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# Differences in the seemingly uniform world of Jane Austen

A comparison between the social context in the novels *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*

Bachelor's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Wassim R. Rustom

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## **Table of Content**

<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>SOCIAL CONTEXT .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>CLASS STRUCTURES, GENDER AND FAMILY LIFE .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>DIFFERENCES IN THE UNIFORM WORLD.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>ELIZABETH BENNET AND ANNE ELLIOT .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LITERATURE: .....</b>	<b>11</b>

## Summary

This Bachelor thesis argues that there are significant differences in the seemingly uniform world of Jane Austen. Early 19th century when Austen wrote her novels *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the English landed gentry and the social norms connected to this social class were an important part of how the issues and challenges are presented in the novels. Austen is known for exploring and criticizing the norms of society in this time of history, and even though there are little variation in what challenges and social classes are being represented in the novels, Austen have managed to shed light on the challenges of the oppression of women connected in the English landed gentry from different perspectives by creating female protagonists which handle the challenges they face in different ways. Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* is from a wealthy family in society, but confront problems in terms of marriage just like Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* who belongs to a lower class of the English landed aristocracy. *Persuasion* communicate a more critical point of view on social norms by

focusing on the consequences Anne confront in her decisions than *Pride and Prejudice*, which is a more feminist reflection on the issues of social class by making marriage across social classes the main concern.

## **Introduction**

Austen's novels often explore the lives of women from different social classes and their relationships with men, highlighting the ways in which class and gender intersect to shape her female characters' experiences. Jane Austen lived in a time where discrimination against women and class disparities were prevalent aspects of daily life, and have become one of the world's most famous writers in history by portraying and criticize the challenges and questions about the society at this time in her novels. The heroines of Austen do not act as most women would have in this period, and have in common that they all face challenges connected to gender norms and social class. Even though there are significant similarities in the female protagonists in Austen's novels, the heroines portray different personalities, strengths and weaknesses in their encounter with these challenges.

As this essay will argue, there are significant differences in the seemingly uniform world of Jane Austen, despite of similarities in social context and the challenges women at this time had to face connected to this. To understand how Austen's perception of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century society influenced and shaped her writing and thereby the lives of the characters in her novels, this essay will present an analysis and discussion of the class structures and gender relations in the English landed gentry by presenting two of Austen's heroines; Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1817), and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). A comparison between these two female protagonists will point out differences between them regarding personality traits and social background, to argue how these differences convey diverse perceptions of similar issues.

## **Social context**

### **Class structures, gender and family life**

In Jane Austen's novels, the plot is designed by class structures reflecting the social and cultural norms of 19<sup>th</sup> century England, more specifically the English landed gentry. People who were a part of this social class were not only a part of the gentry class but were also landowners. This meant to not have a traditional job but rent their land to tenant farmers who worked their land (Rothery, 2018). The greater ease of travel on the 19<sup>th</sup> century made it relatively simple for the landowners to find farmers seeking for a landed foothold (Thompson,

1963). These individuals were a part of the lower nobility, but were still well-born and of higher social status because of the wellness in income that came of the rental of the land. The landlord's job was simply to administrate their estate, which would be passed down in generations through primogeniture (Rothery, 2018).

In Jane Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, primogeniture plays a significant role in shaping the lives and relationships of the characters. Primogeniture is the practice of passing down inheritance and titles to the first-born son in a family, rather than equally dividing it among all children (Rothery, 2018). In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet family's estate is entailed, meaning that it can only be inherited by a male heir, specifically the eldest son. This puts pressure on Mr. Bennet to ensure that his only male heir, Mr. Collins, will inherit the estate rather than a distant male cousin. The entailment also motivates Mrs. Bennet's obsession with marrying off her daughters to wealthy men who can secure their financial futures. In *Persuasion*, the Elliot family's estate is also entailed, leading to tension between the protagonist, Anne Elliot, and her father. Anne's father is obsessed with maintaining the family's status and wealth, and is willing to marry Anne off to a wealthy man, despite her objections. Meanwhile, Anne's love interest, Captain Wentworth, is not wealthy enough to be a suitable match for her in her father's eyes, despite their strong feelings for each other. Primogeniture highlights the inequalities and limitations of the social structure in Austen's time, particularly for women who were often forced into marriage for financial security.

The maintenance of the wealth was highly important for the families belonging to the English landed gentry. The male inheritor and their choice of marriage were crucial. Choosing a sustainable match would mean to help sustain or increase the wealth of the family estate and help improve the status of the society's impacts on class and social hierarchies (Rothery, 2018). To marry well presupposes a certainty and trustworthy relation between the families joined together by marriage, and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was common to marry a person one was related to. Kinship played a significant role in the gentry social life, and through The National Census Enumerator's Books for 1851 and 1881 clarify that the gentry socialized with their kinship on the regular (Rothery, 2018).

Gender relations and female oppression are in relation to class structures are one of the main issues presented in Austen's novels. She is known for using her own personal experiences in her novels, and the issues and relations she wrote about can be mirrored to her



own life (Jamoussi, 2022). Austen's lifetime is a period of gender equality, where the society were male-dominated and women were discriminated. This did not only include difficulties regarding social class; gender is also a significant term of issue. Women's role in society were to take care of the household and give birth to heirs that could lead the men's legacy on. The universities and professions were not open to women, so to obtain financial stability they had no other opportunity than to marry (Lindström, 2010). Marrying well for a woman in the English landed gentry meant to marry a man with good income.

In the time *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* were written, women were starting to get their hopes up for a more equal society (Eagleton, 1983). The industrialization that had started in Britain in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was changing the view on the inhabitants of Great Britain. These happenings were the beginning of a remarkable change in society and can be thought to have been inspiring for Austen's way of presenting the society's challenges. Even though the industrialization or movements that happened in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is directly mentioned, we can find quotes and statements in her work that initiate a influence by the changes in society. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot have a playful argument with Captain Harville originally about whether men or women are more devoted in their love for other people, but gives us a picture of how Anne sees the differences between men and women;

“We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, buissness of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions...” (Austen, 1997, pp. 173).

Austen highlights women's role in society and the issues connected to this by creating relations and challenges in these areas for her female protagonists. Both in *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* the protagonists are women, and as females they meet disadvantages in connection to family, social belonging and personal appearance. Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet have similar expectations and social belonging as they are both females. They are also presented as very strong women, which in this period was quite untraditional qualities for females. How their strong female character influences their lives differs, due to their different lives and circumstances.

## **Differences in the uniform world**

Even though the representation of the social world is limited to the English landed gentry and her focus on resident landowning families, there are however significant differences in this seemingly uniform world (Jamoussi, 2022). Austen is well known for focusing on the English landed gentry social class in her work, and the family group and the interaction between the members is conveyed and described in her novels without much input of imagination (Shamsudden, n.d). Conflicts within families are an essential part of Austen's work, especially focusing on the individuals' attitude towards family (Jamoussi, 2022).

Both *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice* are novels where Austen have made the strictly defined class division in society the main issue, but in two separate ways. In *Persuasion*, it is the challenges the characters meet in the maintaining of the institutional class order within marriage that creates the conflicts, as opposed to *Pride and Prejudice* where the conflicts and challenges roots in the crossing between the upper and lower social class in a relationship.

To be able to understand how the protagonists' personality and environment influence their lives, and to understand how these seemingly similar novels highlights the changes in the society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in two different ways, it's necessary to compare the aspects of the novels to each other; especially the differences in Elizabeth and Anne's lives and personality. Their different personalities and belonging in the social hierarchy influence the different challenges they face, and how they handle them. As we now know the set expectations and options these women had at the time the novels were written, we can understand what makes Austen's novels so ahead of its time; the revolutionary crossing between social classes, and how aspects like love and romantic connection between people became a relevant issue in literature.

## **Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot**

Even though Elizabeth Bennet belong to the middle-class and the lower class of the English landed gentry, her personality reminds of the sophisticated and gentle behavior of the higher class. Anne Elliot on the other hand, is from a wealthier family, but does not act on the privileges or share the traditional values associated with a higher class. *Pride and prejudice* present a more feminist description of the female characters' challenges connected to gender and their limited opportunities for independence and self-determination than *Persuasion*, which presents a more traditional view of women's role in society. The protagonists' strong and differentiating personality traits appears through their decisions in one of women of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most vital choices; whom to marry.

Elizabeth Bennet represents an independent and forward-thinking approach to women's rights. Elizabeth Bennet is portrayed as a strong, independent and intelligent woman who challenges the social norms and expectations related to them. She is not afraid to speak her mind, and her direct approach clarifies her fearlessness. An example is this statement she shares with her sister regarding her realization about the differences between two of the men in the novel;

“There certainly was some great mismanagement in the education of those two young men. One has got all the goodness, and the other all the appearance of it” (Austen, 2002, p. 217). Elizabeth values her own opinions by speaking her mind and challenge the views of the traditional and conservative people around her, like Mr. Collins. Mr. Collins is the one who stands to inherit Mr. Bennet's property, and by marrying him Elizabeth would get financial security for both herself and her family. However, when Mr. Collins propose to Elizabeth, she declines his offer. This decision is a clear reflection of Elizabeth's strong and independent figure, showing that she is unwilling to compromise her values for the sake of social status.

Elizabeth is also portrayed as a very kind woman, believing in treating the people around her with respect. When her sister fell ill, Elizabeth travelled to take care of her. This unladylike behavior portrays Elizabeth's kindness, and are one of the characteristics about her personality that opened Darcy's eyes on the possibility of liking her. “Darcy had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty...But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she hardly had a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes... he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing; and in spite of asserting that her manners were not those of the fashionable world, he was caught by their easy playfulness” (Austen, 2002, pp.24).

Mr. Collins appears as an awkward and snobbish man, and rejecting his proposal regardless of the security it would have given Elizabeth testify that she is more interested in character and integrity than status and wealth. This is evident in her relationship with Mr. Darcy, a wealthy gentleman, whom she initially dislikes because of his haughty and snobbish demeanor. When she gets to know him better and explores that Mr. Darcy have admirable qualities like loyalty and commitment, she reconsiders her prejudices and eventually fall in love with him. The decision to reject Mr. Collins proposal is one of the largest reasons for

why Elizabeth is a symbol of the changing social landscape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century England. She represents a new generation of women who are challenging the traditional gender roles and expectations of their society. When being accused of tricking Darcy into proposing to her, Elizabeth stands up to Lady Catherine de Bourgh's assumptions and makes it clear that even though Lady Catherine has a wealthier background than herself, she will not accept that Lady Catherine is meddling in affairs that do not concern her at all; "I have said no such thing. I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any person so wholly unconnected with me" (Austen, 2002, p.338). Her eventual marriage to Mr. Darcy is not only revolutionary by being a union primarily based on romance, but also a partnership of equals in which both parties are respected for their individual strengths and abilities.

Like Elizabeth, Anne Elliot has a clear sense of duty and is acutely aware of her responsibilities to her family and society. Anne Elliot's character is moderated by her deep dignity of integrity, honor and charity, and are very humble in her consideration of other people's feelings through her dedication to duty and principle. She conveys her beliefs in a mature and wise sense of communication, even though her personal opinions disagree with the counterparty. In a conversation with Mr. Elliot, she expresses her disagreement about his statement claiming that "good company" contain intelligent subjects such as aristocracy;

"My idea of good company, Mr. Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation; that is what I call good company." (Austen, 1997, p. 110)

Even though Anne in some situations expresses her opinions outwardly, she possesses a calm mind and kind heart which often leads to her keeping her feelings to herself. As a single woman in her late twenties, she is considered an "old maid" by the standards of her time. Despite her intelligence and competence, she is expected to defer to the men in her life, including her father and her former suitor, Captain Wentworth. Her introspective person and high respect for tradition and social norms sometimes lead to her making decisions that go against her own desires, like when she breaks off her engagement to Captain Wentworth because she believes it would be socially unacceptable to marry a man with no fortune or connections. This decision becomes a source of regret for Anne for many years.

“More than seven years were gone since this little history of sorrowful interest had reached its close, and time had soften down much, perhaps nearly all of peculiar attachment to him,—but she had been too dependent on time alone; no aid had been given in change of place... or in any novelty enlargement of society” (Austen, 1997, p.19)

The personal growth through self-examination and reflections about her confined character leading to her actions, has a significant influence on the plot of the novel. The passage situated above describes the time Anne had spent reflecting on her decision to reject Captain Wentworth’s proposal, trying to make sense of her feelings. Throughout the novel, Anne’s sense of duty and fear of going against the social norms which lead to her rejecting Wentworth’s proposal get interrupted by her learning to navigate her own emotions and trust her own judgement. Her marriage to Wentworth at the end of the novel is a happy ending precisely because it allows her to fulfill her traditional role as a wife and mother, and at the same time she marries the man she loved. Love was just barely a secondary thought in the discussions of marriage, because the social and financial aspects like class, income and status were a lot important.

Elizabeth and Anne’s individual and specific personality traits clearly has a significant influence on the plot of the novels, but their personalities are also strongly connected to their place in the social hierarchy. Elizabeth as the second daughter of a country gentleman is not considered a great catch in society due to her family's lack of wealth and status. Since the Bennet family's estate is entailed to Mr. Collins, a distant cousin, means that Elizabeth and her sisters will be left without a home and fortune after their father's death. This fact puts Elizabeth and her family in a precarious situation, and she is aware of her inferior position in society. Nevertheless, the line between her independency, her sharp tongue and her tendency to make hasty judgements is vague. Elizabeth’s rejection of Mr. Collins proposal is one of the biggest surprises in the novel. The fear of possibly losing everything her family own the day her father passes have caused great pressure on the Bennet sisters to marry well, so why does she not take the opportunity to secure her family a stable future?

As mentioned, Elizabeth was a strong believer of treating people with respect, and despite her social range she expected the same respect in return. Presumably she did not experience this in her connection with Mr. Collins, and because of her stubborn belief in her own values she put them before her expected duties connected to her class and gender. By marrying Darcy she marries well and secure herself a stable future as he is of a higher social class than Elizabeth herself, but puts her own needs and romantic feelings before her family.

In contrast to Elizabeth, Anne Elliot is in a more privileged position in society due to her family's rank and wealth. Her father, Sir Walter Elliot, is a baronet, a title that gives him and his family a certain degree of prestige. *Persuasion* is quite openly dismissive of rank and class, and Austen presented all the characters of the higher classes, except Anne, as arrogant and self-absorbed (Lindström, 2010). Austen clarifies these features by ironically mocking these personality traits of her characters of the higher class. Anne's father Sir Walter Elliot were considered one of the most ridiculous characters in British literature, because of Austen's description of his way of being.

“Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation... He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and Sir Walter Elliot, who untied these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion.” (Austen, 1997, p.2)

As the eldest daughter, Anne would have been expected to make a good match and marry someone of her own rank. However, Anne's situation is complicated by her family's financial difficulties. Her father has spent much of his fortune on maintaining his position in society, leaving his family with a diminished income. This fact puts pressure on Anne to marry for financial security rather than love.

Social class is an essential part of both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, but makes a clearer statement in *Persuasion*. One should believe that it would be opposite, thinking of the fact that Elizabeth is the one marrying someone outside of her own social class, and Anne marrying a man in the same social class as herself. *Persuasion* conveys a more critical point of view on social hierarchy by making the consequences of class differences in marriage the main issue throughout the novel. The denial of Captain Wentworth's proposal in the beginning of the novel due to societal pressures and her family's disapproval is what shapes Anne's character when she attempts to rekindle their romance while navigating expectations connected to class structures. By writing about Anne's personal development of a strong voice that finally dares to stand up and make herself heard, Jane Austen critiques the social pressure that often forced women to sacrifice their own desires for the benefit of their families and the expectations of society. Despite these societal expectations, Anne breaks the norms of society by choosing to reject a marriage proposal from a man who is of equal social standing but whom she does not love. Instead, she chooses to follow her heart and pursue a relationship with Captain Wentworth. Her decision to prioritize love and happiness is a testament to her developed strength of character and her willingness to challenge the status quo.

Even though this criticism against social norms openly states the challenges regarding marriage from the female character's point of view, *Persuasion* on the other hand agrees with the norms regarding social hierarchy.

“He was rich, and being turned on shore, fully intended to settle as soon as he could be properly tempted; actually, looking round, ready to fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and quick taste could allow” (Austen, 1997, p. 44)

By developing Captain Wentworth's character to a suitable match for Anne due to his position in the Navy, the novel does not go as far as crossing the line with a marriage between social classes, as it would be an unnatural outcome in this time in history in the English landed gentry. Even though the social norms of marriage are maintained by this ending, the novel's purpose are still perceived as a criticism against the social structures by using Anne's dutiful but longing character to describe the consequences from a female's point of view to highlight women's place in society.

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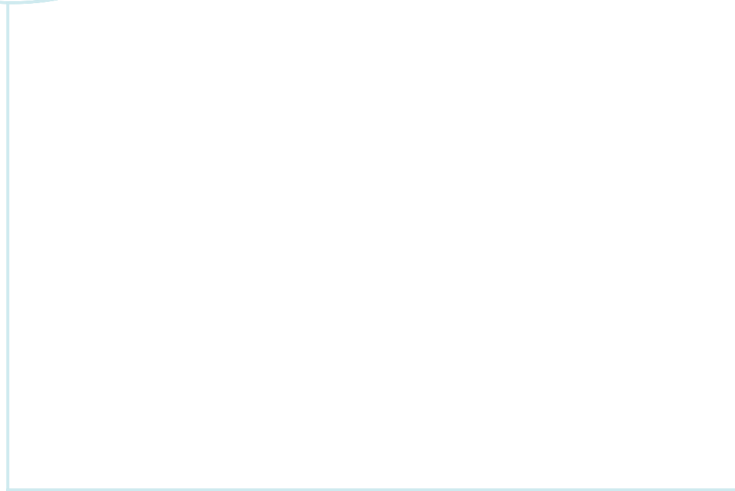
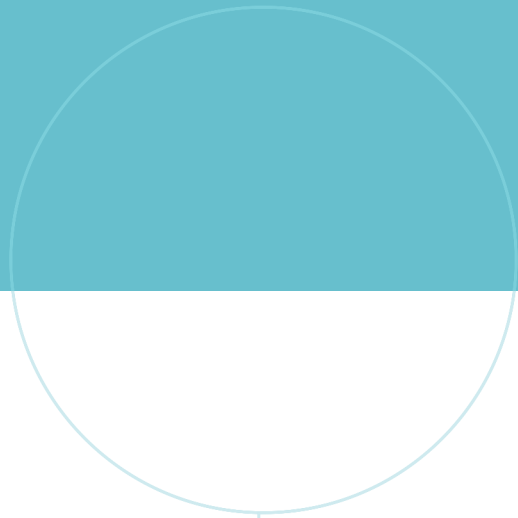
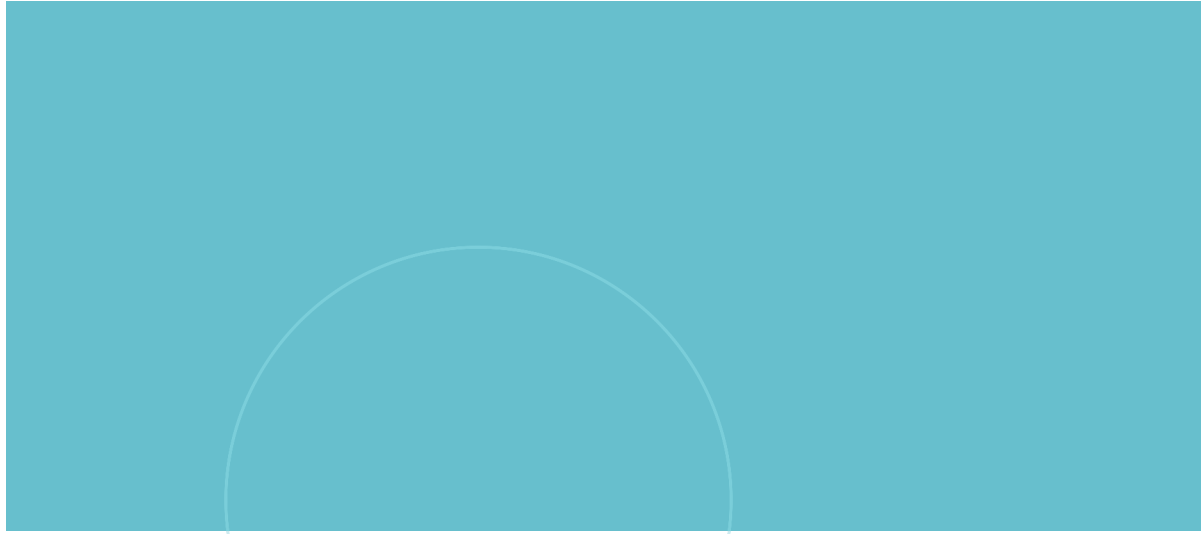
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