elizabeth, Miss Bingley's ‘great anxiety for the recovery of her dear friend Jane, received some assistance from her desire of getting rid of Elizabeth.’(52). Such narrative comment, expressed in diction reflecting Miss Bingley's attitude and language use, and suggesting narrative sensitivity to the irony and sarcasm implicit in words like ‘dear’ also reveals the hypocrisy and duplicity Caroline Bingley regularly demonstrates. Such use of free indirect discourse further enhances the relationship between narrator and reader since readers are being reminded of Caroline's previous attitude through the prose style. This economical use of tone influences reader response without the need for overt commentary. What is more, behaviour may reflect only some motivations, or be misinterpreted. Miss Bingley appears to desire Jane's speedy recovery, concealing her greater desire to end the visit from Elizabeth. Readers are left in no doubt about her motives nor her methods thanks to the revealing narrative voice.

Mr Collins, described as one of literature's 'prize idiots' announces his arrival in a letter that generates speculation among all of the Bennets, each character reading into it his or her own values or interests. The propensity of characters to credit others with their own feelings may become a source of misunderstanding, and yet it is ‘one of the qualities the entire novel is designed to exercise and develop.’ Character speculation invites readers to share in interpreting his letter. The narrator reports that ‘Mr Bennet's expectations were fully answered. His cousin was as absurd as he had hoped.’ One reason for Collins' absurdity is explained by Ivor Morris thus:

67 See Fergus, pp. 110-115 for a sensitive analysis of this scene.
69 Fergus, pp. 93-4.
…not that he spends time and thought in fashioning compliments, or even that he is bad at it—
but that he admits to doing it.  

In a novel that examines the pursuit of truth and understanding with the view to creating wholesome human relations, a character who takes pride in practicing flattery demonstrates a debasing abuse of language and communication. His determination to marry is established through narrative explanation. When Mrs Bennet hints that Jane is soon likely to be engaged, Collins has only to change from Jane to Elizabeth. Like other limited characters, he concerns himself with appearances, superficial relationships, and materialism. His ‘pompous nothings’ (72) can be taken seriously only by other vacuous fools. The narrator informs readers that Mrs Bennet's attitude had undergone a dramatic change: ‘…the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces.’ (71). Where honesty and sincerity are valued, both Collins and Mrs Bennet reveal themselves to be lacking in integrity. This is clearly demonstrated by Mrs Bennet sanctioning Mr Collins's substitution of one daughter for another. Reciprocal respect and affection remain irrelevant since for him, human beings, like property, are interchangeable. Indeed, he assesses the Bennet women and the Bennet estate he will inherit as would a valuer at auction.

They were not the only objects of Mr. Collins' admiration. The hall, the dining-room, and all its furniture were examined and praised; and his commendation of every thing would have touched Mrs. Bennet's heart, but for the mortifying supposition of his viewing it all as his own future property. (65).

Mrs Bennet finds his attitude acceptable since ‘the business of her life was to get her daughters married’ (5). Any husband, of sufficient financial prospects, would do.

In an interesting moment when Mr Collins is asked to read aloud to the ladies

…a book was produced; but on beholding it, (for every thing announced it to be from a circulating library,) he started back, and begging pardon protested that he never read novels.— Kitty stared at him, and Lydia exclaimed.— (68).

Narration economically presents the scene including a parenthetical aside to explain Collins's repulsion when confronted by a novel. Indirect discourse and well positioned dashes convey his verbal response and the reactions of his cousins. The

70 Morris, p. 21.
joke must further distance reader sympathy from a character who rejects the very literary genre in which he exists.  

Readers and characters are confronted by another new acquaintance, Mr Wickham, who delivers his convincingly dark account of treatment he received from Darcy, confirming Elizabeth's earlier impressions. Their conversation is handled so that its details can be recalled later when Elizabeth learns the truth from Darcy's letter. As Elizabeth listens to Wickham's story, the narrator gives readers an insight into her thoughts.

‘…To treat in such a manner…the favourite of his father!’—She could have added, ‘A young man too, like you, whose very countenance may vouch for your being amiable’—but she contented herself with ‘And one, too, who had…been his companion…’ (80-1).

This narrative revelation is particularly effective in aligning reader sympathy with Elizabeth because she is seen to be compassionate, discreet, and capable of succumbing to Wickham's physical attractiveness. Such vulnerability aligns her behaviour with many readers who would also find the charming, handsome gentleman appealing. The inside view informs readers of her unspoken comments. Significantly, Wickham's social grace establishes Elizabeth's regard for him, proving that she can be mislead by appearances. Furthermore,

Wickham wins her allegiance by telling her a story. His version of his youth and blighted prospects has the verbal embellishment of romantic fiction. The satisfying fiction, along with Wickham's professional delivery, charms Elizabeth, and she believes it because she wants to.

Her assessment of other characters, however, has been accurate, as far as readers can deduce: Mr Collins is 'an oddity'; Caroline Bingley is superficial and manipulative; Mr Darcy is an arrogant snob. If she finds Wickham attractive and captivating, readers must trust her judgment. When Elizabeth appeals to Jane for an interpretation, Jane exonerates both Wickham and Darcy, concluding that there must have been a misunderstanding, and that it is 'impossible for us to conjecture the causes or circumstances which may have alienated them' (85). Jane prefers to believe in their goodness, without evidence to confirm Wickham's allegations. In this instance, her generosity is more commendable than Elizabeth's entrenched hostility.

71 Penny Gay observes that Collins's proposal to Elizabeth ‘...proceeds along the lines dictated by the conventions of third-rate novels (one always suspects him of a secret passion for these)…’ Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice, (Sydney UP and Oxford UP Melbourne, Australia, 1990), p. 32.
72 W. A. Craik, p. 69.
73 Juliet McMaster, pp. 29-30. See Pride and Prejudice , pp. 68-70.
That these sisters continue to compare their interpretations of their experiences reinforces reader need to remain open-minded since readers can objectively evaluate the conversations which the narrative has positioned them to overhear.

ii. Building relationships

_Pride and Prejudice_ allows readers to participate in the education of Elizabeth Bennet as she achieves the wisdom of humility. At the same time, readers can enjoy testing their own character analysis by watching the characters watching each other. Patterns begin to emerge, the discovery of which engages the reader's vanity, ‘...an activity that furthers intimacy with and absorption in the novel while underlining its theme: a comic exploration of complacency or pride of judgment.' Collins's proposal to Elizabeth produces one of the most amusing declarations in literature, illustrating brilliantly the blindness of pride. Collins enumerates his reasons for marrying, including the admission that he came ‘...into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife…’(105). When Elizabeth declines his proposal he is undiscouraged.

‘...perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character.’

‘Really, Mr. Collins,’ cried Elizabeth, with some warmth, ‘you puzzle me exceedingly. If what I have hitherto said can appear to you in the form of encouragement, I know not how to express my refusal in such a way as may convince you of its being one.’

‘You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course…’(108).

In this scene, characters are speaking in unequivocal terms. Yet, Collins is so unprepared for Elizabeth's reply he refuses to believe it is genuine. The truth, expressed in ‘merely words’ becomes a game since words may be used to disguise real meaning. Interpretation remains flexible, providing yet another example of characters imposing their own feelings and motives onto their interpretations of the feelings and motives of others. Collins's logic is perfectly understandable even if it fails to account for values differing from his own. He rejects Elizabeth's honesty because he thinks she uses words as insincerely as he does. Elizabeth's moral integrity and appeal are founded on her care and precision with language. Even when Elizabeth expresses herself ironically, she intends to be understood, and her sensitivity to the communication process allows her to enjoy the multiple messages encoded in any utterance. In clearly expressing her rejection of Collin’s proposal,

74 Fergus, p. 93.
Elizabeth prefers a blunt, direct and honest response which will cost the least pain to both.

Later, Elizabeth thanks Charlotte for occupying Mr Collins's attention and keeping him in a good humour, unaware that her friend is encouraging Collins's courtship. Charlotte's acceptance of Collins stuns Elizabeth: ‘Engaged to Mr. Collins! my dear Charlotte,—impossible!’(124). This failure to believe stated ‘truths’ occurs frequently: Mrs Bennet absolutely contradicts the announcement of Charlotte's engagement (126); Jane and her parents refuse to take Elizabeth seriously when she announces her engagement to Darcy. Not only may characters misunderstand; or become misinformed, they indicate from their incredulity that they fail to grasp the motivations and emotional involvements that occur around them. For all their apparent intimacy, characters remain very distant and secretive. The narrator observes ‘The strangeness of Mr. Collins's making two offers of marriage within three days, was nothing in comparison of his being now accepted.’ (125). If Elizabeth's confidence in her judgement and the laws of probability needs shaking, the behaviour of Mr Collins and Charlotte Lucas provides an example of human nature's complexity, and adds to the catalogue of attitudes that impair perception and judgement. Mrs Bennet is silly; Mr Bennet: cynical; Jane sees the world through rose-coloured glasses; Wickham practices deliberate deceit. Miss Bingley is insincere; William Lucas is a creature of social forms. Charlotte and Collins reveal themselves to be materialistic and insensitive to emotional and intellectual needs, and motivated by value systems completely opposed to Elizabeth's.

Readers may find a number contradictory ways to assess events in the text, as thousands of pages of criticism confirm. One of the most intriguing questions raised by *Pride and Prejudice* concerns the soundness of Charlotte Lucas's decision to marry Mr Collins. While it is possible to excuse Charlotte's marriage to Mr Collins as an expedient solution in Charlotte's situation, and a relatively happy outcome for a woman who never pretends to be romantic, Stuart Tave argues strongly against such a reading. Citing Austen's own letters to her niece who was contemplating marriage to a man she no longer loved, Tave asks what ought Charlotte Lucas do rather than marry Mr Collins? His answer: ‘… anything…To be an impoverished old maid is a misfortune, but to marry Mr Collins is immoral.’ If Elizabeth is surprised and even disillusioned by Charlotte's decision, she steadfastly refuses to sacrifice her principles for material comforts or relative financial security. Elizabeth demonstrates

the kind of moral and intellectual integrity that make her a great heroine chiefly because she will not betray her principles, and readers are positioned to share her attitudes and applaud her decision. Charlotte's and later Lydia's conduct serves to contrast with Elizabeth's ethical ideals. Her quest is for dignity, and a relationship founded on respect, esteem and affection. These qualities are evident in Darcy, although Elizabeth takes a long time to recognise them.

The opening of the second volume presents a series of events requiring judgements by characters that reflect their attitudes and the ways in which incomplete information can be interpreted. The strong moral censure of Bingley's unexplained abandonment of Jane indicates Austen's condemnation of any conduct that causes suffering. Elizabeth sums up her case when she says

… without scheming to do wrong, or to make others unhappy, there may be error, and there may be misery. Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people's feelings, and want of resolution will do the business. (136)

It was, after all, Elizabeth's hurt feelings that led to her prejudice against Darcy. Jane's broken heart causes pain to both sisters. When Wickham becomes engaged to Miss King, an heiress, Elizabeth excuses his defection as prudent concern for financial security, supplying further evidence that Elizabeth's prejudices continue to impair her judgement because she is prepared to interpret Wickham's behaviour in a favourable light it does not merit. Readers may well have doubted his motives and integrity long before Elizabeth. For example, she excuses his initial conversation on the 'commonest, dullest, most threadbare topic' (76) because his skills as a speaker disguise it. When Caroline Bingley suggests Wickham treated Darcy in 'a most infamous manner' (94) and Jane confirms Wickham's questionable character (95) readers are invited to exercise caution. Hence, both Jane and Elizabeth are hurt by callous behaviour that readers may be better able to understand because readers have had the benefit of narration which creates a wider perspective from which to interpret material. Moreover, readers have been deciphering a tale told with irony and humour which must invite alternative interpretations that characters within the text—even clever ones like Elizabeth—have not been privileged to share.

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77 Marilyn Butler writes in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) ‘What makes *Pride and Prejudice* especially baffling is that the form taken by intelligence in the novel is so seductive. The reader cannot help admiring Elizabeth's wit and sharing her lively and satirical vision…’(p. 216) But Butler goes on to accuse Austen of producing ‘...an effect dreaded by the moral novelist…that of presenting a faulty heroine whose very errors were attractive.’ (p. 217) Elizabeth's faults allow readers to identify with her because they are faults shared by real people. Elizabeth's education is also available to real people, and is equally attractive.
Elizabeth's visit to Hunsford re-establishes contact with Darcy, and provides the setting for an animated conversation involving Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and Darcy (174-6). Elizabeth playfully engages both men in the articulate, ironic and humorous dialogue at which she excels. Through these lively exchanges, characters reveal their mastery of logic and their ethical principles. Language and conversation distinguish the real qualities that social and economic hierarchies fail to recognise. Darcy learns to value Elizabeth despite her relative poverty because he respects the qualities of her mind as they are revealed in conversation. Undaunted, charmingly impertinent Elizabeth attacks Darcy for what she sees as his attempt to alarm her. Military language underlines this tactical exchange. When she accuses Darcy of trying to frighten her, he *smilingly* replies that she could not be serious in attributing to him such an intent. He observes that he has ‘had the pleasure of her acquaintance’ long enough to hear her express ideas that may not reflect her real opinions. Elizabeth's concern that the Colonel will distrust her if Darcy's allegation is believed suggests her attempt to establish credibility with the Colonel, emphasising that Elizabeth wishes to be understood and believed. Her ironic remarks signal her desire to communicate on several levels.

When Elizabeth forewarns the Colonel to prepare himself ‘for something very dreadful’, readers too are aroused. The ‘dreadful’ event, described in mock-serious language, is presented as a crime, forcing Darcy to defend himself. Elizabeth is not only confronting him to assuage her hurt feelings. She is forcing him to recognise how his actions have an impact on other people's feelings; compelling him to understand himself. Elizabeth's statements about Darcy's conduct at the Netherfield Ball remind readers of the scene by her allusions to it. Elizabeth's retelling allows her to ‘retaliate’ for Darcy's original offence without threatening his dignity. She even elicits Darcy's confession that his judgement may have been faulty. He expresses his defence with enough ambiguity to leave readers and Elizabeth several interpretations. Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam attribute Darcy’s hesitation to dance as indolent arrogance.

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78 ‘Deceptions, such as lies, hoaxes, hypocrisy, white lies and equivocations, which purport to convey a truth but do not, may also be seen as contrasts of appearance and reality...But the modern ironist...dissembles or rather, pretends, not in order to be believed but...in order to be understood. In deceptions there is an appearance that is proffered and a reality that is withheld, but in irony the real meaning is meant to be inferred either from what the ironist says or from the context in which he says it; it is ‘withheld’ only in the weak sense that it is not explicit or not meant to be immediately apprehensible. If among an ironist's audience there are those who are not meant to understand, then what we have in relation to them is a hoax or an equivocation, not an irony, though their non-apprehension may well enhance the pleasure of the irony for the real audience. Insinuations and innuendoes, where the person addressed is invited to complete by inference what has been left unsaid, may be intended to inform or to mislead...’ D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (London and New York: Methuen, 1970)*The Critical Idiom*, Ed. John D. Jump, pp. 35-6.
Darcy's explanation suggests otherwise. Bias prevents Elizabeth from understanding that Darcy's sincerity is of greater value than the social facade so effectively exploited by ingratiating manipulators like Wickham. When Darcy later comments that ‘disguise of every sort is my abhorrence’ (192), the genuine reluctance he describes here may be accepted as a real motivation for his behaviour. Elizabeth cleverly compares his social hesitation to her own performance on the piano, to which Darcy makes a generous, ambiguous reply that escapes Elizabeth's understanding. He commends the use to which she has put her time, possibly complimenting her musicianship but more likely referring to her witty conversation. His final statement describes their joint preference for intimacy: neither performs for strangers; confirming they are strangers no longer.

Elizabeth's teasing repartee with Darcy delights him, while his willingness to be teased indicates his interest and affection. Consistent with his behaviour at Netherfield, he initiates conversation and joins those in which Elizabeth is participating. Elizabeth's failure to understand the reasons for his attentions suggests she is naive about her ability to attract him, a humility that is itself attractive. In the opening of Chapter X, Volume II, the narrator informs readers that Darcy often encounters Elizabeth on her walks, an occurrence Elizabeth attributes to his unaccountable perversity, particularly when she deliberately indicates her route so that he can avoid her. She continues to regard Darcy's attentions as ‘wilful ill nature’ (182) while readers must find her ‘wilful self-deception’ ironic and amusing since their own intimacy with the characters is well-established. Darcy's and Elizabeth's relationship is built over time, and readers too have been able to discover their characters. Contrasted to Collins's vacillating matrimonial designs or Wickham's negligent opportunism, the relationship of Darcy and Elizabeth is built on a substantial foundation.

iii. Breaking relationships

Elizabeth is justifiably furious when Colonel Fitzwilliam reveals Darcy's part in separating Bingley from Jane. The narrative account opening Chapter XI reports

…Elizabeth, as if intending to exasperate herself as much as possible against Mr. Darcy, chose for her employment the examination of all the letters which Jane had written to her since her being in Kent. (188).

In re-reading the same letters that had previously appeared cheerful, now ‘…Elizabeth notices every sentence conveying the idea of uneasiness.’(188). Elizabeth's changing perceptions reflect her altering interpretation of written material, much as novel readers must evaluate their analysis. At this inopportune
moment, Darcy arrives. Elizabeth is not pleased to see him, nor is she prepared for his proposal of marriage. It is conveyed to readers in free indirect discourse, capturing at once Darcy's ardour, hauteur and awareness of the ‘degradation’ such a match would be in view of Elizabeth's social and financial inferiority.

As he said this, she could easily see that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He spoke of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security. Such a circumstance could only exasperate farther… (189).

Narration presents Elizabeth's thoughts in free indirect discourse, positioning readers to accept her interpretation of Darcy's attitude. She has already received a proposal from an arrogant man who expected her positive response. Darcy, aware of his desirability, also anticipates Elizabeth's acceptance, especially since he has misunderstood her impertinence as playful encouragement of his advances. Typifying Austen's handling of dialogue, Elizabeth's response is conveyed in direct speech, allowing readers to hear the original and unexpected conversation that follows. When banalities are exchanged, or when characters are well-known to readers, much of their speech is summarised, crediting the reader's ability to imagine the obvious. But when characters diverge from expected practice, their reactions are individual and interesting. Direct speech captures these exchanges, enabling readers to hear and experience heightened moments of interaction. For a second time Elizabeth is offered an opportunity to marry into wealth; for a second time she resolutely refuses the offer.

Chapter XII contains Darcy's letter, presented to Elizabeth after she deliberately alters her usual walk, hoping to avoid him. Darcy must put his testimony into writing, compelling Elizabeth to examine the evidence carefully; repeatedly, and without recourse to wit. The letter is provided in its entirety, so Elizabeth and readers simultaneously read it. Darcy's eloquence, elevated diction confirming Bingley's observation that he ‘…studies too much for words of four syllables…’(48) and his attempt to present an impartial account of his actions contains genuine sympathy for Elizabeth's feelings. While asserting that he writes without intention of causing pain, and insists that ‘…farther apology would be absurd. . .’(197) he

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apologises several times, but feels that he has a right to demand Elizabeth's attention because he deserves her justice. The letter reveals Darcy's interpretation of events already presented to readers from Elizabeth's perspective. It also provides information previously unavailable. Darcy feels that his character and moral integrity have been damaged by Elizabeth's misunderstanding. In offering his defence, Darcy provides her with necessary information to correct her errors of judgement which present threats to her own well-being. He concludes his ‘…faithful narrative…’(202) referring Elizabeth to Colonel Fitzwilliam for corroboration. The language reveals a composed, scrupulous and compassionate character. Elizabeth savours its probable truths as she reads and re-reads it. Readers follow her analysis, and are able to measure her interpretation against the additional evidence with which narrative has provided them.

Chapter XIII reveals in narration Elizabeth's reactions to the letter, opening with a narrative subjunctive sentence that sets the tone of uncertainty necessary for Elizabeth's enlightenment. ‘Her feelings as she read were scarcely to be defined. With amazement…’(204) the second sentence begins, emphasising her response of emotional turmoil rather than rational composure.

She read, with an eagerness which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of the one before her eyes. (204).

Here the real and the imaginary conspire to deceive Elizabeth, whose prejudicial biases still sway her common sense. Darcy is wrong about Jane's feelings, but he is not entirely wrong and Elizabeth must learn to recognise his perceptual errors as well as his capacity to understand correctly. Readers are given a summary of the contents of the letter, broken by Elizabeth's agitated and incredulous responses, sometimes directly quoted; sometimes incorporated into the narrative account of the letter itself. For many readers, Darcy's vindication of his actions will be applauded, while Elizabeth persists in ‘all her original dislike.’ Elizabeth put [the letter] hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, that she would never look in it again.

…[In] half a minute the letter was unfolded again, and collecting herself as well as she could, she again began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham, and commanded herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence…[When] she read and re-read with the closest attention…she was forced to hesitate. She put down the letter, weighted every
circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality—deliberated on the probability of each statement—but with little success. On both sides it was only assertion. Again she read on. But every line proved more clearly that the affair, which she had believed it impossible that any conduct in it less than infamous, was capable of a turn which must make [Darcy] entirely blameless throughout the whole. (205).

Narration records Elizabeth's gradual realisation through the slow absorption of ideas that change her interpretation and understanding. This mirrors reader experience of sifting facts from fictions in establishing what is real. From many sources of information, truth must finally rest on an authoritative foundation. In this case, the most authoritative voice is Darcy's as presented in his written 'affidavit'. Elizabeth's discovery is presented in sentences which are broken by dashes, compelling Elizabeth and readers to consider and reconsider the evidence. As her biased blindness begins to mend, Elizabeth experiences an unnerving realisation that not only has she been wrong about many of her deductions, but also her ability to make deductions, on which she prides herself, is fallible.

Readers have been sharing Elizabeth's perceptions and will continue to do so. Hers is the central story, so it is important to appreciate why Jane Austen endorses Elizabeth's method of gaining knowledge. While Elizabeth is obviously flawed in some of her thinking, she

...has the capacity to test her beliefs against her experience and form new beliefs on that basis...She has learned how difficult acquiring knowledge really is; consequently besides renouncing her former belief, she renounces, too, her former brash sense of confidence in her own insight. Thus, one might conjecture that it is not for her opinions about the world that Austen metaphysically rewards Elizabeth, but for her comprehension of the structure of knowledge.

Elizabeth's humiliation educates her about the epistemological problems confronting seekers of truth in a world where experience constantly alters interpretation. While

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81 '...a person's mode, his system of perceiving and conceiving reality is creative. Understanding the world necessarily involves a system, and every system at least partially creates its object. No statement ever directly tests itself against reality, for a single statement is always embedded in a theory...[Pride and Prejudice] exhibits the different interpretative models, the divergent theoretical structures, by which characters understand the world...[No] one of the characters' systems is clearly superior to all the others.' Martha Satz, pp. 176-177. Satz identifies four cardinal propositions of Platonic belief based on the equation of knowledge with good: 1) Moral virtue is equivalent to knowledge... 2) Those who are wisest are best; those who are not virtuous fail because they lack knowledge... 3) Ideally, reason should control feelings... 4) Only when beliefs are subjugated to the painstaking test of reason do they result in knowledge.' pp. 177-8.

82 Satz, 182.
Austen sees ethical principles as a constant, behaviour may reveal or conceal motives that are determined only over time, and are subject to review. To err may be human, but to err repeatedly indicates that no useful learning has occurred and this is a serious failing which Austen's heroines must and do overcome.

Chapter XII and XIII are central to the narrative; the action, and the structure of the novel, presenting the pivot-point upon which Elizabeth's and readers' understanding of the fiction must balance. The narrator has contributed to some of the surprise since reader perspective has been closely aligned with Elizabeth's. If she learns more slowly than readers, it is chiefly because she has not had the benefit of information provided by the narrator, nor the ability to distance herself so that characters' reactions can be accurately, impartially gauged. After close scrutiny of evidence and the devastating realisation that 'vanity...has been [her] folly' (208), Elizabeth achieves humiliating and enlightening self-knowledge. Even for observant readers who have avoided Elizabeth's errors, she wins sympathy and maintains appeal because she heroically confronts knowledge that shatters her self-image. Elizabeth's imperfections mirror those of her readers who are equally capable of error when exercising their powers of perception and logic to discover the nature of truth. Learning from her mistakes, Elizabeth provides a good role model for readers who may still feel they are wise enough to avoid misjudgments. If narrative technique in the fictional world has manipulated readers into false confidence about their own interpretations, it has done so in mimicry of the real world where information-gathering and processing is continuous and dynamic. Beliefs formed on the basis of data at one time must be subject to revision when new data become available. This is what Elizabeth is prepared to accept. She learns that hearsay evidence is not admissible; that a single instance of observation is insufficient in trying to understand someone's character; and that one must be discerning, open-minded and generous in learning about people.

In addition, Elizabeth's enlightenment requires not only that she re-interpret information, but she must accept that communication is a process open to alternative and sometimes contradictory readings. Darcy's reluctance to dance with a partner to whom he has not been introduced could be seen as snobbery; arrogance; timidity; laziness; all or none of these. When he refrains from revealing George Wickham's

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83 ‘...to know thyself is to be thyself and survive with independence, integrity, and responsibility; it means removing the self-delusions and personal weaknesses which distort our vision of the world outside, and understanding ourselves by recognising the human limitations and aspirations we share with others.’ Ira Konigsberg, Narrative Techniques in the English Novel Defoe to Austen, (Hamden, Conn: Archon Books, Shoe String Press, 1985), p. 234. Elizabeth's education demonstrates the same kind of growth which readers are positioned to experience through their engagement with the text.
conduct, his reticence could be regarded as irresponsible indifference or noble disinclination to discredit a young man who might win favour and self-improvement. Darcy's decision to reveal his relationship to Wickham occurs when Darcy is ‘master enough’ (202) of himself to express the truth, with control. His is not a vindictive, but an informative gesture. His written testimony, his authoritative demand that Elizabeth read his case, and the fluent, formal prose style in which he presents his ideas contributes not only to his moral stature, but underscores the power of written language. His letter is a demonstration of the nobility of communication requiring above all presence of mind, precision with words, and a receptive, imaginative and sympathetic reader.

When Elizabeth finally recognises her perceptual delusions, her language and thoughts take on the tasks previously handled by the narrator.

Elizabeth Bennet now employs this language in a cognisant and accurate way—she is at last aware of the moral and social issues involved in her relationships with Darcy and Wickham, issues which we have been aware of all along. Her proper use of this language now marks the close proximity of her intelligence and awareness to those of the narrator. At this point in the novel, Elizabeth's moral consciousness is sufficiently developed for her to perceive and articulate the values which Austen wishes to communicate through her work. The narrative voice need no longer be so concerned with enlightening the reader through commentary and irony since the heroine has become a dramatic embodiment and spokesman for all the correct values.

Many critics have observed that the novel changes in structure and tone from the point when Elizabeth reaches her enlightenment. She is isolated by her need to conceal information and her desire to avoid dissembling. Thus, Elizabeth's usually playful conversational interchanges are restricted. She is learning to moderate her responses to allow for uncertainties, thus intensifying narrative concentration on the internal world of thoughts and feelings. Her ironic exchanges with Darcy disappear since her appreciation of his character undergoes a significant change. She thinks more; weighs information with care and speaks less. ‘Elizabeth's former frankness is replaced by restraint because [she] is now denied the idiom of absolute certainty.'

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84 Konigsberg, p. 242.
85 Mooneyham, p. 65.
iv. Re-building relationships

Elizabeth's response to Darcy's letter (204-207) demonstrates Austen's versatility in combining various narrative techniques. By presenting the letter, Darcy is allowed to speak for himself, in the first person. Elizabeth's immediate reactions are conveyed through her direct speech (‘This must be false! This cannot be!…’); flashback (‘She could see him instantly before her…’), narrative report indicated by exclamations (‘But, alas!…’); and a rich combination of free indirect discourse and narrative summary. The shifts in viewpoint, achieved through the use of these and other narrative techniques, allow readers to understand the intense emotional response of the heroine while at the same time providing detachment to permit objective analysis. Since omniscient narration informs readers better than the heroine, their enjoyment of this scene must be in part a result of Darcy finally demanding the justice he deserves by commanding Elizabeth's undivided attention through a written account of his story.

Many letters are referred to or printed throughout the novel so Elizabeth's enlightenment, resulting from information gained through a letter, corresponds to other important communication in the text. By using a variety of narrative techniques, Austen exploits the individualised language and perspective of characters without losing control of the plot's forward momentum or immediacy of reader involvement. Such variety also disguises repetitions. For example: Jane summarises and quotes directly from Caroline Bingley's letter concerning the party leaving Netherfield. ‘She then read the first sentence aloud…The next was in these words…’[quoted directly]…(116). Readers need not be told what the first sentence contains, although it would be possible to construct it. The text gives only what is needed. In Volume II Chapter III, several letters between Jane and Elizabeth are referred to, with important quotes provided; culminating in this narrative comment preceding Jane's letter which is printed in full ‘The letter which she wrote on this occasion to her sister, will prove what she felt.’(147-8). Here the narrator speaks to readers with the authority of an attorney offering irrefutable evidence. Again, letters speak convincingly because the written word endures to be studied, shared, interpreted and quoted. Written text traverses time and space, and exerts influence far beyond the limitations of speech or conversation. Indeed, conversation encourages playful exchanges for the purpose of entertainment while letters and

86 Chapman and others contend that Pride and Prejudice had been written originally in epistolary form; that Austen's re-working indicates her dissatisfaction with the limitations of this genre, while the retention of so many letters and references to them reveals remnants of the original design.
other forms of writing must convey to readers information that confers authority on the writer as in a monologue. Witty repartee becomes more problematic when exchanges occur over time. Thus, letters tend to focus on the truth and the real because the words alone must bear the burden of communication. Letters provide substantial and enduring content, as demonstrated throughout this and other Austen novels because writing is subject to study and examination.

As if to confirm the power of the written word, the final chapters include a number of letters, printed in full; or summarised in narration that captures precisely the attitudes and language of their writers. Elizabeth's wedding announcement to the Gardiners, mention of Darcy's letter to Lady Catherine, and Mr Bennet's reply to Mr Collins all appear in succession (382-3). Elizabeth and Darcy sit down together to attend to their correspondence

…in an equable and friendly silence. That the reader is meant to compare this scene to the earlier letter-writing scene with Miss Bingley is made explicit by Elizabeth's comment to Darcy as she hands him some writing-paper: ‘if I had not a letter to write myself, I might sit beside you and admire the evenness of your writing as another young lady once did.' (382)

Besides the happy ending that joins two strong, complementary personalities, such treatment of the protagonists as producers of text underlines the importance of their communication skills. They are writers as well as readers; creators of text as well as interpreters of it. Elizabeth is too busy with the project of composing text and creating a document to waste time and words in flattering her companion about his penmanship. Her sensitivity to the intellectual and moral value of language compels her to use it honestly, accurately, sparingly and for communication. Words are not for deception or frivolous games.

The final chapter opens with the novel's only first-person narrative comment, beginning ‘I wish I could say…’ that Mrs Bennet did not remain ‘…invariably silly’ (385).

In fact she could say anything she liked but what she is asking [readers] to enjoy here is the recognition of the power of what she has already created, the character of Mrs Bennet. She is saying we cannot throw on poetic justice and totally reform her…

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87 Mooneyham, p. 55.
The conclusion of this elegantly designed novel allows the narrator a deliberate announcement that the machinery of fiction is winding down, reminiscent of a similar though more outspoken narrative curtain call in *Northanger Abbey*. Such self-conscious revelation draws reader attention to the narrative process by reminding readers of the story-teller's role, at the same time pretending that the narrator can not say whatever she pleases. The ironic games of this playful narrator persist to the end, happily suggesting that fiction offers unlimited possibilities. The artistic perfection of *Pride and Prejudice* may have dictated the ending presented, but other tales could be imagined. What readers choose to believe is still subject to the laws of probability.

*Pride and Prejudice* teaches that flexibility in thinking is crucial to the acquisition of knowledge, but care for the feelings of others remains essential. Elizabeth's mortification arises chiefly from her shame and remorse when she discovers Darcy's noble character in contrast to the image of him she created in her ignorance. Ignorance allows misunderstanding, while perception and compassion help avoid it. Through sharing Elizabeth's adventure, readers are educated to apply sound methods of information gathering and logical discrimination to interpret meaning. By creating an intimate awareness of Elizabeth's thought processes, an affectionate bond with her is deliberately fostered, which Jane Austen recognised when she wrote

> I must confess that I think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print and how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like her at least I do not know.  

Sympathy for the heroine encourages readers to exercise their compassion for others, and in learning of her fallibility, readers are taught to recognise that she is no less lovable for making mistakes. Since readers are able to understand Elizabeth's thought processes and feelings, her behaviour becomes more fascinating because readers are allowed to measure thoughts against deeds, actions by desires, and values by motives. Elizabeth's lesson about learning and life has an impact on everyone, and is expressed by Susan Morgan when she writes:

> Elizabeth…[is] brainy, believes [she can choose her] brain over her heart…Making choices without heart, turns out to mean making heartless, and stupid choices. It turns out to mean being trapped, relinquishing the very modes of perceiving that might lead [her] to see…Not to believe that[the] heroine's life can be better for what she has learned must mean to challenge the novel's premise, or to argue that the novel challenges its own premise: that to

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see better brings a chance to live better; that perceiving is a form of doing; that consciousness, education, matters; that life can be a matter of art, and even a matter of mind.\footnote{Susan Morgan, *Sisters in Time, Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) pp. 196-7.}

*Pride and Prejudice* teaches its clever hero and heroine that they must learn compassion, for there is no dignity without it. Both Darcy and Elizabeth appreciate finally that all people are entitled to be treated with understanding, that errors of judgment must be forgiven and accepted as part of the process of growth. Readers too can participate in this great lesson which underscores the importance of humility, sympathy and open-mindedness. Austen's achievement in conveying such weighty cargo in so light a vessel remains the miracle of her genius, which Jan Fergus sums up\footnote{Fergus, p. 120}

The greatness of *Pride and Prejudice* remains undefined. If it were Austen's last novel, it would be considered a perfect work of its kind, not to be surpassed. No possibility of transcending its achievements could be imagined if *Mansfield Park, Emma* and *Persuasion* had not followed it.

Austen's next novel, *Mansfield Park*, examines the plight of a disempowered child whose moral stature compensates for her social and economic deficiency. Fanny Price seems to lack even Catherine Morland's heroic potentials. She is taught to feel obligated for the self-conscious charity bestowed upon her. Her tale examines her intense emotional responses which are denied expression as she maintains her sense of duty and righteousness in a world where dignity and justice are constantly assaulted. It is a story of perseverance, fortitude and growing sense of self in a character who receives only minimum encouragement. For her next novel, Austen turns to a heroine who commands what appears to be every advantage. *Emma* examines the machinations of a young woman enjoying all the blessings of wealth, social prominence, beauty and wit. Like Catherine and Elizabeth, Emma becomes a victim of stories. Unlike her predecessors, Emma's stories are entirely of her own making.

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91 Fergus, p. 120
CHAPTER FOUR

*Emma*: Believing is Seeing

‘What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection...—M. and A.—Em—
ma.—Do you understand?’ (*Emma* p. 371)

Mr Weston's conundrum is ‘too much a matter of fact,’ in his estimation, and
‘should not have come quite so soon,’ according to Mr Knightley. But if Weston's
phrase applies to the novel, *Emma*, it accurately describes Jane Austen's masterpiece.
*Emma* provides readers with a wealth of relationships which throw into high relief
values and methods of interaction necessary to achieve intimacy. Truthfulness and
honesty are most prized, but human nature's complexities, and the intricacies
inherent in the process of communication combine to present challenges to the
pursuit of understanding. This novel, hailed as among the first great detective
stories, demonstrates that knowing is almost as much an act of faith as believing,
and sometimes it is far more dangerous. Through *Emma*, the novel, readers become
acquainted with Emma, the character, whose personality ‘opens like a fan...’
Readers are invited to join Emma in her quest for knowledge, which requires her to
undergo a humiliation similar to Elizabeth Bennet's since pride blinds both heroines

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93 Julia Prewitt Brown, ‘Civilisation and the Contentment of *Emma*, *Jane Austen's Novels Social Change and Literary Form*, (Cambridge Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard UP, 1979), p.106. ‘Seen in her innumerable relationships with others, she alters continually and gracefully, and the novel is deliberately paced to allow this...The Emma who condescends to Harriet, self-satisfied, smirking, and dictatorial, is not the Emma we see with Mr. Knightley, witty, open, and daring...We cannot think of her as we do some nineteenth-century heroines, changing under the circumstances like Darwinian organisms. Emma’s inner nature, her stability as Emma...never alters; she is still Emma...a reservoir of indeterminacy. She represents the genuine triumph of volition, for she is free to be better than she knows herself to be. She is faultless not in spite of her faults, but because of them.’
to the limitations inherent in perception and the resulting restrictions placed upon their powers of analysis.

i. Fanciful and troublesome

From the start, readers are positioned to share Emma's experiences because the narrative perspective presents much of the text from her point of view, providing subtle clues about Emma's faulty perceptions so that readers are permitted to see 'objective reality' and Emma's subjective interpretation of it as well as the consequences of mistaking the two.Narration subtly suggests ambiguities to readers which characters may regard as straight-forward or unequivocal. Consequently, this text demonstrates the complexity of communication and the variety of interpretations generated by even the simplest actions. If readers escape Emma's humiliation, they can be grateful for assistance provided by Austen's narrative technique which tells Emma's tale with compassion for her as she blunders her way through the business of being Highbury's 'first in consequence' (7). A number of strategies are employed to create sympathy for the heroine, most important among them being her sensitivity to language usage and the fine nuances of communication upon which so much of human interaction depends. Emma contrasts clever games with genuine feeling. While readers are positioned to enjoy decoding the detective story, Emma is educated to value truthfulness that transcends expression in language. Indeed, while she is a consummate manipulator of speech and communication, Emma must learn that caring for others finally finds its best expression in actions rather than words. Like Elizabeth Bennet before her who discovers the value of Darcy through his selfless exertions, and Anne Elliot for whom words fall short in capturing essential, emotional responses, Emma enjoys her own linguistic virtuosity. Until she is finally speechless, she has communicated little of value.

Austen's novel makes the communication process a subject which characters and the narrator consciously examine. Besides frequently using literary terms like narration (239), and Emma's 'mental soliloquy' (189); Mr Elton's courtship is summarised '…to use a most intelligible phrase…'(182). The narrative undercut characters with such comments as: "I have no hesitation in saying", replied Mr Elton, though hesitating a good deal while he spoke…' (82) 'The charming Augusta Hawkins' is described as having 'all the usual advantages of perfect beauty and merit' (181) expected in a novel heroine. This frequent reliance on literary terms and literary analysis in both the narration and the speeches of the characters draws reader attention to textuality and novel convention. A particularly revealing example occurs
when the prospect of organising a ball at the Crown becomes a focal point of discussion. In a speculative comment, the narrator records what characters might be thinking in reaction to the state of the hall.

The ladies here probably exchanged looks which meant, ‘Men never know when things are dirty or not;’ and the gentlemen thought each to himself, ‘Women will have their little nonsenses and needless cares.’ (253)

These thoughts of the characters are second-guessed by the narrator, an ironic distancing of this usually authoritative informant. Such a reminder keeps readers in touch with the flexibility of the narrative process by underlining the speculative nature of all deduction. At Box Hill, Emma and Frank engage in a lively, bantering exchange

…which now, in her own estimation, meant nothing, though in the judgment of most people looking on it must have had such an appearance as no English word but flirtation could very well describe. ‘Mr. Frank Churchill and Miss Woodhouse flirted together excessively.’ They were laying themselves open to that very phrase—and to having it sent off in a letter to Maple Grove by one lady, to Ireland by another. (368)

The narrator offers a definitive term emphasising Emma's and Frank's impropriety, and suggests how their conduct will be reported by two different writers in the company. Other narrators will convey stories about social conduct and colour it with their interpretations. Readers know why Emma allows Frank's gallantries. ‘She laughed because she was disappointed…’ (368) The lady correspondents are not positioned to understand her so well but their reports abroad will carry the weight of truth. Despite privileged information, readers are likely to be as surprised as Emma on occasion. Still, it is difficult to avoid sympathising with this heroine when readers must fall into some of the same traps she sets and falls into herself.

While correspondences spread stories abroad, conversations cement the social activities of Highbury, and provide dynamic evidence of language at work. Emma and the narrator draw reader attention to the nature of the discourses that individualise characters. When, for example, Emma plans to speak to Mr Elton in the carriage ‘…with exquisite calmness and gravity of the weather and the night’ she finds her subject ‘cut up’ (129) by his amorous advances. The value Emma places on the intimate conversation of Mrs Weston (117), and her desire to assist Jane Fairfax with ‘quiet, rational conversation’ (390) contrasts frequent narrative descriptions of
gossip and small talk constituting so much of social intercourse. Emma visits the Bateses prepared not to be ‘...incommoded by any troublesome topic, and to wander at large amongst all the Mistresses and Misses of Highbury and their card-parties.’ (156). Readers are exposed to tedious, self-centred small-talk when Mr Weston and Mrs Elton attempt to converse but instead exchange monologues, each about his or her favourite topic. Mrs Elton's dissertation on strawberries (358-9) is presented in one of the most economic and original passages of direct speech in the novel. Only the important words appear, beaded between dashes and moving from one pole of thought to the opposite with delightful, unconscious irony.

In fact, the novel devotes much of its focus to the tedium of conversational topics and styles, further enhancing reader interest in Emma's dialogues with Mr Knightley, which often concern ethical issues and abstract ideas. Boring characters in Emma encourage readers to exercise leniency toward Emma because while she may sometimes be irritating, she is almost always interesting.

...though we aren’t entirely bored with the fumblings of Emma’s father and the flow of Miss Bates’s free association, or the insipidities of Harriet, or the social-climbing crassness of the Eltons, of the hausfraulich simplicity of Emma’s sister, or the depressive Jane or the manic Frank, we begin to wilt under the weight of their banalities. In this temper, we have one recourse: to close the book for a while and return to the commonplaces of our own lives. But Emma has to live with these people.

‘The real “evil” or terror in Emma is the prospect of having no one properly to talk to...’ Emma’s imagination and intelligence, however ‘misapplied’, create her appeal. If Emma's conversations with Frank Churchill show her manipulated as his dupe, they serve to highlight the warmth and depth of her exchanges with Mr Knightley, for they are primarily concerned about the feelings and emotional well-being of others. Their mutual interest in ideas elevates their dialogue, and draws them together as they actively pursue social harmony. Even when Knightley reproaches Emma, the tenderness he feels for her indicates the real affection they share because in important matters they think and feel very much alike. Their mutual regard for honesty in human relations finally draws them together, however Emma may be inclined to dissemble before completing her education. Readers, influenced by Mr Knightley's regard for Emma, must extend greater sympathy to her because he

does. Likewise, readers are taught to exercise great sympathy toward Emma because she deserves ‘the best treatment...’ (452).

The epistemological questions raised in *Pride and Prejudice* are further explored in *Emma*, with the additional complication of subjective limitations influencing interpretation of experience. Where Elizabeth Bennet was duped by George Wickham's stories, Emma invents her own and determines to validate them by reading and misreading the communications she observes among those for whom she has literally ‘plotted’, providing this novel's focus on the influence of imagination and the need for its regulation. When Harriet decides to burn some relics of her infatuation with Mr Elton, Emma's thoughts are narrated in a most engaging way:

…should she proceed no farther?—should she let it pass, and seem to suspect nothing?—Perhaps Harriet might think her cold or angry if she did; or perhaps if she were totally silent, it might only drive Harriet into asking her to hear too much; and against any thing like such an unreserve as had been, such an open and frequent discussion of hopes and chances she was perfectly resolved.—She believed it would be wiser for her to say and know at once, all that she meant to say and know. Plain dealing was always best. (341).

Here, Emma's concerns unfold in a series of questions that indicate her sensitivity to the non-verbal content of communication. Hesitation and silence speak volumes. Discriminating fine points of meaning in the way conversations evolve demonstrates Emma's alert attention to language. She must make her assessments and decisions quickly to avoid hesitations that might be misleading. Such consciousness emphasises the complexity and delicacy of interactions. Since Emma and readers have already endured Harriet's love-sick pining, Emma's careful tactics to avoid a repeat must be applauded by readers who will share Emma's fate. It is clear to her that ‘plain dealing’ (341) is best, and so without naming names, Emma thinks Harriet aspires to Frank Churchill, an ironic misunderstanding unintentionally created by assumptions and withholding of information. The very determination to gain knowledge biases Emma and further distorts her view of reality. She has yet to learn that subjectivity imperils perception of broader possibilities, which invariably are needed to gain understanding.
Characters also engage in story telling which directly advances the plot and adds to its dramatic ironies. For example, Miss Bates concludes her account of Jane's letter by admitting ‘…she tells her own story a great deal better then I can tell it for her.’ (162) Harriet ‘…wanted…to give the history of her hopes…’ (409) regarding Mr Knightley's affection, resulting in ‘…the wonderful story of Jane Fairfax [being]…quite sunk and lost.’ (408). Other stories enjoy a vogue: the Crown Ball is eclipsed by Harriet's encounter with the gipsies, highlighted by its handling in the narrative which focuses attention on the problems and blessings associated with imagination. The narrator reports:

Such an adventure as this,—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way, could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain. So Emma thought, at least. Could a linguist, could a grammarian, could even a mathematician have seen what she did, have witnessed their appearance together, and heard their history of it, without feeling that circumstances had been at work to make them peculiarly interesting to each other?—How much more must an imaginist, like herself, be on fire with speculation and foresight!—especially with such a ground-work of anticipation as her mind had already made. (334-5).

Emma's speculation is compared to statistical probabilities entertained by scientists and academic researchers, emphasising the mock-authority Emma attempts to exploit. Her imagination, primed with the romantic fantasies of popular fiction, could hardly be expected to miss the implications of this adventure. Indeed, the suggestion here is that an ‘imaginist’ operates with authority of similar stature to empirical researchers, and that imaginative enterprises deserve professional status because knowledge and fantasy share common value. Emma is prepared to believe that a coincidental event, such as Mr Dixon's rescue of Jane Fairfax, provides sufficient motivation for two people to fall in love. She fails to recognise that her own association with Mr Knightley, spanning many years, represents a more realistic basis for creating an enduring relationship. Still simplistic and immature, Emma plays games with emotional attachments between other people as though they were dolls. The narrative conclusion to Chapter III, Volume III suggests that Emma needed correction from her nephews when she altered her telling of the gipsy story in the ‘slightest particular.’ (336). Other tales are described in terms of their merit: ‘Mr Knightley and Harriet Smith!—…The attachment of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax became commonplace, threadbare, stale in the comparison…’ (413). Such a
profusion of stories, and story-tellers allows diversity in the main narrative, and comparison of the merits evident in each tale and in the techniques of each tale-teller. Miss Bates rambles without structure; Jane Fairfax reveals little; Frank Churchill suggests and deceives through innuendo. But the novel provides readers with even more reason to analyse narrative technique.

Dialogues and monologues transform characters into narrators. Of the ninety characters mentioned in Emma, only thirteen speak directly in major roles; thirty-five have speech reported, creating a sense of social density without cluttering the narrative. Emma unfolds many scenes like scripted dialogue, featuring some of Austen's most voluble characters. Miss Bates, for example, reports all: no inside view is needed or possible. ‘What is before me, I see…’(176) and she conveys it without editing, including the entire contents of Jane Fairfax's letter (157-62) while Emma and readers ‘…escape the letter itself.’(162). Chapter II, Volume II concludes with Miss Bates extemporising on Mr Knightley's gift of apples. The narrator reports ‘the visitors walked upstairs without having any regular narration,’(239) linking Miss Bates’ interminable articulation to novel narrative. Narration is necessary in novels; but Austen's artistry in using words with economy and precision produces pleasure for readers who choose to experience life transformed into a linguistic adventure. Miss Bates mimics tedious talkers, yet she effectively conveys much information that detectives both within the novel, and reading it, rely upon as they gather evidence. While she is poor in matters of finance, she commands a wealth of information and her generosity in sharing it makes her an invaluable colleague. Readers must find her amusing because she is so happy, kind, and has so many counterparts in the real world.

Other characters describe actions and reactions of their associates which helps to structure textual reality with a convincingly complex overlaying of information sources. Since so much of the plot is propelled by conversation, report, letters and coincidental encounters, readers gain information in a manner that reflects real experience. This helps to reduce awareness of the authorial manipulation required to structure the plot. It also diversifies the narrative voices responsible for telling Austen's story. Such a use of character report sweeps readers into the action of the dinner party at the Westons’, for example, or encourages readers to feel themselves dancing at the Crown Ball. Narrative enhances this kaleidoscopic sense

of reality, suggesting stream of consciousness, yet preserving a logic, order and integrity that avoids confusion. Emma creates certainty from the conflicting possibilities of experience because she is so confident of her ability to judge. Careful handling of narrative allows readers to observe, without confusion, the complexity of experience and perhaps interpret with equal certainty.

Emma is herself an agent of narration. She reports what she knows as well as what she believes, and in acting accordingly, demonstrates Austen's understanding of personality as a manifestation of subjectivity. Furthermore, Emma is shown to express herself eloquently, fancifully, and sometimes deceptively. Her growth in moral integrity largely reflects her realisation that honesty is the best policy, and that language usage reveals moral stature. Emma, a self-conscious ‘novelist’ in her own right, structures plots and sub-plots for her associates. Throughout the text, Emma's consciousness of novelistic conventions, language usage and discourse analysis is foregrounded in narrative report of her thoughts and feelings. For example, Miss Bates is ‘…a great talker upon little matters…’(21). Emma views her father's evening guests as capable of producing ‘quiet prosings …’(22); and Robert Martin ‘…bore a part in [Harriet's] narrative…’(28). Mr Elton is the ‘hero’ (81) as later Jane Fairfax becomes the ‘fair heroine’(220). Emma happily arranges plots while characters busily pursue their own, each inclined to misunderstand machinations undertaken by others. Readers and characters must discriminate between known ‘facts’ and conjectures. Both must assess conduct and behaviour as well as disengage, whenever possible, Emma’s biased readings through which so much of the evidence is presented. When Emma finally recognises the limitations of subjectivity, she can begin to appreciate how complex, dynamic and mysterious communication can be.

Narrative handling of Jane Fairfax ensures that Emma remains the central figure in the novel. Jane Fairfax’s case history is presented in a page that summarises her sympathetic plight: orphaned, talented, educated, impoverished, and destined to join the ‘slave trade’ in human intellect as a governess.

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97 Julia Prewitt Brown observes that the ironic method of comprehension as presented in Austen's narrative demonstrates Austen's recognition that consciousness is realised at different moments. ‘All planes intersect, overlap, and blend in various ways; the individual consciousness is pliable, indefinite, expansive, decaying, and capable of change…This intuition of the malleability of individual beings and the potential cohesiveness of their experience is realised in the subject matter of the novels.’ ‘An Introduction’, Jane Austen's Novels, pp. 36-7.

98 ‘Emma is a bad “novelist” who is the central subject of a great novel.’ Tanner Jane Austen, p. 202.
…she had resolved at one-and-twenty to complete the sacrifice, and retire from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever. (165).

Such emotive narrative clearly conveys her situation, starkly contrasted to Emma’s comfortable life of luxury.\footnote{Wayne Booth comments on Jane Fairfax that she is a ‘more sympathetic person than Emma herself. Jane is superior to Emma in most respects except the stroke of good fortune that made Emma the heroine of the book.’ ‘Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s Emma ’ (1961) appearing in Jane Austen Emma A Casebook , David Lodge, ed., (London: Macmillan & Co., 1968), p. 200.} The heightened, somewhat melodramatic register may also indicate Jane's exaggerated anxiety as she faces the prospect of work, and perhaps is calculated to distance readers from her situation. Ironically, Jane Fairfax combines all of the character traits usually attributed to fictional heroines, yet Emma imagines for her only the most unbecoming plots. The paragraph describing Emma’s feelings about Jane Fairfax slips from pseudo-narrative into free indirect discourse:

Emma was sorry;—to have to pay civilities to a person she did not like through three long months!—to be always doing more than she wished, and less than she ought! (166).

Phrases and clauses broken by exclamation marks and dashes capture her agitation, as well as her attempt to justify ‘…a dislike so little just—every imputed fault was…magnified by fancy…’ (167). Reminiscent of Elizabeth's attitude toward Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, logic and compassion toward others may not always prevail.

Emma ascribes the role of heroine to Harriet and Jane, but never to herself. Because Emma depends upon novel conventions to create her own heroes and heroines, she blinds herself to the real heroism required for meeting life's challenges. Harriet's mysterious background; Jane's orphaned and impoverished condition; even Frank's complicated removal from Highbury provide scope for Emma's imagination. As David Monaghan observes, Emma's imaginary world allows her to survive the dull round of daily life repressed by an inert parent.\footnote{Monaghan, Jane Austen Structure and Social Vision, (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1980) pp. 120-124.} She recognises Frank Churchill as a hero, although he behaves callously. When Emma discovers Jane is being conveyed home in Mr Knightley’s carriage, Mrs Weston suggests a match between Jane and Mr Knightley, which Emma berates. ‘My dear Mrs Weston, do not take to match-making. You do it very ill.’(225). Later, during the same conversation, Mrs Weston suggests that the piano was a gift from Mr Knightley and Emma scolds her ‘You take up an idea, Mrs. Weston, and run away with it…’(226) which is almost a direct quotation of Miss Bates ‘One takes up a notion, and runs away with
it.’(176). Emma continues to criticise attitudes and ideas articulated by others, yet fails to recognise them in herself. Her warnings pertain equally to readers, who must be guessing themselves into the same tangles. Experience changes interpretation, and the evidence is obvious only when viewed retrospectively.

Thus, when Frank Churchill meets Emma and Harriet in Ford’s shop, describing himself as ‘…the wretchedest being in the world at a civil falsehood,’ (234) Emma says she doesn't believe him. He is later proven to be quite proficient at misleading people and lying. Emma is persuaded that Frank can be as insincere as his neighbours (242), yet her skill in sifting her words through her intended purposes reveals her own artifice. Emma feels for Jane’s situation ‘compassion and respect’ (168), even lamenting ‘that Highbury afforded no young man worthy of giving her independence; nobody she could wish to scheme about for her.’(168). Emma neglects to consider Frank as a suitable partner for Jane, possibly because she has other plans for him. Her first impulses, again, are to find Jane a worthy young man and to scheme. However, Jane and Emma spend an evening at Hartfield which confirms Emma’s previous aversions, and Chapter II, Volume II ends with the narrative comment ‘Emma could not forgive her.’(169). The same sentence opens Chapter III. Narrative reveals, however, that while Emma’s attitude is reinforced, Mr Knightley wishes to commend Emma’s kindness toward Jane since he is unaware of Emma’s true feelings. This narrative refrain—musically repeating the important, lingering hostility, provides a clever device for keeping readers in touch with the characters’ feelings. When Knightley’s comments later attempt to compliment Emma's conduct, her reply ‘I was pleased with my own perseverance in asking questions and amused to think how little information I obtained’ (171) demonstrates both Emma’s honesty and subtle understatement. It is a good example of what Marilyn Butler describes when she says Emma ‘…avoids telling the full truth, but she does not tell lies, nor go out of her way to mislead others.'  

While her social sensitivity makes such tact desirable, it also illustrates that gamesmanship with truth can lead to misunderstanding. Emma may feel that Jane’s reserve denies an intimacy initiated by Emma's questions. Later, when Frank Churchill and Emma discuss Emma’s relationship to Jane, Emma admits that her own ‘wickedness…was prone to take disgust towards a girl so idolised and so cried up as she always was…’(203). Emma mentions Jane’s ‘reserve’; Frank calls it a most ‘repulsive quality’ and goes on to state: ‘One cannot love a reserved person.’ (203). One can and he does, but his

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lie here represents another attempt to mislead and deceive, compared to which Emma’s deceptions seem harmless.

iii. Emma's plotting authority

Emma's versatile language use confers one of her greatest charms, and creates her authority. She minimalises and objectifies characters by attaching adjectives to their names which are used by others, as in: ‘poor Harriet’ (twice on 402 and 450). Harriet, Robert Martin and Mr Wingfield gain indefinite articles as does Mrs Elton (182-3). Yet, Emma can quote her father, anticipating that he will call her ‘poor’ Emma (464) when her betrothal to Mr Knightley is revealed. Emma's attitudes toward her associates indicate her assessment of their net worth, and her arrogance. This effectively influences reader response by diminishing minor characters' stature. Mrs Elton's arrival is treated with the same uncertainty in the opening of Chapter XIV, where visits needed to be paid in order ‘to settle whether she were very pretty indeed, or only rather pretty, or not pretty at all.’(270). While outwardly composed and diplomatic, Emma's private response to Mrs Elton is an amusing outburst bristling with dashes and spiked with exclamation marks.

‘Insufferable woman!’ was her immediate exclamation. ‘Worse than I had supposed. Absolutely insufferable! Knightley!—could not have believed it. Knightley!—never seen him in her life before, and call him Knightley!—and discover that he is a gentleman! A little upstart, vulgar being, with her Mr. E., and her caro sposo, and her resources, and all her airs of pert pretension and under-bred finery…’ (279)

Emma's sensitivity to Mrs Elton's linguistic style displays her own eloquence, elegance and social grace. It is also through linguistic style that social position and class are established. Emma is not fooled by Mrs Elton because Emma is a perceptive discourse analyst. Significantly, later in the same expostulation, Emma considers how Frank Churchill would react to Mrs Elton, but she stops herself,

Ah! there I am—thinking of him directly. Always the first person to be thought of! How I catch myself out! (279)

Emma does indeed catch herself out, neglecting to notice that it is Mr Knightley of whom she first thinks. If readers miss the reference as Emma does, it is not surprising since the energy of her response to Mrs Elton explodes in a verbal tirade of suppressed indignation that carries readers with it. Still, the clue is there. Real
appeal, however, is created through the eloquent prose in which Emma expresses herself, or through which her thoughts and feelings are conveyed. The passages revealing Emma's enlightenment celebrate her moral growth in ‘the writing’s unboastfully poetic vigour’. A few examples taken from Chapter XI Volume III illustrate Austen's care in creating a sympathetic response for her leading lady:

A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched—she admitted—she acknowledged the whole truth.(407-8).

How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!—The blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!—she sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery—in every place, every posture, she perceived that she had acted most weakly; that she had been imposed on by others in a most mortifying degree; that she had been imposing on herself in a degree yet more mortifying; that she was wretched, and should probably find this day but the beginning of wretchedness. (411-12).

Emma's grasp of her misunderstanding is demonstrated in the economical leaps of perception that bring her at last to the truth. The second passage emphasises her attempt to understand how deceptions lead to blunders. Alliteration links the causes and effects. Forms of impose, mortify and wretched each appear, unified by irresistibly flowing internal rhyme and alliteration. Austen's prose sweeps readers along with Emma as she learns the potentially tragic implications of her meddling. The significance of her altered understanding gains impact through the repetitions that resound with her thoughts.

Moreover, Austen's use of free indirect discourse encodes Emma's and other characters' thoughts and language usage in narrative report, allowing multiple ironies and multiple interpretations.

…Austen's narrative variations seem to increase knowledge by default; they assume the unknowability of experience…[Her] very purpose is…to undermine any secure viewpoint or state of mind that would structure [reader] experience of the story and allow him to transcend it. The narrative dips in and out, shifts from plane to plane, grasping and then releasing a particular consciousness: authorial, individual, family, neighbourhood, even, as Mary Lascelles had shown, the collective consciousness that forms spontaneously around an event.

102 Robin Grove, ‘Austen's Ambiguous Conclusions’ from Modern Critical Views, Harold Bloom, ed., p.190. The passage continues: ‘Without straining towards imagery or metaphor, the phrasing achieves what it wants…’
Such narrative mode reveals an intuition of life that is inconclusive, restless, alive—the opposite of Mr. Knightley's...organised wisdom. The initial effect of this narrative pliability, then, is to interfere with a static,...dogmatic viewpoint.  

Experience teaches because the activity of interpretation alters meaning. Austen's text demonstrates the richness of multiple readings made possible when various kinds of consciousness interact in the process of gaining understanding.  

A variety of free indirect discourse forms, reported speech and direct quotation alter focalisation almost imperceptibly. Once readers are familiarised with characters, character speech patterns and thoughts can be economically conveyed. Emma's conversation with Mr Knightley, opening Chapter XIII Volume III, reveals the range of techniques used to abridge and focus upon the most essential elements of their meeting:  

The 'How d'ye do's,' were quiet and constrained...He must have had a wet ride.—Yes.—He meant to walk with her, she found. 'He had just looked into the dining-room, and...preferred being out of doors.'—(424).  

Without encumbering the prose, the banalities of greeting are passed over while the characters' emotional states are suggested. Brevity communicates unease. The third-person report offers Emma's perspective; Mr Knightley's comments are conveyed so that readers feel themselves to be hearing his words through her. Similar narrative treatment is used to reveal Mr Weston's joy (317-8) and Frank's irritable entrance at Donwell Abbey (363). In each case, third-person narration captures Emma's subjective perspective, encouraging readers to share her interpretation.  

Narration provides readers with information about characters' thought processes. Emma’s occasionally erroneous but often perceptive analysis is most often revealed, but other characters' attitudes are occasionally reported. Mr Knightley's feelings about Frank Churchill run a full gamut from ‘villain’ to ‘a very good sort of fellow’ in one short paragraph (433) reflecting Mr Knightley's changing perceptions of Churchill's involvement with Emma. This amusing narrative provides another example of how perception is influenced by experience. Emma's deliberations on how to phrase a question that might embarrass Jane Fairfax are reported thus:  

…‘Now, how am I going to introduce him?—Am I unequal to speaking his name at once before all these people?—Is it necessary for me to use any roundabout phrase?—Your Yorkshire friend—your correspondent in Yorkshire;—that would be the way, I suppose, if I were very bad.—No, I can pronounce his name without the smallest distress. I certainly get better and better. —Now for it.’ (297).

Readers are informed about her thoughts, her mental rehearsal of vocabulary, diction, and assessment of the social acceptability of her utterances. In this instance Emma feels required to conceal what she believes is a compromising state of affairs. It is hard to censure a character when the narrative creates such reader complicity in her plot. Shortly after, readers are informed in narrative report that Mrs Elton was considering how to retract a misunderstood statement about her sister (307) which shows Mrs Elton to be capable of the same kind of conversational strategies, but narrative treatment and her selfish motive encourage readers to maintain a critical distance from her.

Characters themselves analyse each other in terms of their speech patterns and written communications. Emma's decoding of Mr Elton's charade (72-3) slips into direct quotation of her thoughts, where her internal comments applaud Elton's clever courtship of Harriet. Harriet Smith's critique condemns ‘...having good sense...to sit down and write a letter, and say just what you must, in a short way...’(76). Ironically, she applauds the charade's pretentious verses which Emma herself disparages. Quoting Mr Elton's ‘Exactly so’ Emma speculates that Mrs Elton is ‘Emma-Woodhousing’ her (284). Emma objects to Mrs Elton for many reasons, but her language use and abuse receives Emma's strongest censure. ‘Emma had not to listen to such paradings again—....so disgustingly decorated with a “dear Miss Woodhouse.”’(284). Emma describes Miss Bates, whom readers have yet to meet, as ‘...so silly—so satisfied—so smiling—so proing...’(85) demonstrating Emma's fluent command of language which contrasts to Miss Bates own linguistic style. Emma mimics her (225) and analyses Miss Bates's discourse ‘...then fly off, through half a sentence...’ to reveal how Miss Bates thinks. At the conclusion of the novel, Mr Knightley criticises Frank's letter to Emma, indicating how Frank's language usage reflects his moral failings. Mr Knightley's textual analysis serves to instruct Emma and readers about exactly where and why Frank's behaviour is reprehensible.

Other techniques compel readers to re-examine earlier events in the text. Harriet quotes Emma's assurance that ‘...there had been matches of greater disparity
(those were your very words)…’(406) and again ‘But you know they were your own words, that more wonderful things had happened, matches of greater disparity had taken place than between Mr Frank Churchill and me…’(407) which serves both to refresh reader memory and to indicate that verbal exchanges between characters in the novel affect their behaviour just as readers may be influenced by advice. Late in the novel, Emma is reminded of the ‘…first forlorn tête-à-tête, on the evening of Mrs Weston's wedding-day…’(422) as are readers. Indeed, Emma's enlightenment primarily concerns her re-evaluation and re-interpretation of textual events, compelling readers to follow her example; inviting additional re-readings. This underscores the novel's epistemological theme since recognising errors of judgment must precede moral growth.

The ability to do or determine is shown to be the ability to err. And authority is achieved by counteracting in revision the mistaken efforts which such ‘doing’ constitutes…’[First] impressions’, false steps, and fanciful and distorting narratives are revised in the careers of characters like…Elizabeth Bennet, …Catherine Morland [and]Emma Woodhouse. Perceptiveness, humility, a willingness to alter—these traits ultimately replace ‘power’ among Austen's characters and are also necessary to reflexive, not other-directed or pioneering activity….characters who gain authority are able to modify themselves.104

Like her predecessors, Catherine Morland and Elizabeth Bennet, inexperience places Emma in peril when she is confronted with deceit or ambiguity. She must learn there are dangers in ‘…having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself…’(5). Arrogance handicaps her emotional development and threatens to impair the happiness of those who love her best because Emma pursues her manipulative games, believing she is in control. Narrative technique allows readers to monitor her conduct with greater sympathy, sensitivity and objectivity than she believes herself already exercising. How narrative technique positions readers to share in Emma's experience, and the lessons provided by the text to both heroine and readers will be further examined below. Emma, the manipulator, is manipulated by the narrative in which she is immersed, and by the narrative she invents. Austen's masterpiece develops its moral exploration through the structure of the narrative which emphasises the intricacies of interpreting language.

104 Kaplan, Deborah 'Achieving Authority: Jane Austen's First Published Novel', in Modern Critical Views, Harold Bloom, ed., p. 216.
iv. The ‘Parthenon of fiction’

Austen's handling of the narrative demonstrates the skill with which she engages reader sympathy for Emma, whose moral instruction and growth provide the ethical issues readers are required to examine. Described by the author as a ‘…heroine whom no one but myself will much like…’ Emma has been ‘…traditionally considered one of the most “person-like” characters in English literature…’ Many narrative techniques are exploited to engage reader involvement with this protagonist who is anything but a ‘picture of perfection’.

The first sentence offers a short list of Emma's virtues, and two suggestions that such apparent ‘blessings’ can actually lead to ‘distress’. The narrative voice here is authoritative and concise. Besides presenting the facts of Emma's life in a series of fluent statements, attention to fine points of emphasis creates an immediate intimacy between the narrator and reader. For example, in the third paragraph the italicised ‘them’ indicates that the narrator's awareness of relations between Emma and her governess, Miss Taylor, is refined and astute, and readers share this sensitive insight from the start. That all is not well becomes apparent immediately. There are other ominous suggestions. Emma's 'real evils'(5) are listed in the fourth paragraph, but ‘the danger…was at present…unperceived’ (6). Emma's case history, compressed to half a page maintains focus on the text's 'present'.

Inclusion of background information helps to establish a basis for the personality that her character demonstrates, suggesting that Austen took a lively interest in the forces that shape individuals. Mr Woodhouse, his daughter and readers share a melancholy evening after the wedding. Because the novel focuses on the internal story of emotional life, it opens not with the festivities of this important celebration but rather its deflating

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107 Alternatively, Weinsheimer is quoted as making the following 'provocative' statement in the course of an analysis of the manner in which characters are textualised: 'Emma Woodhouse is not a woman nor need be described as if it were.'(1979) Cited in: Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics, (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), p. 32.


110 Michael Williams notes in Jane Austen: Six Novels and Their Methods (London: Macmillan Press, 1986) p. 138. ‘Austen's novel exists in the present tense, where things are still happening…To understand is to explain the past and predict the future as well as to comprehend the present: and the attempts within the novel to explain its meaning are so completely enmeshed that they can, whether accurate or not, influence or even determine what the reality becomes. In that sense the reader is more implicated in Austen's novel…’
aftermath. Readers at once are tuned to the subtle nuances of introspection and the
drama of thought processes. Paragraph five begins:

Sorrow came—a gentle sorrow—but not at all in the shape of any disagreeable consciousness.—
Miss Taylor married. It was Miss Taylor's loss which brought grief. (6).

The narrative handling of this sorrow, qualified by its gentleness, and broken by a chain
of dashes suggests on-going reflection and also reinforces the ironic sorrow resulting
from Miss Taylor's marriage. *Emma* relentlessly examines how individual actions have
an impact on entire communities; how one person's joy can lead to another's grief, and
how the internal worlds of each character may remain very isolated and secretive
despite close contact between individuals. The narrative voice allows readers to feel
with Emma, to share her perspective, and it encourages readers to exercise their greater
discernment in understanding where her judgement fails. Readers receive enough
information to make correct assessments, or to postpone decisions until presented with
sufficient data. The capacity to make finer discriminations of judgement than Emma's
becomes one source of reader pleasure. As in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth's
erring deductions are no less interesting than her correct ones, Emma's faults engage
interest because her thinking process is accessible.

Mr Knightley arrives to disperse some of the gloom, and his character is
sketched with narrative report, the accuracy of which is soon confirmed by the content
and manner of his speech. Conversation reveals that Emma has taken credit for the
match between Miss Taylor and Mr Weston, in which Mr Knightley insists Emma
played no part. Emma determines to match Mr Elton with Harriet Smith, Emma's
friend[111] by first separating Harriet from her suitor, Robert Martin in one of Emma's
most nefarious acts of manipulation and snobbery. ‘Poor little Harriet’ becomes
Emma's victim, and is variously described as Emma's Galatae or monster[112]. When, in
Chapter V, Mr Knightley expresses to Mrs Weston his concern about the dangerous
intimacy developing between Emma and Harriet, readers are given one of only two

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chapters in the novel not viewed directly from the heroine's vantage. In this way, narrative technique presents analysis of Emma's situation as it is assessed by two characters who know her well. Mr Knightley calls the relationship a ‘bad thing’ (36). Mrs Weston reveals her kind, somewhat naive faith in Emma's capacity for goodness, telling Mr Knightley that Emma

…has qualities which may be trusted; she will never lead any one really wrong; she will make no lasting blunder; where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times. (40).

While her assessment might influence readers in theirs, Mr Knightley's disapproval of the relationship between vulnerable Harriet Smith and Emma sets up a dialectic that further developments must resolve. Since readers have already seen the two in action, Mrs Weston's and Mr Knightley's differing interpretations may be accurately gauged. The episode allows readers to share with characters an opportunity to interpret other characters' behaviour, to read personalities and to examine the politics of power in human relations. Thus from very early in the novel, readers are exposed to the complex and multi-levelled responses that influence communication. Characters may feel many conflicting reactions and express only some; may change their minds, or re-interpret events in the light of new feelings or experience. More importantly, readers will find themselves reacting in a number of conflicting ways as their familiarity with the characters and circumstances develops.

v. Riddles, charades, games

Emma's perspective becomes central to the narrative as she contrives to bring Harriet and Elton together through her execution of Harriet's portrait. When Elton lavishes compliments on Emma, the narration reports her response

Yes, good man!—thought Emma—but what has all that to do with taking likenesses? You know nothing of drawing. Don't pretend to be in raptures about mine. Keep your raptures for Harriet's face. (43).

This inside view allows readers to share her thoughts; her sharp insights of her own failings as well as the failings of others. She seems to understand Elton's hypocrisy, but is herself so absorbed in the game of pairing him with Harriet that his fawning compliments fail to register as genuine attempts to engage her interest. Emma's misunderstanding is further revealed:
'This man is almost too gallant to be in love,' thought Emma. ‘I should say so, but that I suppose there may be a hundred different ways of being in love. He is an excellent young man and will suit Harriet exactly; it will be an “Exactly so,” as he says himself; but he does sigh and languish, and study for compliments rather more than I could endure as a principal. I come in for a pretty good share as a second. But it is his gratitude on Harriet's account.’(49).

Here readers are allowed to contrast Emma's thoughts with her deeds as she rationalises in interpreting behaviour to suit her plans. Emma, who has never been in love, presumes to understand others who are. Elton's gallantry conforms to novelistic conventions for lovers, and has little to do with real feeling, a distinction Emma has yet to learn, although she rejects insincerity as expressed in the clichéd flattery of romance fiction. Still refusing to play the heroine's part in her own novel, Emma is too caught up in an authorial role, as demonstrated by her reference to ‘a Harriet’ being ‘exactly the something’ (26) useful to herself.113 This same objectification occurs later when Emma can refer to ‘A Mrs. Elton’ (182) ; ‘a Robert Martin’ (183), creating a similar distance between readers and these minor characters. Both Emma and the narrative contrive to minimise reader attention on any situations that may otherwise compete with Emma. For example, Martin's letter of proposal is not presented to readers directly, even though it is discussed by Harriet, Emma and Mr Knightley, all of whom agree that it is well-written and sensitive. Emma admits this to herself, and readers are aware of her thoughts, but her subsequent analysis to Harriet reveals that Emma is capable of concealing her true beliefs.114 Emma's reading of Martin's proposal letter demonstrates in free, indirect discourse her flair with language:

She read, and was surprised. The style of the letter was much above her expectation. There were not merely no grammatical errors, but as a composition it would not have disgraced a gentleman; the language, though plain, was strong and unaffected, and the sentiments it conveyed very much to the credit of the writer. It was short, but expressed good sense, warm attachment, liberality, propriety, even delicacy of feeling.(50-1).

Besides complimenting the writer with a double negative, her analysis of the writer's character as reflected in his prose style identifies many virtues embodied in Mr

114 Laura Mooneyham writes: ‘The letter itself is not presented to the reader... [because it] might too readily shift the reader's balance of sympathy from Emma to Mr. Martin...Such narrative censorship is necessary to hide the full effects of [Emma's] cruelty from the reader.’ Romance and Education in Jane Austen's Novels, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Mapshire, London: Macmillan Press, 1988) p. 116.
Knightley and other heroic personalities. But Emma concludes that the letter is too fine to have been written by Robert Martin: one of his sisters must have written it. Emma domineers Harriet's response by playing power games with her own affection, and practically writes Harriet's rejection letter. (53-5). Mr Knightley rebukes Emma ‘Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do…’ (64). He and Emma argue until narrative reports

Em... tried to look cheerfully unconcerned, but was really feeling uncomfortable and wanting him very much to be gone... but she had a sort of habitual respect for his judgment in general, which made her dislike having it so loudly against her...(65).

Readers, too, have been encouraged to feel ‘respect for his judgment’ because he honestly speaks his mind and alone among Emma's associates is prepared to contradict her ideas.

Mr Elton's presentation of a charade for Harriet Smith's collection allows characters to reveal further their motives and abilities. Emma compares the charade to a ‘sort of prologue to the play, a motto to the chapter…’ and speculates it ‘...will be soon followed by matter-of-fact prose.’(74). Quoting from Shakespeare underscores Emma's authority, and indicates that Austen expected her readers to appreciate Emma's literary allusion. When Harriet questions Emma about her own matrimonial aspirations, Emma's reply allows readers a glimpse of her arrogance and self-delusion because she thinks herself too well situated to engage in the dangerous emotional games that require honesty and selfless care for others. Her amusing contrivance to bring together Harriet and Mr Elton, whom Emma refers to as 'the hero'(81), is demonstrated when Elton meets the girls during their walk from the Bates's. His gallantry toward Emma escapes her, although alert readers may be more aware of his intension. First, Emma fails to see herself as Elton sees her. His presumption in paying addresses to her shocks and insults her when she finally realises her error. Second, readers have been able to see his behaviour, in the light of Mr Knightley's declaration that '[Elton] will not make an imprudent match’(66). While Emma only interprets Elton's behaviour in terms of Harriet, readers can see that his attentions are directed differently.

Mooneyham comments: ‘Truth is a function of love; candour makes love possible.’ (p. 142) Mooneyham's article discusses how Jane Austen demonstrates Emma's education in use of language as a tool to help her achieve emotional growth.
Emma's social grace remains one of her greatest virtues. Her desire to match-make is an expression of the value she places on human relations in general and marriage in particular. Establishment of solid relationships provides the foundations for a stable, secure society. Given the period in which this novel was written, Austen's desire to create a heroine who valued stability is not surprising.

Marriage has historically performed a complex function in feminine destiny: it establishes economic security and social status; through children, it provides a professionless class with an occupation that is potentially meaningful to the individual and a practical necessity to the society; it answers the psychic need of any vulnerable social group for a securely identified place in the universe, almost a refuge from it, where role and function are already provided; and until the present century, it has made the sexual experience acceptable to the majority of intelligent women. It is not surprising, then, that Jane Austen should view the selection of spouse as a complicated and crucial undertaking. The state of marriage was not only essential to a tolerable existence for most women…it was, for the English girl of Jane Austen's day, 'the one time in her life when her destiny lay not in her family's hands, or in her husband's, but to a significant degree in her own.'

John Knightley is the first to suggest that Mr. Elton 'seems to have a great deal of good-will towards’ Emma. She is so surprised by the suggestion that she considers the

…blunders which arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into; and not very well pleased with her brother for imagining her blind and ignorant, and in want of counsel.116

This ironic insight allows readers to enjoy Emma's delusions as she demonstrates both her appreciation of epistemological uncertainties and that she is at the same time a victim of her own blindness. Readers have been given sufficient evidence to concur with John Knightley's opinion both from Elton's conduct and Knightley's penetrating observations. At Randalls, Emma actively and sensitively socialises. Narrative reveals that ‘…she had the comfort of appearing very polite, while feeling very cross…’(119). Her heroic determination to behave in a constructive way earns reader approval. When Frank Churchill succumbs to his irritable mood at Donwell (364) Emma's conduct appears to greater advantage. Such narrative not only reveals the contrasts between characters' needs and behaviour, but suggests that social

harmony requires some adjustment, which Emma never fails and Frank often refuses to achieve.

Chapter V, Volume III, one of the few departures from Emma-centred narrative in the novel, reveals Mr Knightley's speculations as he observes Emma and Frank distressing Jane during a word-game. Games require agreed rules, so determining whether the players are playing fairly further complicates interpretation. It is important for readers to gain evidence that might help them understand this complicated situation better than Emma. Even with the advantage of narrative information, assessing motive is complex and inconclusive. Mr Knightley's observations tend to remain more objective than Emma's. The narrative links his assessment to the line of Cowper's poem: ‘Myself creating what I saw,’ (344) so readers may recognise that Mr Knightley ‘reads’ events with the advantage of experience. He knows what imagination can do. After observing conduct that appears almost cruel, Mr Knightley decides to confront Emma about her part in it because

He owed it to her, to risk any thing that might be involved in an unwelcome interference, rather than her welfare; to encounter any thing, rather than the remembrance of neglect in such a cause.(350).

Such determination to help a friend, and even risk alienating the woman he loves, distinguishes Mr Knightley not only in the world of Highbury, but among the heroes of fiction. He is concerned about Emma's emotional and moral well-being. Her part in the game that she outwardly dismisses as nonsense, privately shames her. Because Mr Knightley thinks Emma is attracted to Frank, whose affections may be engaged elsewhere, he tries to warn Emma of her danger. She finds Mr Knightley's 'first essay' (350) in imaginative speculation amusing and dismisses his suggestions 'with a confidence which staggered, with a satisfaction which silenced.'(351). Her arrogance remains unassailable.

The Donwell Abbey party is followed by an excursion to Box Hill (Chapter VII, Vol III), where personalities and group dynamics create tensions, revealing the strained relations even among this carefully selected group who wish to enjoy themselves visiting a scenic attraction. Here Emma commits an unpardonable act of indiscretion, humiliating herself in a manner that finally shakes her self-confidence. Emma's insult to Miss Bates occurs in a passage that is presented almost like a stage script. (370-1). Parenthetical indications of characters' actions, and dashes breaking
dialogue to convey its natural unfolding place readers exactly where Emma's remark can most shock. Nothing is happening. Her words alone create a cataclysm. Miss Bates handles the violence with grace and dignity. Readers must feel devastated. Why? First, of course, Emma has always taken pride in her social style and courtesy, despite her sometimes unruly thoughts. Her polite discretion seems to ensure Emma's primary goal would be to preserve the emotional security of those in her company. Yet, her behaviour, under the influence of Frank Churchill, has begun to slide. When she distresses Jane Fairfax during the word-game by promoting a 'joke' that amuses only some of the participants, it is not funny. Her inability to 'resist' a potentially hurtful comment to Miss Bates simply extends this deteriorating concern for other people's feelings. Readers have become so intimate with Emma that it is difficult to see her behave in a cruel way without feeling ashamed of her, and at the same time sorry for the humiliation and contrition she will certainly experience because she is too good to ignore her own faults. Second, Emma attacks Miss Bates with a blow that goes straight to the heart because the nature of Emma's insult is a reaction to the way Miss Bates uses language. Language usage is so integral to personality that an insult of this kind undermines any chance of preserving meaningful interaction. Through language characters make contact and create understanding. To belittle language use is to undermine the substance of a personality. No attack can be justified. Silence is perhaps the only response. Miss Bates may abuse language in the sense that she talks too much. But her honesty and goodwill preserve her right to compassion. Those who conceal information or feelings are far more culpable. Those who deliberately mislead are villains. Emma behaves badly in a number of ways but her verbal misconduct toward Miss Bates represents her worst abuse of power.

Why Emma attacks Miss Bates has been explored by many critics who propose a number of interesting explanations including that Emma, who likes to lead, finds Miss Bates uncontrollable. Bernard J. Paris attributes Emma's shame and guilt when in Miss Bates's company to Emma's recognition of her own failings to demonstrate tenderness of heart. 'Insofar as she makes Emma feel cold-hearted or undutiful, Miss Bates is a threatening figure.' Later, when confronted with her reprehensible conduct, Emma is sorry.

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118 Paris, p. 85.
...tries to laugh it off, as she has been doing all day long; says she could not help it, nobody could have helped it, thereby disposing of the act itself; says Miss Bates did not understand, disposing of the effect. 119

Mr Knightley prevents Emma's attempts to escape responsibility, thus initiating her humbling self-recognition which contributes to Emma's moral and emotional growth. The dramatic impact of the scene is sustained by its narrative treatment which allows Emma's insult to pass without immediate reproach. Leading to it is Frank's demand, on Emma's behalf, to know what the party are thinking. Such impudence meets with hostility or denial. The proposal invites dishonesty since even when putting thoughts into words, the process of selecting which thoughts are speakable and which words should be used allows only one of many possible communications. Significantly, a parenthetical comment from the narrator (370) indicates the two friends whose thoughts Emma felt she could know without trepidation. Following the insult, the conversation moves on; the party breaks up, and when Mr Knightley unexpectedly confronts Emma just after the narrative describes Emma's joyful anticipation of a 'quiet drive home' (374), his rebukes resound with genuine feeling and honesty. He is not playing games, and his description of Miss Bates's candour and generosity (375) in expressing her regret at causing Emma distress illustrates both the value of honesty and the power of language. Readers have been positioned to condemn Emma's heartless behaviour during this episode.

The Box Hill insult is one of the great moments in literature. Every time it is read, it shocks. It also delights because readers know very well what Emma means. So, while readers would never (hopefully) drop their social guard enough to say the unspeakable, Emma verbalises a possible subconscious reader response. Miss Bates is a tiresome talker. The humour of Emma's comment arises from its truth. But the characters in the novel must conform to high standards of moral behaviour if they are to deserve reader compassion, and Emma's lapse not only shames her better self, it jeopardises reader sympathy. If Emma is to remain a worthy heroine, she must recognise her disgraceful conduct, and she must make amends. The novel Emma is as much about forgiving faults of character and conduct as it is about showing compassion for others. Emma's mortification places readers in a position to judge her critically for her grievous faults, but they must also exercise compassion because they are able to understand her. And of course, the narrative has placed readers into

the same scene, protecting them from making Emma's error simply because readers are not actors: they are only reactors.

**vi. Deliberation, analysis, interpretation**

Never had [Emma] felt so agitated, mortified, grieved at any circumstance in her life…She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! (376).

Narration compels readers to share Emma's thoughts. Her conscience dictates a change of conduct, prompting her to visit the Bates. Jane Fairfax avoids Emma, giving Miss Bates an opportunity to reply to Emma's enquires concerning Jane's sudden acceptance of a position, ‘But you are always kind.’ (380) This gratitude is described as ‘dreadful’ (380) and yet it reinforces Miss Bates's nobility since Emma must submit to being paid an undeserved tribute from the very person most victimised by Emma's unkindness. Emma is the local 'lady' condescending, but her conduct and disregard for Miss Bates' feelings throw into question Emma's moral stature and position as ‘lady’. Later, Emma initiates a moment of reconciliation between herself and Mr Knightley that is described in delicately broken sentences conveying Mr Knightley's uncompleted attempt to kiss her hand. Emma fails to understand why he changes his mind. Readers may find her explanation amusing, but an expression of only some of the truth. Mr Knightley is prepared to value ‘all that had passed of good in her feelings’ (385) and indeed, to forgive her. He is noble enough to recognise that making errors is part of life's moment by moment adventure. Those who acknowledge their mistakes are most likely to improve their lives by learning from their errors. Emma sees her fault and deals constructively with it.

Another surprise follows: Mrs. Churchill dies, and the narrator observes

Goldsmith tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but to die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally to be recommended as a clearer of ill-fame. Mrs. Churchill, after being disliked at least twenty-five years, was now spoken of with compassionate allowances. In one point she was fully justified. She had never been admitted before to be seriously ill. The event acquitted her of all the fancifulness, and all the selfishness of imaginary complaints. (387).

The passage is interesting for several reasons. First, the narrator alludes to the writings of another author, linking this narrative to texts in the reader's world outside
fiction. Literature forms a bridge between realities and fantasies: here a narrator who appreciates the relevance of poetry addresses readers in a tone that assumes they too share this refined sensitivity. Second, if death is considered an appropriate solution to a woman's folly, Mrs Churchill's demise can then be taken as a comic rather than tragic event. By juxtaposing the absurd literary allusion with textual events, readers will consider both as abstract, rather amusing suggestions, thus avoiding the serious implications of death. Also, her death permits Frank and Jane to marry, conforming to expectations for a conventional comic ending. Third, the ironic conclusion that an invalid manipulating households through twenty-five years of ‘imaginary’ complaints is vindicated when she dies, forgives the crime of misguided imagination, which is being treated as a far worse tragedy than actually succumbing to real illness. Mrs Churchill bears a similar relationship to Mr Woodhouse in her power over those in her household, although her influence is more far-reaching. Both of these ‘imaginary invalids’ have used their illness, real or otherwise, to manipulate others. Emma, too, has abused her imagination.

Jane refuses Emma's assistance, and 'it mortified [Emma] that she was given so little credit for proper feeling, or esteemed so little worthy as a friend…'(391). Emma's situation is clearly one of her own making. Where intimacy is prized, unworthiness for friendship represents a serious failing.

When the Westons tell Emma of Jane's and Frank's secret engagement, Emma is outraged.

What has it been but a system of hypocrisy and deceit,—espionage, and treachery?—To come among us with professions of openness and simplicity; and such a league in secret to judge us all!—Here have we been, the whole winter and spring, completely duped, fancying ourselves all on an equal footing of truth and honour…(399).

Emma nearly allowed her interest in Frank to become a serious attachment because she was so easily duped by him, indicating yet another error of her judgment. Prevented by social mores from declaring her feelings before the gentleman makes his intentions known, Emma risks censure and courts misunderstanding because rules governing communication of feeling prevent openness. Genuine feelings can not be shared where dishonesty exists, and honest relationships become an impossibility. If Emma departs from absolute honesty, her deprecation of the secret engagement can be explained by her recognition that anything short of truth
jeopardises understanding. Harriet's revelation that Mr Knightley returns her affection causes Emma's sudden realisation:

It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!

Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world... (408).

Finally Emma learns the truth about herself. The passage captures in imagery that is rare and absolutely appropriate Emma's *eclairissement*. The words she uses to describe her failings identify the hallmarks of character, elegance and virtue that Emma and her creator valued: consideration, delicacy, rationality and compassion. Readers have been instructed to value these attitudes as foundations for behaviour, so their feeling for Emma as she recognises her failings should reflect exactly how much compassion they have learned to exercise for her. Emma invites Harriet to describe her relations with Mr Knightley, and the narrator reports

——Methodical, or well arranged, or very well delivered, it could not be expected to be; but it contained, when separated from all the feebleness and tautology of the narration, a substance to sink [Emma's] spirit—especially with the corroborating circumstances... (409).

Here Emma engages in discourse analysis as she reacts to Harriet's style of narration. Readers receive simultaneously a report on Harriet's inarticulate and wandering verbal style and Emma's precision. While readers are credited with imagining the nature of Harriet's explanation, they do not have to wade through it. Instead, Emma's assessment of each detail is provided. Emma at last begins to re-examine the evidence in light of her new knowledge. She re-reads events and begins to believe that Harriet's interpretation is correct. ‘When Harriet had closed her evidence’ (400), Emma's real misery begins. The narrative presentation of Emma's thoughts follows her internal drama with the power of fluent expression conveying the urgency of her self-reproach.

With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of everybody's feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange everybody's destiny. She was proved to have been universally mistaken; and she had not quite done nothing—for she had done mischief.
She had brought evil on Harriet, on herself, and she too much feared, on Mr. Knightley.—
…Was it new for any thing in this world to be unequal, inconsistent, incongruous—or for
chance and circumstance…to direct human fate? (412-3).

At last Emma can and does plead guilty, even expressing her crime in a wonderful
double negative to emphasise the evil. And what might she argue in her own
defence? The most important discovery of all: that human fate is often directed by
perversity and accident. How then, can anyone presume to be all-knowing? Emma
relinquishes her omniscient authorial role, and in so doing becomes a real heroine.

In a passage of poignant reflection, the narration notes that ‘The weather
added what it could of gloom.’ (421). Emma recalls the opening scene of her tale,
and especially her melancholy predictions of abandonment by friends that in fact had
never occurred. Now, however, that prediction seems very likely to be realised.

If all took place that might take place among the circle of her friends, Hartfield must be
comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined
happiness. (422).

The worst tragedy facing Emma is the prospect of ruined happiness; it is one that
can be understood by readers who seek the kind of joy provided by love, friendship
and intimacy. Mary Poovey makes the point that Jane Austen's readers find
‘escape into romance attractive’ because fiction offers a viable alternative to
social and political structures that may prevent other forms of fulfilment. Romantic
subjects and interpersonal rewards are tolerated because they seem to support rather
than undermine socio-economic power structures. In promoting refined human
relations on an individual level, Austen is seeking to define a form of gratification
that can be realised without wealth, power or position.

Emma is not kept long in suspense, nor are readers: the weather improves.
She meets Mr Knightley who initiates a conversation that brings them to ‘…within
half a sentence of Harriet…’ (429). Such attention to the verbal structure of human
interaction re-emphasises the narrative and linguistic basis of personal relations.

120 James Thompson Between Self and World The Novels of Jane Austen (University Park and London:
Pennsylvania State UP, 1988), notes that Austen uses intimacy and its variants 84 times in her novels. He
observes that only familiarity built slowly, over time can produce the kind of intimacy that is rewarding. (pp.
162-164).

121 Mary Poovey, ‘Ideological Contradictions and the Consolations of Form’, The Proper Lady and the Woman
Emma is once again second-guessing—wrongly—the sub-text of Mr Knightley's actions. He is introducing a delicate subject, and Emma cries ‘…don't speak it…’ to prevent utterance of words that may change their relationship forever. Language invests this tiny scene with the drama of a duel. But Emma ‘could not bear to give him pain.’ She assures him that she will listen as a friend. What she hears transforms her into a lover. Mr Knightley's declaration is straight forward and tender, while Emma's shock and relief in discovering herself to be his object elicits a response that conforms to the 'probable or reasonable.' (431). Readers are told

"Her way was clear, though not quite smooth.—She spoke then, on being so entreated.—What did she say?—Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.—(431)."

When Knightley says, ‘If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more,’ (430) this truthful expression of his honesty is startlingly obvious. Strong feeling affects actions, attitudes and behaviour. Words are inadequate and wise writers leave emotionally charged verbal exchanges to the imaginations of their readers. This witty repartee confirms reader confidence that Emma is a lady who can certainly say what she ought. Genuine, strong feeling finally surpasses linguistic expression.

"Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material. (431)."

Here is stated one major theme of the novel. Three times 'seldom' is repeated to emphasise how difficult understanding another human being can become when disguise or mistake cloud perceptions and confuse interpretation. If language and the communication process finally reveal only some of a person's thoughts and feelings, then inconsistency may simply reflect the complexity that behaviour and language attempt with varying degrees of success to describe. Mr Knightley visits Emma, not intending to propose: he wishes only to comfort her if she suffered from the discovery of Frank Churchill's duplicity. His motive, as always, is to safeguard the feelings of others. The importance of sensitivity to people's feelings remains paramount. Mr Knightley confesses that he surprises himself in proposing to Emma.

122 James Thompson, among others, suggests that ‘...Jane Austen's fiction has brought us to the limits of her language and our imagination...’ *Between Self and World The Novels of Jane Austen*, p. 60. For this reason Austen avoids putting into words moments of extreme emotion. The poignancy of the scenes can be and is conveyed, but direct speech of the characters is not employed to do it. ‘True intimacy is quintessentially private, and so to represent it is to violate it, to provide just another false or partial intimacy.’ (p.176) See also Wayne Booth ‘Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s Emma ‘. (1961) cited from *Jane Austen Emma A Casebook*. David Lodge. Ed. (London: Macmillan, 1968), 'If the narrator's superabundant wit is destructive of the kind of illusion proper to this work, the novel has been ruined long before.'(p. 213).
With Emma and Mr Knightley all but united, the richness of their relationship is revealed when he ‘would rather be talking to you [Emma]’ (444) than reading Frank's long letter of self-defence. The letter (436-43) requires readers to re-examine textual material, this time presented not with the cool, ironic wisdom of the narrator, but in the wildly emotive, exaggerated and self-indulgent style of a young man who was regarded as ‘not quite the thing’ by Mr Woodhouse. Frank's long letter, a form of monologue, allows him to argue his case, in his own voice. Explanations clear the mystery, but fail to justify Frank's hurtful behaviour to Jane, or betrayal of trust that is shown to be his greatest crime. Mr Knightley reads the letter already presented in full which compels a re-interpretation of events for readers as well as Emma. Now, the moral issues of deception become even more obvious.

‘It will be natural for me…to speak my opinion aloud as I read. By doing it I shall feel that I am near you. It will not be so great a loss of time…’(445).

By sharing his responses to the letter, Mr Knightley is focusing his attention on Emma and revealing his feelings through a form of literary criticism. His vocal annotations to the letter review without repetition ideas readers have already seen. Mr Knightley's outspoken comments serve to underline the moral issues that Frank's behaviour and especially Frank's rationalisations raise. Finally Mr Knightley states

‘…—his own mind full of intrigue, that he should suspect it in others.—Mystery; Finesse—how they pervert the understanding! My Emma, does not every thing serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other?’(446).

Mr Knightley's desire to share his sincere feelings about Frank's letter demonstrates exactly why he is a hero, and a suitable partner for his imaginative bride. His critical analysis of the letter and its writer reflect both his maturity and moral superiority to this consistently selfish young man. If readers feel for Frank more sympathy than he deserves, their proximity to Emma must in part be responsible. She liked his company. She was deceived by his motives. Readers are meant to have been influenced by her.

In an amusing dialogue Mr Knightley later reveals to Emma that Robert Martin and Harriet Smith are engaged. Emma is so surprised she asks if he hadn't confused Harriet's hand with ‘the dimensions of some famous ox’.

123 Morgan, Susan Sisters in Time, Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-century British fiction, (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), p. 200: ‘Austen's heroines, whatever their degree of blindness, do not act on that blindness in ways that cannot be recalled. But whom should readers credit for that restraint, the character or the text? When Austen's heroines do things that need to be recalled…who does the recalling? Emma breaks the real romance between Harriet Smith and the Farmer Martin. At the end of the novel their romance is reinstated, more or less as it was, though not in any way that can credit Emma… [The] plot, which is to say her author, does it…’
‘Do you dare to say this?’ cried Mr. Knightley. ‘Do you dare to suppose me so great a blockhead, as not to know what a man is talking of?—What do you deserve?’

‘Oh! I always deserve the best treatment, because I never put up with any other…’(474)

And for this very reason, Emma is entitled to be acquitted. She has demonstrated that her ability to recognise her errors allows her to learn from them, and she still possesses a grace and charm that confer her appeal. Her regard for Mr Knightley’s character, and his recognition of her being ‘faultless in spite of her faults…’(433) enhances reader appreciation of her.

vii. Verdicts

What does Emma finally learn? The jury is divided. Susan Morgan, for example, interprets Emma’s remark quoted above as clear proof that Emma is far from humble or dependent.

…Emma was written in relation to a well-established tradition of the roles possible for heroines and that this novel, like all Austen’s novels, explicitly laughs at, rejects, and replaces the all-too-familiar presentation of eighteenth-century fictional heroines. The archetype has been unveiled as a cultural convenience and a literary cliche.124

Carol Pearson and Katherine Pope propose that

…Emma departs from her blind devotion to conventional behaviour because she discovers that convention is not to be trusted. Society lies…Society has encouraged Emma to exercise gamesmanship instead of honesty, to control rather than share, to live through others rather than find her own fulfilment.125

That she knows her own heart better than when the novel opened is clear. But she is still Emma, and as Francis Warre Cornish writes

124 Susan Morgan, Sisters in Time, p. 52. Morgan goes on to say of Emma: ‘The character becomes the creator, the artist figure. The epistemological and the moral dilemma of the story is where to direct that creativity, how to use one's imagination, what it means to have the power to shape a life.’ (p. 54).

Why do we forgive Emma so easily? She was generally wrong in her guesses, and sometimes unscrupulous in acting upon them. And yet we forgive her and love her. It must be because she was sincere and unaffected, ready to confess herself in the wrong when found out, abounding in good-will where she felt it, always natural and gay, and, above all, warm-hearted and truthful…

We might not have approved of all she said and did if we had had the good luck to know her; we might not have loved everything in her; but if we had called at her door and been told Mrs Knightley was not at home, we should have gone away disappointed.

And what have readers learned? *Emma* teaches many lessons: the need for vigilant compassion; honesty; recognition that perceptual limitations affect observation; the likelihood of logical fallibility; that there are no certainties when trying to discover why people behave as they do. Imagination, if it is guided by logic and the laws of probability, enhances experience. Readers are asked to be compassionate toward all of the characters and especially to Emma who is perfect because of her faults, just as real people are. The text also creates an enduring intimacy with Emma and a familiarity with the community of Highbury that demonstrates the richness of interpersonal relations, even across the twilight zone separating reality and fiction. Finally, readers are treated to a artistic masterpiece that matches language to content in a triumphant celebration of prose poetry. As characters examine each other's language use, readers too must become more sensitive to the power of language in creating reality. Through sharing their interactions, understanding their thoughts and responding to the textual events, readers also must become more sensitive to how words define experience. Jane Austen's text presents a fiction that demonstrates both the power of creative imagination and the dangerous ambiguity of interpreting language since both writer and reader must rely on their judgement to discover truth. When Weisheimer refers to Emma as ‘it’ readers who feel shocked must recognise how Austen's textual creation takes on a reality that seems to step out of the world of fiction into the world of real experience because Emma presents such a dynamic, fascinating presence. The character and the novel are constructs of words capable of producing a kind of fiction that transcends itself. In learning to feel for the character, readers will learn to feel for other characters, both real and imaginary. Readers may even begin to lose the exact point at which one becomes the other.

Readers are positioned to understand Emma's process of story-telling. Her verbal facility combined with her social status confer authority on her narratives. Austen's next novel, *Persuasion*, features a heroine whose words are largely ignored,

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and whose story seems to have ended before the novel begins. Narrative perspective allows insight into the intense feelings of the heroine, whose emotional responses are often beyond accurate representation in language. The narrative itself is fractured and dynamic reflecting the mobile and crowded world in which the characters move. The complications of reading reality multiply as interpretations of communication are increased by characters' subjectivity.
CHAPTER FIVE

Persuasion: Romantic Uncertainty

Austen's last completed novel is set in a world shaking on its foundations. Both the prose style and the narrative technique reflect this. No longer is the plot sculpted and polished to conceal joins and authorial manipulation. Accident, chance, coincidence, convenience jolt events along the textual journey without any attempt to gloss over the machinery of plot or the conventions of novel fiction. Characters are introduced when needed, and abandoned as soon as they have fulfilled their function. The narrator is peremptory and concise, penning each portrait with the rapid brushstrokes of an experienced appraiser of human folly. Austen's failing health may account for the urgency with which this melancholy love story is conveyed. Persuasion, another variant on the Cinderella story\(^{127}\) presents a romantic vision of a complex and dynamic world. Epistemological issues fill the pages as characters attempt to understand the nature of truth when they recognise that their own biases are inescapable. Blinding self interest contributes to misunderstanding or deliberate deceit. Language offers the most mysterious and confusing vehicle to both extend and restrict perception because each character must engage with life using their personal linguistic tools. Moreover, the novel examines a diverse system of signs that influence relationships between characters and the very structure of society. How characters communicate and what they communicate forms a substantial part of the textual focus.

\(^{127}\)‘The situation of being a poor relation was one that Jane Austen could share with her sister and their widowed mother. The situation of being the most brilliant, the most sensitive and penetrating member of her family, while she filled the roles of affectionate spinster aunt and of dutiful daughter to a hypochondriac mother, was a situation she could share with no one. It is not surprising, therefore, that variants of the Cinderella story, as well as the psychologically allied story of the foundling princess, should be prominent among the basic themes of her novels.’ D. W. Harding, ‘The Dexterity of a Practised Writer’ (1965) from The Introduction to Penguin edition of Persuasion pp. 7-26. Reprinted in Northanger Abbey and Persuasion A Casebook, B. C. Southam, ed., (London: MacMillan Press, 1976), pp. 193-4.
As in Austen's other novels, characters are rewarded by the quality of the people with whom they finally associate. Intimate knowledge of another person's mind permits the matching of healthy partnerships. In order to enjoy this intimacy, characters must be prepared to be honest and open in dealing with each other. Persuasion offers the most penetrating study of intimacy because the heroine is for much of the novel alone. Her isolation foregrounds the richness of close, human relationships from which she is excluded. Since readers experience Anne's situation through narrative that reveals her perspective during much of the novel, their sympathy with her is engaged. Anne's sensitivity to the feelings of others contrasts their lack of regard for her, further enhancing reader identification with her plight. Even more compelling, however, the narrative structure unites readers to an informed and outspoken narrative voice. The narrator may share confidences with readers, unlike Anne, who bears her emotional burdens while deprived of the benefit or consolation provided by a confidant. Anne's isolation is poignantly revealed by a narrator who can be sensitive to her situation but scathingly critical of characters who deserve little sympathy.

i. The tide is out

Narrative voice immediately establishes a relationship between itself, the reader and the text through its treatment of the novel's opening. The first, bloated sentence (over one hundred words long) introduces Sir Walter who is reading with unfailing interest his name in the Baronetage. Readers must read along with him. Apart from establishing his vanity and egotism, the text specifically identifies its present as 1814, thus reducing the distance between fictional and factual events. The second sentence provides a list of the family members attached to Sir Walter; complete with dates of births and deaths. While Sir Walter finds this fascinating, the brief extract produced is enough to discourage many readers. Personalities are slightly embellished with some details of the characters sketched more fully by a narrator who wastes few words in defining weaknesses of judgement or aberrations of conduct. When, for example, readers are told that ‘vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character,’ the sketch is both accurate and concise.

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128 This strategy is discussed by R. S. Crane in Twentieth-century Studies, A Casebook ed. B. C. Southam, ‘Persuasion A Serious Comedy,’ esp. p. 186. Crane argues that Anne is engaging because she is the central consciousness as well as the primary object of interest in the novel. (p. 183).


130 Eileen Sutherland suggests Sir Walter would have been reading the first edition by John Debrett, published in London in 1808 in two volumes (500 pages each). See Sutherland's article 'The Rise and Fall of the House of Elliot', Persuasions, Dec. 16, 1993, (No. 15) p. 58.
Such acerbity reveals a narrative voice that will be heard throughout the novel: direct, penetrating and sometimes ruthless.

Anne is described in narrative reflecting Sir Walter's estimation. She was

…of very inferior value…[W]ith an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;—she was only Anne. (5).

Such an introduction encourages the alignment of reader sympathy with Anne since few readers would deliberately choose to regard themselves as people without real understanding. That Anne's word is weightless establishes the importance words will continue to demonstrate, and also sets up a conflict: why, given credit for such intellectual gifts, would she be ignored? The remainder of the chapter is devoted to development of the other Elliots and their financial straits, suggesting that the narrator can also overlook this child of ‘very inferior value’. Indeed, ‘value’ extends the theme of materialism to include human beings as marketable commodities. Financial matters concern all of the characters. Mr Shepherd, a friend and lawyer who manages property, is consulted in an attempt ‘...to remove [the Elliots'] embarrassments and reduce their expenditure, without involving the loss of any indulgence of taste or pride.’ (10). Shepherd wishes to help the Elliots to keep up appearances and to maintain the lifestyle their indulgences destroyed. He is a property manager whose job is to manage for those who are unable or unwilling.

Chapter II begins with an account of Mr Shepherd's relation to Sir Walter. Shepherd, wishing to excuse himself from having to suggest anything disagreeable, ‘...begged leave to recommend an implicit deference to the excellent judgment of Lady Russell…’(11) whose advice he expected would include a move to different lodgings, exactly his preferred outcome. This narrative passage is important for several reasons. Besides establishing in free, indirect discourse a feeling for the obsequious Mr Shepherd's speech through phrases such as ‘begged leave’, readers receive an additional confirmation of Lady Russell's good judgment. Here also is the first suggestion that Mr Shepherd, while a friend of Sir Walter, has ulterior interests in Sir Walter's decisions. Three destinations are suggested for the move. Anne prefers another house near Kellynch Hall. Mr Shepherd feels his own influence and ability to manage Sir Walter's affairs would be threatened if Sir Walter resettled in London. Lady Russell likes Bath and ‘…felt obliged to oppose her dear Anne's
known wishes…” (14). Significantly, the narrator informs readers that Elizabeth Elliot had formed with Mr Shepherd's daughter, Mrs Clay, ‘…an intimacy which [Lady Russell] wished to see interrupted…’ (15). Thus, by the conclusion of Chapter II, a complicated system of manipulative forces is in place. Lady Russell is using all her influence for Anne's ‘benefit’ even though Anne clearly dislikes Bath. Mrs Clay is ingratiating herself into the Elliot household through her friendship with Elizabeth; Mr Shepherd is actively protecting that connection in order to maintain his business association with Sir Walter. Even in these early pages all of the characters, excepting Anne, act in self-interest while ostensibly serving others.131

Chapter III opens with a long conversation, chiefly between Sir Walter and Mr Shepherd, concerning potential tenants for Kellynch Hall. Textual time is now present time. Direct speech allows readers to compare the characters with their reputations since most information until this point has been narrative report. Evidence confirms narrative accuracy: Sir Walter is a conceited, pompous bore and Mr Shepherd is a toadying opportunist. Characters conform to narrative presentation, encouraging readers to regard other narrative report as equally reliable. Anne finally emerges from obscurity. She speaks little, yet reveals that she is well-informed, attentive to others even when not directly involved in the conversation, and is strangely agitated by the report closing the chapter. Her agitation increases curiosity and reader sympathy, since she shares circumstances common to other fictional heroines. Anne's resignation and fortitude emerge along with her acceptance of a subordinate role which seems her only recourse.

Besides establishing characters; and narrative reliability, the conversation presented in Chapter III offers one level of intellectual and emotional interaction in which characters participate. Shepherd's account of the Admiral he intends to present to Sir Walter as a tenant occurs in a brilliant passage of indirect speech reminiscent of the babbling effusion's of Emma's Miss Bates. Austen's careful handling of the text almost imperceptibly directs reader engagement to Anne, who has remained largely invisible. Even Mr Shepherd is more directly central to events at this point although his disappearance from the story is imminent. Since the characters are

131 Patricia Meyer Spacks catalogues the principal characters' 'blindness of self- obsession' in 'Taking Care', The Female Imagination, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), p. 80 : ‘…Mary Musgrove spends much of her time seeking occasions to be insulted and most of the rest making sure that she has as many privileges as anyone else… Louisa and Henrietta Musgrove, in search of husbands, believe the rest of the world should share their concentration on how they are to achieve that state in life they deserve. Mr Elliott wishes only to preserve his inheritance of rank…Even Anne's invalid friend Mrs Smith is deterred by self-interest from informing Anne that she seems about to engage herself to a villain.’ It is also noteworthy that the narrative presentation of Lady Russell's motives for relocating the Elliots to Bath reflect in large part Lady Russell's desire to exert influence over Elizabeth. Indeed, Lady Russell's interference in the Elliot family business seems an unwarranted imposition.
unattractive, cold, calculating and tedious, the way is cleared for Anne Elliot to quietly assume her central position. Most of the characters demonstrate such selfishness that readers searching for an agreeable protagonist would find any intimacy with them difficult or impossible. Compassion permits intimacy and excepting Anne, the characters presented so far fail to demonstrate any. Norman Page observes that Austen's prose style has moved towards a more relaxed and conversational manner, with a quiet intimacy which is in tune with the heroine's nature... The narrative prose gains variety and vitality from an infusion of the idioms and rhythms of speech...[the] dialogue entering into an intimate relationship with narrative prose instead of standing...outside it. This unobtrusively skilful and highly versatile blending of different elements was something new in the English novel, and surely constitutes one of Jane Austen's claims to be regarded as an innovator...

The narrative allows for an unusual reader/narrator relationship, which develops as the relations between the characters evolve. Dialogue and free indirect speech reinforce the personalities of the characters through presentation of their thoughts and values because their habits of language-use are encoded into the narrative. Characters gain a reality and substance that enhances reader involvement with them since readers gain insight into how language influences characters' thoughts. The narrator contributes to the substantiality of the characters by slipping in and out of their 'idiolects' and idiosyncratic language patterns so that narrative report reflects in its presentation the mind-sets of the characters. For example, in Chapter VI, (pp. 44-46) direct speech reveals Charles's and Mary Musgrove's communication as experienced by Anne. Much later, when narrative reports Mary's reaction to a play engagement she may have to miss, ‘...she should not think herself very well used...’ (224) comes close to expressing her idea as though she had spoken it. Narrator authority is established because narrative report efficiently and economically combines evidence (textual content) to form (linguistic presentation). Characters extend the influence of their personalities to each other and to readers through their language usage and narrative handling of it.

*Persuasion* represents a departure from Austen's other novels in the kaleidoscopic movements of the plot. The long case history of the Elliots comprising

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132 Mary Poovey describes the first three chapters of *Persuasion* as the 'public' plot which she says ‘...corresponds to repressive social conventions’ and details the interactions between the various characters. ‘Typically, the private plot is repressed, although increasingly it competes with the public plot for the reader's attention...’ until it finally assumes the central emphasis as the ultimate focus of this novel is on meeting personal needs. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*, (University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 228.

the first chapter is insufficient to provide enough background for readers to understand the characters' complicated relationships. As the narrative unfolds, many parenthetical explanations break up the prose, suggesting the narrator is commenting by using asides to avoid slowing the action. Readers are positioned almost as eavesdroppers, overhearing conversations which the narrator clarifies with brief explanations presented like stage script directions about character movements or tones of voice. Anne's first comment is announced ‘Here Anne spoke,—’(19) to emphasise the significance of Anne's rare self-expression, and to highlight the entrance of this nearly inaudible heroine, whose words, ironically, take on greater weight for readers because they are so few. Anne's words also gain importance because readers have access to the thoughts that inspire them.

Chapter IV opens with a narrative exposition of Anne's previous connection to Frederick Wentworth, brother to the wife of Admiral Croft, explaining Lady Russell's influence in convincing Anne to break the engagement[134]. When Charles Musgrove later proposes to Anne, narrative informs readers that ‘Anne had left nothing for advice to do…’(29) presumably because she had learned an important lesson. In any case, the subject of the broken engagement is ‘never alluded to’. Readers are told that in the following years, Wentworth achieved great success at sea, confirming that his predictions were accurate while Lady Russell's were not. Wentworth later attributes his success to luck, often a significant element in any dangerous enterprise. Luck will continue to influence circumstances throughout the novel. Anne, in contrast, is living in her own self-imposed Gothic nightmare by choosing to remain unmarried in a world where marriage provides status and a relatively secure lifestyle.

Anne stays with her sister, Mary, for two months, eliciting Anne's acknowledgment that ‘…every little social commonwealth should dictate its own matters of discourse…’(42). Anne's perceptive and analytical observations of people allow her to assume a detached role, similar to the novel's narrator. Groups of people select conversational subjects revealing their interests and values, emphasising the significance of language in moulding thought, groups and society.

...Roland Barthes calls a ‘sociolect’—‘the language of a linguistic community, that is of a group of persons who all interpret in the same way all linguistic-statements.’ It is [true]... that people speaking the same language can very often not ‘hear’ each other because they are operating within different discourses or sociolects. It is characteristic of many of

134 Tanner suggests that the novel *Persuasion* is a second novel, following the original love story that is presented in Chapter IV describing in a few sentences Wentworth's and Anne's brief courtship and engagement. ‘In Between: “Persuasion”’ *Jane Austen*, pp. 211-212.
Jane Austen's heroines that they are aware when people are operating within different discourses—an awareness which is an aspect of their sense and linguistic 'conscience' and very often a consequence of their detachment and isolation.135

Conversation levels encountered at Uppercross are indicated by Mary Musgrove's tiresome hypochondria and worries about child-rearing. Anne demonstrates the tolerance and misfortune of an active, sympathetic listener because her compassion places her in a position to hear grievances from everyone. While this may seem a tribute to her wisdom, it is not. The problems are petty; the complaints niggling. Valued as an ear, Anne recognises her powerlessness to effect desired changes. Readers are subjected to the tedious, repetitive and essentially self-centred conversations which Anne must endure. Her real virtues and talents are largely untapped. Unexpectedly and without fanfare, in the midst of this stultifying tedium, Wentworth and Anne meet.

Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's; a bow, a curtesy passed; she heard his voice—he talked to Mary, said all that was right; said something to the Miss Musgroves, enough to mark an easy footing: the room seemed full—full of persons and voices—but a few minutes ended it. (59).

Readers must share Anne's surprise and embarrassment because, like the heroine, they are caught off-guard. This dramatic moment is captured in prose that conveys Anne's confusion and alarm through the broken phrases, the reported comments of a heard voice without specific words. Direct reporting of dialogue would be damaging since the exchanges could only involve banalities, but the movement of the prose creates emotional impact. Similar narrative style is employed elsewhere to convey scenes of swirling activity and fragmented communication. ‘Anne heard nothing distinctly; it was only a buzz of words in her ear…’(235). Now, after seven chapters and as many years, the two principals have shared several moments in a crowded room.

Austen makes the conflict between repressive society and Anne's desire seem as important as the epistemological conundrum it displaces by emphasising the odds against Anne's happiness. Nearly all the events of the first part...reinforce the anxiety we share with Anne that her love for Wentworth will be frustrated a second time. Louisa Musgrove actively pursues Wentworth, circumstances rarely bring the two estranged lovers together, Wentworth seems determined to misunderstand Anne, and Anne repeatedly retreats from

135 Tony Tanner, p. 220.
exposure by defining her ‘duty’ as self-effacement.  

Anne and Wentworth move in the same social circle, but they ‘…were as strangers; nay worse than strangers, for they could never become acquainted. It was a perpetual estrangement.’ (63). This poignant situation becomes the emotional focus of the novel. Because readers are aligned with Anne and experience the events through her perspective, her sensitivity enhances reader response, and the establishment of such an intimate sympathy between readers and Anne occurs early in the text despite Anne's marginal position to events within her family. Anne's secret love is shared with those who understand her feelings. Although readers are not directly addressed, their identification with Anne has been achieved with great subtlety. Through this long indoctrination lasting seven chapters, readers have become educated to perceive as Anne perceives: with sympathy and patience.

A number of strategies are employed to create this alignment. First, Anne's role as observer allows readers to share her relationship to events since readers observe scenes which include Anne. Her acute and accurate understanding encourages readers to trust her judgment because she is a reliable witness. However, Anne expresses scepticism and demonstrates an ability to understand interpretations that differ from her own. Since she defers judgement, readers are encouraged to exercise the same caution. Second, Anne's attention to the needs of others frees her judgment from self-interest and permits objectivity. Third, narrative focus on Anne's feelings and emotional responses compels readers to react with her, and for her. Her compassion wins reader sympathy since her struggles are made evident. Finally, Anne's concern with ideas becomes increasingly attractive in contrast to the superficial conversations of her associates. The word *minutiae* occurs a number of times throughout the text, emphasising topics of discussion and their treatment in conversation. When Anne, Benwick, Harville and Wentworth engage in discussion of abstract ideas, the elevation of subject provides a welcome relief.

While the narrator is capable of compassionate observation, there are also many examples of rather tactless comment. One that has aroused some of the greatest critical debate in all of Austen's work occurs when Mrs Musgrove, seated between Wentworth and Anne, laments the loss of her son, Dick. The narrator comments: ‘Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for the self-command

136 Mary Poovey, pp. 228-229.
137 See the Lady Russell-Wentworth-window curtain scene (p.189); and Anne's speculation on Wentworth's attendance at the evening party (p. 226 and p. 232).
with which he attended to her large fat sighings…’(68) and later justifies this 
heartless remark by admitting that physical size and mental sorrow have no 
necessary connections. Julia Prewitt Brown argues that

The statement is aberrant and uncontrolled; it suggests…the pathology of disillusion…The Dick Musgrove passage reads like a terrible and irrational outburst against this despair: an exasperated attempt to force meaning—even negative meaning—onto the despondent world…The Musgroves play the role of grieving parents. For the first time in Jane Austen the narrative irony cannot sustain the insincerity, and in a burst of frustration the narrator makes some claim for the diabolical truth.[38]

This interpretation of the narrative voice is particularly important because it allows the narrator to express ideas with a ‘burst of feeling, warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others…’ (173) which Anne found wanting in William Elliot. A slip of the narrative tongue represents the sincerity prized by Anne Elliot, and which readers are positioned to value. Other readings of the passage are possible. The Musgroves entertain Wentworth to acknowledge the kindness he had shown their son. As guest of honour, he enjoys the attention and admiration of the party. Mrs Musgrove's revived, unhappy memories mirror those of Anne, who also remembers Wentworth's influence on her. By monopolising Wentworth's attention Mrs Musgrove interferes with his flirtations. After he has consoled her about her loss, he resumes speaking of the ships he has commanded, and mirroring Sir Walter, peruses the Navy Lists in search of his name. Mrs Musgrove feeling neglected, and reminiscent of Mary Musgrove, renews her laments. Wentworth then

entered into conversation with her, in a low voice, about her son, doing it with so much sympathy and natural grace, as shewed the kindest considerations for all that was real and unabsurd in the parent's feelings. (68).

Wentworth is shown to be capable of sympathy and compassion, even when the person demanding it may have overstepped the boundaries of propriety. In any case, the narrator's exasperation contrasts with both Anne's and Wentworth's composure and tact. Neither of them ignores nor belittles a person's need for sympathy. In this little drama, Wentworth and Anne share their ability to care for others. Although the narrator's ridicule has been biting and vicious, since readers identify with the hero and heroine, Anne's and Wentworth's compassion is thrown into sharper relief.

Readers may feel genuinely embarrassed by the narrative comment, even after an explanation that is powerless to erase its initial effect. Indeed, every time the passage is re-read, the narrator's insult shocks. Although the observation has been expressed only to readers, its impact jolts as though it were spoken directly to the grieving, pathetic mother. Unkind thoughts, in this case those of the narrator, are shown to be as hurtful as unkind words.

The close of Chapter VIII confirms Anne's unhappy situation. She has agreed to play piano while the rest of the party dances; hears herself talked about, and is once spoken to by Wentworth when he is at the piano in her absence.

...he saw her, and instantly rising, said, with studied politeness, ‘I beg your pardon, madam, this is your seat;’ and though she immediately drew back with a decided negative, he was not to be induced to sit down again.

Anne did not wish for more of such looks and speeches. His cold politeness, his ceremonious grace, were worse than any thing.(72).

Readers too, through narrative use of free indirect discourse, feel the extra sting of this retreat from intimacy to politeness. Anne and Wentworth have descended to the lowest level of intercourse when ‘studied politeness’ offers their only safe communication. It is no wonder Anne chooses retreat. What is more, the interactions between characters presented so far indicate little intimacy or prospect of it. Anne's education ‘...in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle...’ (69) is reinforced when her visit to Uppercross elicits very little sympathy or interest from the Musgroves. Conversations are described as ‘little narratives’ (88); Anne's exchanges with Wentworth become ‘...common civilities—(they never got beyond)...’(120-1). Discussion of minutiae, ‘...saying proper nothings...’ and ‘...insipid talk...’(230) graphically presented in the text, in direct speech, or dismissed by report, confirm the intellectual limitations of Anne's situation. Anne and Wentworth once shared a regard based on mutual esteem; they found it difficult to refrain from exchanging ideas. Icy formality in place of their easy communication is chilling and killing. In such a bleak social environment readers, sharing Anne's perspective, are conscious of the terrible loss.

ii. The turning of the tide
Anne's 'good sense, [and] her determination to guard her own peace of mind,' command reader respect because *Persuasion* is also a study of strategies to recognise and gracefully succumb to the powers of circumstances beyond one's control. Anne shares with her readers the experience of pursuing a plot whose conclusion can only be guessed, and then rarely with much accuracy. Misjudged judgement, pressures from others, and mischance all conspire to make life unpredictable, and sometimes unhappy. Austen's reliance on coincidental circumstances has attracted critical attention, testifying to this novel's exploration of uncertainty. Much speculation on the reasons for a change in the author's attitude toward treatment of plot has only confirm that in fiction-writing, and in life, arbitrary and accidental events that create destinies often arise from mysterious sources. Perhaps, as suggested by a number of critics, the machinery of plot ceased to interest the author, whose focus on theme and personality of characters remained her central interest.

It is also possible that Austen's determination that ‘…an artist cannot do anything slovenly’ prompted her to embed details of the plot not actually revealed in the text. For example, William Elliot's association with Mrs Clay seems sketchy, yet there lurks the suggestion that Mrs Clay may have been Elliot's source of information about Anne. In any case, coincidence accounts for the surprised reactions of both Anne and readers who are equally startled when, one morning, Captain Wentworth walks into the drawing-room where Anne is alone, tending the still ailing Musgrove boy. Their mutual discomfort at finding themselves unexpectedly together is relieved when Charles Hayter enters. His courtship of Henrietta Musgrove has been interrupted by her fascination with Wentworth, so this trio presents a tense group thrown together, while Anne's determination to leave the room is prevented by the invalid's request for help. The narrator is quick to observe these unpleasant, if not amusing circumstances, and particularly the inability of any of the principals to speak.

…Charles Hayter, [was] probably not at all better pleased by the sight of Captain Wentworth, than Captain Wentworth had been by the sight of Anne...Wentworth...came from his window, apparently not ill-disposed for conversation; but Charles Hayter soon put an end to his attempts, by seating himself near the table, and taking up the newspaper; ...Wentworth returned to the window.

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Another minute brought another addition. The younger boy, a...stout, forward child, of two
years old...made his determined appearance among them, and went straight to the sofa to see
what was going on and put in his claim to any thing good that might be giving away.(79).

Here is the famous incident where Wentworth rescues Anne from a toddler's assault. It is conveyed with an intense focus on Anne's feelings creating one of the most dramatic, emotionally powerful scenes in all of Austen's work. The actual event is so mundane that it seems incapable of significance. A selfish child's ploy for attention and putting in a ‘claim to any thing good’ extends the novel's theme of self-interest even to the children, although the selfishness of the adult characters indicates many have never matured beyond wilful, childish egocentrism. Wentworth silently comes to Anne's assistance when Charles Hayter is ineffective.

[Wentworth's] kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it
had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced on her
by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her
thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced
such a confusion of varying, but very painful agitation, as she could not recover from till
enabled by the entrance of Mary and the Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to
their cares, and leave the room. She could not stay. It might have been an opportunity of
watching the loves and jealousies of the four; they were now all together, but she could stay for
none of it.(80).

And neither can readers. The narrator captures in a series of insightful flashes Anne's deductions about Wentworth's motives: his consideration and direct action in relieving her; his silence in doing so; his ‘studious’ creation of noise preventing any acknowledgment of her gratitude. Anne is sensitive enough to read and understand Wentworth's unspoken messages, prompting her reaction to escape for her own preservation. The ‘opportunity’ to watch this interesting quartet of lovers, rivals and relatives would have intrigued Anne and readers, had Anne been present. But it is a scene left to reader imagination because readers, narrator and Anne stay for none. It is unlikely that the scene could match in emotional intensity what has just preceded, precisely because the intimate relation of feelings would be blocked by the jealousies of the four characters gathered in the drawing-room. Moreover, if Anne were not involved, the scene would lack its most important member, for the reader's engagement with this text is centred on Anne's engagement. Where she is marginalised reader interest is marginalised. Readers have come to expect emotional sharing, possible, so far, only with Anne.
According to Bernard J. Paris, Anne has developed a number of effective defensive strategies to protect herself. He points out:

Though Anne is resigned to being unhappy and accepting abuse, she is by no means demoralised or crushed. She has pride, dignity, and self-respect. She is fastidious and discriminating and has a sense of superiority which compensates for her various deprivations...[Anne] is a perfectionist whose self-approval matters more to her than anything else. She may be unappreciated by almost everyone around her; but as long as she lives up to her lofty standards, she has a 'comfortable feeling of superiority'.

When Wentworth removes yet another burden from her back, her emotional reaction determines the importance of the event. Narrative perspective permits readers to share Anne's sensitive consciousness, sustaining her appeal and helping to encourage reader sympathy because of her superior abilities and moral dependability. *Persuasion* emphasises again and again that emotional sharing of experience ennobles life and attaches people to each other. This idea is further developed when Louisa falls at the Cobb, and later when William Elliot pursues Anne. Intimacy means sharing feelings, and the lesson graphically presented in *Persuasion* demonstrates that emotional contact essentially determines the quality of life. To live well, one must be caring. The consequences of carelessness are examined in the next section of the novel.

Through establishment of regular social intercourse between the principal families, many opportunities occur for Anne to encounter Wentworth. During a walking party to Winthrop, as the narrator informs readers, Anne attempts to occupy her thoughts with quotations from poetry,

…repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness, that season which has drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling. (107).

Significantly, Anne turns to written text, poetry, carried in her memory for consolation and even a form of companionship. But Anne finds it difficult to

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concentrate when fragments of Wentworth's conversation with Louisa are audible to her. The narrator reports that Anne

...caught little very remarkable. It was mere lively chat,—such as any young persons, on an intimate footing, might fall into.(84).

This is important because the quality of exchanges between characters best indicates the quality of their present and potential relationships. Readers have been subjected, for example, to Mary's attention-seeking complaints; Sir Walter's pomposity; the vapid silliness of the Musgroves and an occasional pithy remark from Anne. ‘Lively chat’ indicates little more than mutual entertainment. Shortly after the walking party arrives at Winthrop, Wentworth and Louisa exchange revealing thoughts while Anne is concealed nearby in the hedge-row. This moment has been frequently examined by critics who point out Wentworth's wit and imagination in describing his views on firmness and resolution, thus arming Louisa for her later disastrous behaviour. Louisa offers no comment, and Anne

...would have been surprised if Louisa could have answered such a speech—words of such interest, spoken with such serious warmth!—she could imagine what Louisa was feeling.(88).

Louisa's inability to respond indicates, perhaps, that theirs is not so much a meeting of minds. In the next overheard exchange Louisa informs Wentworth that Anne had refused Charles's marriage proposal. Louisa reports

‘...papa and mamma always think it was her great friend Lady Russell's doing, that she did not.—They think Charles might not be learned and bookish enough to please Lady Russell and that therefore, she persuaded Anne to refuse him.’(89).

Since readers already have been informed that Anne's refusal had ‘left nothing for persuasion to do,’ Louisa's damaging conjecture contributes further to the misunderstanding between Wentworth and Anne. Wentworth may reasonably deduce that Anne still sought to please Lady Russell, indicating Anne's inability or disinclination to please herself. This highlights the need for directness and honesty in communication since so much of what people learn about each other is indirect, through such report. Readers are positioned to experience vicariously how social structures and circumstances prevent opportunities for such open exchange. Misunderstanding becomes almost unavoidable. Anne, later in her interview with Mrs Smith concerning Mr Elliot's character, is reluctant to believe unsubstantiated
information, and is obliged to read old letters which are presented as reliable
evidence. Just as Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* must defend his character; and
*Emma*'s Frank Churchill attempts to defend his conduct through letters: ideas
entrusted to written communication carry weight because they can be studied,
survive over time, and reach a wide readership. The written word is privileged by a
creator who appreciated textual power. However, pinning down facts remains
difficult, especially since many obscure motivations can account for human
behaviour.

Anne and Wentworth are restricted to ‘the interchange of…common
civilities’(99), so her acquaintance with Captain Benwick and their mutual interest
in poetry offers a stimulating enlargement of conversational and interpersonal
possibilities. As Anne encourages Benwick to struggle against affliction (100), the
irony of her position is not lost on her. That poetry seems to feed his melancholy
further emphasises the impact of language and specifically poetic literature on
perception and behaviour. The narrator says of Benwick: ‘He was evidently a young
man of considerable taste in reading, though principally in poetry. (100). The
‘though’ subtly suggests that reading poetry may indicate questionable taste. In
Benwick's case, sensitivity and emotional indulgence, nurtured by romantic poetry,
predict him from functioning effectively in the real world. Anne prescribes prose:
particularly letters and memoirs. Attitudes and behaviour are nourished by the ideas
imparted through reading, so the influence of writing and text must be understood.
Anne's interest in reading can be seen as another of her defensive strategies. It is
important that Anne turns to literature of Scott and Byron—written text—and even
discusses it with Captain Benwick ‘…still as unable, as before, and as unable as any
other two readers, to think exactly alike of the merits of either.’(107). By examining
various interpretations of text, the value of literary criticism and sensitivity to
language use is underscored. Readers, too, are invited to share their insights, because
Austen expects her readers to be familiar with these two popular, contemporary
writers

143 Darcy must defend his character; Frank Churchill attempts to defend his conduct through letters: ideas
entrusted to written communication carry weight because they can be studied, survive over time, and reach a
wide readership.

144 See Nancy Armstrong *Desire and Domestic Fiction, A Political History of the Novel*, (New York and
Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) for a thorough discussion of the political, social and cultural impact of writing, and
the ‘…notion of literacy as a form of social control.’ (p. 91).
When a woman is totally isolated from anyone who shares her perceptions, reading may provide the fictional community that keeps her sane. Katherine Mansfield, for example, refers to Jane Austen as a ‘secret friend’.

In her novels, Jane Austen consciously examines the power of language to influence perception, compelling readers to follow characters as various communication methods are employed, analysed, interpreted, abused or refined. *Persuasion* demonstrates that communication occurs even without recourse to language. Indeed, if *Emma* intimates that strong feelings are incompatible with expression in words, *Persuasion* confirms this by use of other semiotic techniques as illustrated in a number of scenes described in narration which reveal characters' thoughts and attitudes toward the communication process itself. Anne, Harville, and Benwick discuss textual interpretation as they actively engage in literary criticism. Less obvious, but equally relevant, Admiral Croft and Anne examine a painting of a boat that amuses and disturbs the Admiral because its representation on canvas suggests an inadequate design for navigating reality. In another instance, Charles Hayter uses the newspaper as a physical barrier to communication when he finds himself in Wentworth's company. (102) Wentworth refers to himself as a lucky survivor who ‘…should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspaper…’ (90). Sir Walter writes a letter which earned no admiration from Lady Russell, among others, but it succeeded in ‘…bringing three lines of scrawl from the Dowager Viscountess…and the Hon. Miss Carteret, to be arranged wherever they might be most visible…’ (162). When the Crofts deliver letters to Bath, Sir Walter refers to them as ‘…convenient passports…’ (174). Elizabeth's pointed invitation to Wentworth which he receives with ‘…surprise rather than gratification, of polite acknowledgment rather than acceptance…’ (231) is interpreted by Mary ‘I do not wonder Captain Wentworth is delighted! You see he cannot put the card out of his hand.’ (231). All of these semiotic exchanges are incorporated into the narrative presentation to suggest characters' ability and inability to interpret messages. Not only the contents of exchanges, but the form they take and the quality of presentation speaks volumes.

All forms of interaction that rely on transmitting messages over distances and through intermediaries can become sources of mis-information and misunderstanding. Wentworth’s words are ‘…carried round…’ (85) where they can

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cause mischief, because they are only spoken. Letters are also crucially important because the written words can be preserved and examined over time. Mrs Musgrove consults her letters to ascertain Wentworth's connection to her son.(77). Mary instructs Anne to give news to Elizabeth, a correspondence described as ‘toil’(127). Mrs Smith's evidence of William Elliot's character is documented in correspondence; as is Wentworth's love for Anne which he pens while he is supposed to be writing a letter re-allocating a portrait of Benwick, originally intended for Harville's sister. References to other forms of printed material: quotes from rental documents (60), allusions to other fiction works (pp. 135 and 233), as well as the non-fiction records contained in the Baronetage and Navy Lists describe a world saturated with language. Learning to discriminate the genuine communications from the noisy babble presents an educational challenge for Anne and readers.

Louisa's wilful determination to jump into Wentworth's arms at the Cobb represents a major crisis in the novel, and an important turning point for Anne's status. The scene is so famous it hardly needs presentation here, except to note that while the action is dramatic, the brevity of its presentation makes it easy to overlook. The narrator exclaims ‘…—The horror of that moment to all who stood around!’(129). Focus is on the emotional responses of the onlookers. Everyone is immobilised except Anne, who efficiently and resourcefully directs help. Keeping readers paced with the action, another parenthetical narrative reminder asserts ‘(it was all done in rapid moments)’ (130). The narrator describes delighted spectators arriving to gawk, finding two ‘lifeless’ forms better value than they anticipated. This kind of detail undercuts the potential tragedy of the event, keeping readers amused rather than horrified, as are the characters. Here is another example of how reader response is manipulated by narrative so that readers can remain cool-headed like the heroine. A surgeon's examination reveals ‘Louisa's limbs had escaped. There was no injury but to the head.’(112). Again the narrator makes a factual comment that is loaded with comic implications, among them the suggestion that ‘the head’ in this instance is less important than the jumping limbs. One of the manifestations of the injury to Louisa's head later reveals itself to be her interest in poetry. It may represent Austen's ironic comment on the dangerous influences of the sentimental and self-indulgent excesses to which poetry may lead a weak mind.

iii. The tide comes in

William Elliot's interest in Anne encourages Lady Russell's hopes, although the narrator observes ‘It was now some years since Anne had begun to learn that she
and her excellent friend could sometimes think differently.’ (160). So when Lady Russell admits, ‘I am no match-maker, as you well know,’ (171), Anne and readers must realise the comic and tragic ironies of this understatement.

After Anne receives news about Benwick's engagement to Louisa in a letter from Mary, her first conversation with Wentworth happens in a shop, where the narrative describes Wentworth's unaccountable embarrassment. Their reunion, occurring amidst groups in transit, is captured in the prose with such comments as ‘…there was a delay, and a bustle, and a talking…’ (176). Again the chaotic, frenetic activity of groups rushing about leaves the narrator little opportunity to fix specific details, and even definite articles are lost in the mêlée. Almost at once, Anne is swept away by her cousin's solicitous attentions, followed by comments of others to indicate William's obvious romantic designs. Wentworth is now placed in Anne's position as he watches his ex-lover being courted. Rather appropriately, the narrator informs readers:

Anne would have been particularly obliged to her cousin, if he would have walked by her side all the way to Camden-place, without saying a word. She had never found it so difficult to listen to him, though nothing could exceed his solicitude and care, and though his subjects were principally such as were wont to be always interesting—praise, warm, just, and discriminating, of Lady Russell, and insinuations highly rational against Mrs Clay… (178)

Elliot may be caring, and thoughtfully attending to Anne's interests, but her concern is with Wentworth and even well-meaning conversation fails to enlist her undivided attention. William's subjects, it appears, are discussions of other people for better or worse, and therefore constitute little more than gossip or small-talk. Anne has already distinguished herself as one who prefers a higher level of discourse, which would explain why Elliot's chat proves unengaging. In view of his later involvement with Mrs Clay, his comments here indicate deceit and hypocrisy.

The scene (pp. 178-9) where Anne spies Wentworth and believes Lady Russell is staring at him, although Lady Russell explains her intense gaze as a search for window curtains, has provided critics with a number of possible interpretations. If Lady Russel is lying and has seen Wentworth, her deception would be in keeping with the theme. Mrs Smith condemns ninety-nine percent of people to such dishonesty. If Lady Russel is innocent and blind, Anne and readers will never know for sure. The presentation of Wentworth's approach is conveyed with a dramatic, cinematographic focus that allows readers to share Anne's suspense and uncertainty,
concluding finally with her ironic failure to discover if Wentworth had noticed them. The scene further examines how little certainty can be placed on what people say. In the end, the laws of probability provide only a guide, and even close friends may have their own reasons for dissembling.

Anne contrives an opportunity to communicate with Wentworth during the concert party. At the conclusion of the concert's first act, and ‘a period of nothing-saying’(189), Anne manages to retain a seat nearer the end of the bench, where a vacant spot is available to Wentworth were he present. He does eventually approach, but in a cool, grave manner for which Anne can not account. They speak and Wentworth is about to sit next to her

when, at that moment, a touch on her shoulder obliged Anne to turn round.—It came from Mr. Elliot. He begged her pardon, but she must be applied to, to explain Italian again…Anne could not refuse; but never had she sacrificed to politeness with a more suffering spirit(190).

Wentworth takes his leave and Anne, all amazement, realises that jealousy of William Elliot is the cause. ‘It was misery to think of Mr. Elliot's attentions.—Their evil was incalculable.’ (191). Significantly, the ‘evil’ results from Anne's ability to translate the ‘meaning’ rather than ‘sense’ of an Italian love song. (186). William recognises she is able to ‘…translate at sight these inverted, transposed, curtailed Italian lines, into clear, comprehensible, elegant English. You need not say anything more of your ignorance.—Here is complete proof.’(186). The concert bill becomes a barrier to Anne's communication with Wentworth. William penetrates Anne's humility about her accomplishments with foreign language and reveals his sensitive insights into her character. He recognises Anne's linguistic skill, which seems a tribute to his discernment. Ironically, he employs his analytic talents to exploit those who trust him.

Narrative detail creates a vivid visual picture of the swirling group dynamics, presenting the difficulties of communicating and the interruptions which all conspire to thwart Wentworth's and Anne's reconciliation. Narration helps convey the atmosphere with observations such as: ‘…her attention was caught by other sounds immediately behind her… Her father and Lady Dalrymple were speaking…’(188).

…Anne's eyes had caught the right direction, and distinguished Captain Wentworth, standing among a cluster of men at a little distance. As her eyes fell on him, his seemed to be withdrawn from her. It had that appearance. It seemed as if she had been one moment too late; and as long as she dared observe, he did not look again: but the performance was
re-commencing, and she was forced to seem to restore her attention to the orchestra, and look straight forward.(188).

Anne tries to interpret their failure to make eye contact: Wentworth seemed to be avoiding her searching gaze; his behaviour had that appearance. Demands of social etiquette require Anne's attention on the concert performance so further attempts to reach Wentworth become impossible. Speculation about meaning remains the only reading of events. After suffering neglect for years, Anne suddenly finds herself too much sought-after, and by the wrong man. Readers experience her volatile emotional states as she soars and sinks under the conflicting influences of the people around her. She is hemmed in by her physical position in the concert hall and the restraints of social decorum that prevent her from speaking first, and speaking directly about her feelings before being addressed on the subject by the gentleman. Dramatic tension is maintained as Anne's resolution to communicate her feelings is tested, for she is fastidious in her social conduct; and retiring by nature. How is she to make herself heard? This problem continues to confront her and confound readers who have 'heard' everything unspoken since her story began. Textual focus remains on the nature of social discourse. The important message Anne needs to convey to Wentworth gains urgency because, compared to the 'nothing sayings' it is a genuine expression of feeling.

The opening of Chapter IX Volume II allows readers a particularly poignant insight into Anne's attitudes when she considers with sympathy William Elliot's position.

How she might have felt, had there been no Captain Wentworth in the case, was not worth enquiry; for there was a Captain Wentworth: and be the conclusion of the present suspense good or bad, her affection would be his for ever. Their union, she believed, could not divide her more from other men, than their final separation.(192).

The narrator goes on to comment that Anne's 'musings of high-wrought love and eternal constancy' were enough to 'spread purification and perfume all the way' along the streets of Bath where she was bound on her visit to Mrs Smith. Such romantic exuberance is at once amusing and possibly ironic. Immediately following is the conversation between Anne and Mrs Smith, exploiting the complexities of communication. Mrs Smith makes ambiguous remarks as she assumes Anne to be in love with William Elliot and Anne is baffled that Mrs Smith has learnt of her love
for Wentworth. Readers may enjoy the misunderstanding, chiefly because Anne is withholding information from Mrs Smith that readers already know. When the confusion is resolved, however, Mrs Smith seeks Anne's help to overcome problems for which Elliot was responsible. Mrs Smith even encourages Anne to consider accepting Elliot, whom she describes as a ‘…gentleman like, agreeable man…’ (196). Finally, convinced that Anne is not in love with him, Mrs Smith reveals how William Elliot ruined her husband. Her story is presented in direct speech. An incriminating letter, fully printed, provides text to substantiate her allegations. Mrs Smith further accounts for William Elliot's ambitions through a series of informants. Anne denies the authenticity of Mrs Smith's allegations, objecting

…we must not expect to get real information in such a line. Facts or opinions which are to pass through the hands of so many, to be misconceived by folly in one, and ignorance in another, can hardly have much truth left. (211).

However, Anne does glean the accuracy of the tale. Her visit with Mrs Smith concludes when, in indirect narrative report, Elliot's association with the Smiths is revealed. This chapter is the longest in the novel, and seems overburdened with analeptic material. Elliot's duplicity and selfish manipulations rank him as perhaps the worst scoundrel in all of Austen's novels, and yet initially he wins the most laudatory praise from characters and narrator. Anne's suspicions alone supply the only reservations for readers. Even more troubling is Mrs Smith's questionable loyalty to Anne, for Mrs Smith seems prepared to conceal William Elliot's villainy rather than protect Anne from a dangerous alliance. Mrs Smith's hesitation to inform Anne of William Elliot's character throws into question her integrity as a friend, and it offers yet another example of self-serving motives that tarnish relations between characters. It also highlights the question of social decorum as another barrier to direct and honest communication. But the revelation is timely and justifies Anne's earlier scepticism.

Anne's opportunities to speak to Wentworth are provided and prevented a number of times following the interview with Mrs Smith. At last, Anne indirectly communicates her feelings at the White Hart Inn where Wentworth overhears a warm discussion between Anne and Captain Harville.147 The depth of feeling and even the subject matter—comparative fidelity between men and women—is

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particularly compelling. First, of course, it allows Anne to voice her previously withheld ideas. Literature is offered and rejected as evidence, and again characters find themselves confronting issues that continue to inspire debate. Second, since she and Harville disagree, Anne is forced to assert herself and her position, because strength of feeling and constancy are not genes found on the sex-linked chromosomes. She is firm and eloquent in presenting her case. It is, after all, necessary to oppose irrationality and to defend truth. Resolution in matters of importance, like this, confirm integrity. As Anne has demonstrated from the start, active and energetic behaviour serves to create a better world, whether that service is rendered to an invalid child, invalid adults, or in opposition to an ‘in-valid’ idea. Third, in straining to hear the discussion, Wentworth drops his pen as he loses concentration on the letter he is supposed to be composing. Anne, symbolically, and Austen in reality, are empowered to inscribe themselves as subjects in their own destinies.\footnote{See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.} (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 174-183 for a fascinating development of these ideas.} Anne's words have silenced Wentworth. Fourth, this philosophical debate appears in vivid contrast to the conversations presented throughout the novel, and those immediately preceding it. For example, Mrs Musgrove and Mrs Croft were discussing Henrietta's engagement, conveyed to readers in free indirect speech by the narrator who summarises the contents of their talk as

…Minutiae which, even with every advantage of taste and delicacy which good Mrs Musgrove could not give, could be properly interesting only to the principals.\footnote{See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.} (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 174-183 for a fascinating development of these ideas.}

Anne's discussion with Harville, overheard by Wentworth, inspires him to pen his proposal to Anne, which he delivers moments later. ‘Her eyes devoured the …words’\footnote{See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination.} (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 174-183 for a fascinating development of these ideas.} and readers are privileged to read his passionate love letter. This confirmation of his love is welcome news to Anne and readers who have become ‘principals’ in the drama. Anne, overcome with joy, pleads illness to escape the assembly. Mrs Musgrove is concerned that Anne may have hit her head, a narrative detail again infusing comic characterisation to undercut Anne's intense emotional state. The depth of Anne's emotional response is once more contrasted to the worldly concerns of the other characters, whose lack of sensitivity maintains their cool distance from readers and the important lessons of experience. With the uniting of the lovers, the story closes quickly. The narrator makes a single first person statement asserting that the ‘bad morality’ of the conclusion is true anyway. Anne and Wentworth sail into their sunset, and readers are gratified with a happy ending to a tense, melancholy romance.
The final result of *Persuasion* can be measured in its impact on readers as well as characters. Anne and Wentworth are reunited, but the painful process of achieving that reunion teaches many lessons. Anne learns to express her ideas enabling her to meet her needs. Asserting oneself is necessary for survival and in this case, happiness. Anne never uses people or manipulates them, departing from the actions evident in others. Wentworth learns to refine his judgement and is humbled by his own careless engagement of affections he does not desire. His wounded pride had rendered him unable to forgive, a lapse of understanding and compassion that cost him years of happiness. Much as the principals learn, readers should have gained a great deal more. In sharing Anne's experiences and responses, readers acquire an insight into a selfless compassion that may well surpass anything they are likely to encounter in real life. This is not to say that Anne Elliot is unrealistic. Her realism allows the strong identification possible between readers and text. Through the narrative, readers are positioned to live the emotional moments that literally change perceptions. Readers rejoice in the triumph of honesty when the lovers understand each other at last because the unique rapport they have shared distinguishes them from their associates. Anne leaves her negligent family and manipulative friends to enter a circle of energetic, capable naval officers and their families. The promise of intimacy, mutual service and regard suggest a world opening opportunities for enriching human contacts.

As Mary Poovey argues in her eloquent defence\(^{149}\) of Jane Austen's love stories, readers need fictions to present imaginative goals, both to compensate for the disappointments experienced in reality, and to inspire the pursuit of a better reality. The conclusion of *Persuasion*, characteristically ambiguous and even uneasy in the prospects presented to the hero and heroine, still gratifies readers. With the closing of the volume, Cinderella and Prince Charming will have each other as they face whatever destiny contrives, free to pursue their career unobserved and unreported by a narrator. Readers should leave the fictional experience appreciating the true worth of this relationship which is measured in the feelings Anne and Wentworth share. Their compassion, sensitivity and honesty are rewarded. Property, material possessions, the pretensions of social climbing, and the trivial, bustling nothingness of town life in Bath can be abandoned without a feeling of loss. Their triumph is the spiritual, emotional union that can be found only through the adventure of trust, and pursuing honesty. Readers have been able to share that adventure and experience, through the fiction, some of that intimacy.

\(^{149}\) Mary Poovey, pp. 237-244.
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