The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Invention 6(10): 5649-5656, 2019
DOI: 10.18535/ijsshi/v6i10.01 **ICV 2015: 45.28**
ISSN: 2349-2031

Research Article

Accomplished ladies and well-mannered gentlemen: The effect of education in Jane Austen's novels

Miguel Ángel Jordán.

Department of English Studies of Universidad de Valencia (Spain) Vice President of Jane Austen Society of Spain.

Email: miguel.jordan@uv.es

Abstract: **The education of young people is one of the recurring themes of Jane Austen's novels. In all her works there are references to the consequences of the education received or its shortcomings. This is a determining factor in the development of personality and Austen, who focuses her novels on people, places great importance on it.**

In this article, we will analyze the abundant references Austen makes on the subject of education and we will offer some information on this aspect in her sociocultural context, differentiating between education as a person's formation, on the one hand, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills on the other.

Key words: Literature and culture, Regency England, Nineteenth Century Literature, Literature and society.

1. Introduction

The works of Austen can be defined as novels of characters, in which the important aspect is not so much the plot as the study of the personality of each protagonist. In this context, it is logical that the author attaches such importance to the topic that we will speak about now, since it will be of great relevance when characterizing the people that will appear in her stories. In fact, according to Devlin, "All Jane Austen's novels, and many of her minor works, unfinished works and juvenilia, are about education." (1)

The character of a person is forged over time and influenced by biological and environmental factors: family, friends, the sociocultural circumstances and the education that is provided in different contexts. In order to fairly assess someone, we must take into account these factors, which will determine to some extent their behaviour. Apart from this, we must consider the freedom of each individual, his reasoning, his feelings and the causes that lead him to make some decisions rather than others.

In the novels in which the protagonists carry the full weight of the story, and are intended to show the events with realism and credibility, it is logical that we provide explanations that justify some determining behaviours.

The term education is often used with two different meanings. On the one hand we refer to the teachings that are transmitted to young people on various aspects of behaviour, values and other facets, in view of their development as people; and on the other hand to the acquisition of knowledge of different subjects: mathematics, geography, etc.

In this article we will talk about both meanings, but we will begin with the first one, collecting all the aspects mentioned above under the title of character education and values training, since these are the facets which Jane Austen concentrates on in her works.

2. Character education and training in values.

During the first years of life, education is acquired primarily within the family. The parents are mainly responsible for this task, and the development of the young person will largely depend on its fulfillment or neglect. This formative task covers all aspects of the personality and is carried out in various ways, continuously and sometimes unconsciously. It is the parents' job not only to teach, but also to correct and punish bad attitudes or behaviours. The way to develop this task can be very different depending on a multitude of factors. There are no fixed rules, no magic formulas. Common sense, affection, experience, knowledge that has been acquired and the search for timely advice are some of the instruments that parents possess in their role as educators.

During the second half of the eighteenth century, works of moral, philosophical or religious nature proliferated and, among them, the Conduct Books, which purported to be a manual for people of all ages, especially for young or not so young ladies, and also a guide for the education of children.

These works, among others, presented women of various ages, situations, and classes with voluminous reminders of their duties and obligations in eighteenth-century British society—as formulated by certain British men of a philosophical turn of mind. Yet another variety of the eighteenth-century British conduct book focused attention on the proper education of children for creating solid British citizens of the aristocracy and gentry. (Teachman 33)

This task, complicated and demanding, also entails some disappointments when negative consequences are detected over time and we suspect that they are due to errors that could have been avoided. These errors can be both unfortunate interventions and omissions. In this field, as in others, you can fail by excess or by default. And, if the awareness of a serious

mistake is always painful, the pain will be much greater when it is committed ignoring the warnings or advice of people with greater knowledge or a broader view of the problems.

This is the case for Mr. Bennet and the incident between his daughter Lydia and Mr. Wickham. In the following excerpt we offer the words of Elizabeth, who warns her father of the risks to which her sister Lydia is exposed if she continues behaving in the same way.

Excuse me, for I must speak plainly. If you, my dear father, will not take the trouble of checking her exuberant spirits, and of teaching her that her present pursuits are not to be the business of her life, she will soon be beyond the reach of amendment. Her character will be fixed, and she will, at sixteen, be the most determined flirt that ever made herself or her family ridiculous. (P&P: 202)

In spite of Lizzy's firmness, Mr. Bennet plays down the matter and takes it as a passing phase, which will have no major consequences, and which does not merit the trouble of a rebuke. Months later, when Elizabeth returns home, having interrupted her trip with the Gardiners upon receiving the news of her sister's elopement, she hears the repentance of her father, who has not forgotten their previous conversation.

It was not till the afternoon, when he had joined them at tea, that Elizabeth ventured to introduce the subject; and then, on her briefly expressing her sorrow for what he must have endured, he replied, 'say nothing of that. Who should suffer but myself? It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it."

(...)

"Lizzy, I bear you no ill-will for being justified in your advice to me last May, which, considering the event, shows some greatness of mind." (P&P: 260)

But these situations do not arise only because of the negligence or permissiveness of the parents. Excessive authoritarianism can have equally serious consequences. We will now see several examples taken from *Mansfield Park* explaining the erroneous and incomplete education of the Bertram sisters and the subsequent reflections of their father, who, all be it too late, understands the mistakes he has made.

Before focusing on Lord Bertram, let's see a text that shows a dilemma of great interest, both for that time and for the current one. The protagonist is Julia who, on a walk through the grounds of the Rushworth, does so with the lady of the house, when she would prefer to be with Henry Crawford.

The politeness which she had been brought up to practise as a duty made it impossible for her to escape; while the want of that higher species of self-command, that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right, which had not formed any essential part of her education, made her miserable under it. (MP: 80)

The narrator emphasizes the contrast between the education received -politeness-, which prevents her from leaving Mrs. Rushworth alone, and the values that she lacks, since it was not part of her education that would have allowed that circumstance without so much suffering..

After this distinction, we will see three examples centered on Lord Bertram, which deal with the subject of the education of young people and, in particular, the errors committed by this authoritarian and distant father.

In this first extract a situation that is not infrequent is commented on. The disparity of criteria and attitudes on the part of those who play an educational role, not only reduces the effectiveness of this task, but can also be counterproductive.

The anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters was never to be entirely done away.

Too late he became aware how unfavourable to the character of any young people must be the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity. He saw how ill he had judged, in expecting to counteract what was wrong in Mrs. Norris by its reverse in himself; clearly saw that he had but increased the evil by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence so as to make their real disposition unknown to him, and sending them for all their indulgences to a person who had been able to attach them only by the blindness of her affection, and the excess of her praise. (MP: 414)

While Lord Bertram was trying to educate his children with discipline, Mrs. Norris indulged every whim and encouraged their inappropriate behaviour. When wanting to counteract this consenting attitude with greater discipline, the only result that the head of the family obtained was that his children would be well behaved but self-conscious in his presence, to continue with their excesses behind his back, without him being able to imagine this double life.

This is another of those cases of timelessness in the situations narrated by this author, which make the reader perceive them as something current, even though more than two hundred years have passed since their creation. Lord Bertram is one of those parents who, concerned about the education of his children, has not spared any expense and effort to provide them with a good education. Today, we could think of plurilingual private schools, extracurricular activities, exchanges, official examinations ... All a deployment of means, but exempt from soul. Education can not be reduced to concepts, skills and experiences. Primarily it is the person, and it is in the personal formation - character, principles, behaviours – in which more time, dedication and love should be invested to achieve part of the desired results..

Bitterly did he deplore a deficiency which now he could scarcely comprehend to have been possible. Wretchedly did he feel, that with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education, he had brought up his daughters without their understanding their first duties, or his being acquainted with their character and temper. (MP: 414)

The consequences of Lord Bertram's authoritarianism and distancing is that his daughters are strangers to him, that they do not feel any affection for their father and that they fear but do not respect him.

Without the collaboration of his wife in this task, and the involuntary, but no less harmful, opposition of his sister-in-law, Lord Bertram focused on the forms but forgot the substance. Good manners, elegance, knowledge, skills ... All this was learned by his daughters at the hands of effective and

compliant governesses. But they were teachings without any moral significance. Theoretical knowledge and mechanical attitudes, which allow them to unfold with ease in social relationships and convey a harmonious image. But when the moment of truth comes, there is no solid foundation upon which to build a personal project.

He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting; that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments, the authorised object of their youth, could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them. (MP: 414)

The girls had heard about moral principles, but they had not been encouraged to practice them. And for this reason, when the time came to act with strength and integrity, they lacked personal resources, criteria and morality to make the decisions that would have brought them closer to happiness.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen shows, as we have just seen, the consequences of excessive authoritarianism, but, both in this work and in others, she tells us about young people who have been indulged in too many whims, or have enjoyed more freedoms than corresponded to their young age, or simply have not received good examples that are always recommended, but even more so in childhood.

The latter is the case of Mary Crawford, or at least, that is how Edmund sees it. In a conversation with his cousin Fanny, the young man laments the malicious tint of some of Mary's statements. Her charms and all her attractiveness, are obscured by frivolousness and even immorality.

> "I know her disposition to be as sweet and faultless as your own, but the influence of her former companions makes her seem--gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong. She does not think evil, but she speaks it, speaks it in playfulness; and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul."
>
> "The effect of education," said Fanny gently.
>
> Edmund could not but agree to it. "Yes, that uncle and aunt! They have injured the finest mind; for sometimes, Fanny, I own to you, it does appear more than manner: it appears as if the mind itself was tainted." (MP: 239)

The bad examples received in the house of her uncles have ruined a personality full of charms and attractions, disorienting it to the point of not being able to assess in its proper measure the appropriateness or inappropriateness of certain attitudes.

Something similar happens with Lydia Bennet, although in this case it is not the bad example of her educators, but the absence of a hand that would guide her towards good, and lead her back when necessary. This is the opinion of her sister Elizabeth, who blames the sad situation caused by her flight on the frivolity consented to the young woman, and the negligence of her parents.

Perhaps I am not doing her justice. But she is very young; she has never been taught to think on serious subjects; and for the last half-year, nay, for a twelvemonth--she has been given up to nothing but amusement and vanity. She has been allowed to dispose of her time in the most idle and frivolous manner, and to adopt any opinions that came in her way. (P&P: 245)

Elinor in the same way reasons when judging Willoughby. The judicious young woman laments seeing how someone with so much aptitude for good had fallen so low, the fruit of premature independence, which had led to negative habits, taking root in his personality until it was completely spoilt.

Her thoughts were silently fixed on the irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper. The world had made him extravagant and vain--Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish. (S&S: 287)

However, not all the cases in which there have been certain deficiencies in the educational work end in such a drastic manner. Some of the protagonists of these stories have been the object of overindulgence, or they have been valued in excess, causing them to have a too high an opinion of themselves. A misguided affection can cause selfishness and vanity. In the same way that excessive praise can lead to pride, vanity or frivolity.

In these cases, usually someone counteracts in some way those involuntarily negative influences, and ensures that these characters do not end up as bad as the ones we previously mentioned.

In the first paragraphs of *Emma*, the environment of the young woman is described as conducive to the flowering of a whimsical, selfish and vain personality.

She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father; and had, in consequence of her sister's marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period. (...)

The real evils, indeed, of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened alloy to her many enjoyments. The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her (E: 121)

Fortunately, Emma has her good sense and the corrections of Mr. Knightley, whose great affection for the girl does not cloud his sight, but rather sharpens it.

Something similar occurs in a dialogue between Mr. Darcy and Lizzy, after the second proposal of the gentleman. In an exercise of humility and repentance, Mr. Darcy reconsiders about his own character, the defects of his education and the consequences of these errors.

As a child I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. Unfortunately an only son (for many years an only child), I was spoilt by my parents, who, though good themselves (my father, particularly, all that

was benevolent and amiable), allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing; to care for none beyond my own family circle; to think meanly of all the rest of the world; to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might still have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! (P&P: 323)

And, it can be read in the last sentence of this quote, the person who led him to confront reality was Lizzy, albeit in an involuntary and non-affectionate way.

Before moving on to the next point, we will assert that, in addition to the personal interest in the subject of the young people's education the author might have, it is the realism of her works that emphasizes the relevance of this aspect. Jane Austen talks about real people with a coherent attitude. They are credible characters, close to reality. And, for this reason, the author depicts some circumstances that justify their behaviour, changes and final situations.

3. Schools, skill development and good taste.

We now move on to a new point, within the framework of the education of young people. Also in this aspect, we will find it easy to detect the voice of the author behind the opinions of the narrator or the characters.

The current educational system is very different from one of those times, so it is not easy to put ourselves in a situation.

The boys who would grow up to follow these gentlemanly careers received by our standards a very narrow education. (...) The curriculum was still very limited, consisting mainly of Latin and Greek classical texts in prose and verse, with some modern history leading on from that of the ancient world; geography ('use of the globes'), French and Italian were usually taught as extras, along with handwriting, dancing, drawing and miscellaneous lectures on scientific topics. Conditions at the old-established public schools were invariably spartan — at Winchester the boys got up at 5.30 in the morning, and in winter and summer alike washed under the pump in the courtyard, dressed only in shirt and trousers, before attending a chapel service and receiving an hour or more's tuition before breakfast. (Le Faye 81)

Even so, there are always some common elements despite the sociocultural distances, as we will see in the next example. The search for the perfect education system is a topic of eternal relevance. The models are relayed for political or social reasons. Strategies from different countries are imported and experiments are made through advances of pedagogy. The results do not always meet the expectations, despite the money invested in studies, methodologies and new materials.

The avant-garde educational centers, in which the latest technological methods are available and new terminologies are used to explain situations and procedures, are viewed with certain skepticism by experienced educators, who give prominence to people, rather than instruments or pedagogical resources.

Mrs. Goddard was the mistress of a School--not of a seminary, or an establishment, or any thing which professed, in long sentences of refined nonsense, to combine liberal acquirements with elegant morality, upon new principles and new systems--and where young ladies for enormous pay might be screwed out of health and into vanity--but a real, honest, old-fashioned Boarding-school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price... (E: 16)

This is the presentation Mrs. Goddard's school, shown as dependable place in contrast to other sites of great reputation, but little credibility. The previous text is missing two lines that we offer below.

... and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies. (Ibid.)

With her usual conciseness and irony, the author offers us her point of view on the education of young girls in her time. Those families who could afford to send their daughters to a school, did not do so in the hope that they would acquire knowledge that would enable them to earn a living in the future, nor did they expect them to receive a deep and extensive education, which could be more of a hindrance that a help. "Until well into the nineteenth century education was not considered necessary for girls. In fact, it was felt to be rather a hindrance to their settlement in life, as they would be regarded with suspicion if thought clever or bookish." (Le Faye 87).

Girls' education was oriented towards making them ladies of good manners, pleasant conversation and with a taste for the arts.

In addition to the reading, writing, artihmetic and basic general knowledte imparted in the schoolroom, girls were mainly instructed in the domestic arts and expected to acquire a number of accomplishments such as singing, watercolour painting, fine embroidery and an ability to play the pianoforte or the harp, and a girl's leisure time was generally spent engaged in one of these activities. (Kloester 70)

In fact, in Austen's works we are often shown conversations in which a girl is referred to and her description is decorated with the adjective "accomplished", which has a very broad meaning, as we can see in the following dialogue between Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley.

> "Then," observed Elizabeth, "you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman."
>
> "Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it."
>
> "Oh! certainly," cried his faithful assistant, "no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half-deserved."
>
> "All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading." (P&P: 33)

It was an education directed mainly towards the arts, although Mr. Darcy adds an important and not altogether habitual slant, that seems to correspond to the voice of the author, when also requiring extensive readings that form the mind of the young people.

Although there were several educational institutions, it was not uncommon for this knowledge to be acquired at home, under the supervision of a governess.

Governesses and tutors were freelance employees, governesses living in the family for a small salary and bed and board, tutors visiting and paid per lesson. Novelists from Rousseau on had depicted Education and accomplishments tutors as romantically dangerous to their female pupils; Austen ignores that possibility. Novelists for the next century would depict governesses as romantically sympathetic; Austen glanced down that road with Jane Fairfax, but she represents governesses as the subordinate creatures they were. Schools were businesses, and those for girls were often run by former governesses or women of some education with enough capital to start a business. (Todd 257)

In other cases, the girls had the sole guardianship of their parents. In the case of Jane Austen, we know that she attended two schools in her early childhood, but that she acquired most of her knowledge and skills at home, with the guidance of her father and a large library at her disposal. This is reflected in some works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. In the first, we are told that the Bennets did not have any governess and in the second, in addition to this, the narrator insists on the idea that these young women were always very busy, and found great pleasure in reading, drawing and music.

Of these three disciplines, we find multiple references in the works we are studying. It is very interesting to see the importance they had in the daily life of their protagonists and the value that was conferred both on the skill in these arts and the ability to appreciate them. In the following pages, we will offer some examples of these.

a) Books

We will start by analyzing the different approaches and opinions that are offered in these works when talking about books.

We have already commented on the educational value of reading. A good selection of books can be a direct path to the acquisition of a broad culture, good reasoning and the foundation for solid ideas. This is shown in *Mansfield Park*, when, shortly after Fanny is welcomed by her uncle's family, Edmund decides to collaborate in her education through books.

He knew her to be clever, to have a quick apprehension as well as good sense, and a fondness for reading, which, properly directed, must be an education in itself. (...) he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment: he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise. (MP: 18)

The opposite example is found in the person of Emma, and in the affectionate criticism of Mr. Knightley, who knows the good intentions of the young woman, but also her weak willpower and perseverance.

Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing-up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through--and very good lists they were--very well chosen, and very neatly arranged--sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen--I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (E: 30)

In this novel, the heroine is presented as a girl gifted in various arts, but to whom the lack of practice has the acquisiton of skill in any of them. And something similar happens in relation to her way of thinking. She has a good heart and noble purposes, but sometimes her intellectual or rational deficiencies become evident, causing her to get carried away by prejudice or a capricious attitude.

Jane Austen talks about books as a means to improve culture and enrich personality, but she does not refer only to profound writings, essays on diverse subjects, or philosophical or moral reflections. These were the genres that at that time were understood as worth reading by educated people. But, understandably, they were not the favourites of young readers. In *Pride and Prejudice* a scene is depicted that we can easily imagine.

By tea-time, however, the dose had been enough, and Mr. Bennet was glad to take his guest into the drawing-room again, and, when tea was over, glad to invite him to read aloud to the ladies. Mr. Collins readily assented, and a book was produced; but, on beholding it (for everything 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. Other books were produced, and after some deliberation he chose Fordyce's Sermons. (P&P: 60)

Reading aloud was one of the entertainment of the time. The chosen works would depend on the tastes of the audience, and it is not difficult to put ourselves in the place of Kitty or Lydia when, after dinner, they prepare to have a pleasant time listening to an enertaining read, but, to their surprise, instead of a novel, a book of sermons is chosen. Lydia does not hide her displeasure and this provokes the following reflection by Mr. Collins.

I have often observed how little young ladies are interested by books of a serious stamp, though written solely for their benefit. It amazes me, I confess; for, certainly, there can be nothing so advantageous to them as instruction. But I will no longer importune my young cousin. (P&P: 60)

We know from her letters that Jane Austen read with interest some books of this genre, but also that she did not hide her liking for the novels, which was seen as an "unworthy" hobby for educated people. In a society in which appearance was so important, recognizing the liking for this type of work was understood by some as an intellectual lowering, a waste of time, or a concession to frivolity. Austen raises her voice against these opinions and recognizes herself as a reader of novels, advocating for the dignity of this genre and defending it both in her public and private writings. In *Northanger Abbey* we find several passages oriented to this end. In some of them

it is the narrator who stars in this apology.

Yes, novels; for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel-writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding – joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. (NA: 20)

And, in others, it comes through the characters.

"But you never read novels, I dare say?"

"Why not?"

"Because they are not clever enough for you – gentlemen read better books."

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid." (NA: 66)

In the works of Austen we detect the love for books that this English author felt from her childhood. It is not only reveald in the fact that almost all her protagonists are great readers, but through some situations of clear autobiographical sense. One of them is the comment on Shakespeare that Austen puts in the mouth of Henry Crawford.

But Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how. It is a part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct. No man of any brain can open at a good part of one of his plays without falling into the flow of his meaning immediately. (MP: 300)

The second example we want to offer displays a daily situation among readers, which still holds true a couple of centuries later.

Anne found Captain Benwick getting near her, as soon as they were all fairly in the street. Their conversation the preceding evening did not disincline him to seek her again; and they walked together some time, talking as before of Mr. Scott and Lord Byron, and still as unable as before, and as unable as any other two readers, to think exactly alike of the merits of either. (P: 155)

And, finally, we will offer a situation described in a very concise way, but that will be familiar to avid readers, and in which the narrator makes an ironic contrast between those who boast of their liking for reading and those who really love it.

Marianne, who had the knack of finding her way in every house to the library, however it might be avoided by the family in general, soon procured herself a book. (S&S: 262)

The opinion about a great writer, the pleasure of talking about one's favourite books and contrasting our point of view with that of other readers, the need to take refuge - like Mr. Bennet - to enjoy reading without being interrupted , etc. These are evidence Austen's love of books, narrated in her novels that, in turn, have been and will be mentioned in many subsequent works.

b) Music

The taste for music and the ability to play a musical instrument -especially the piano- are themes that appear in almost all of Austen's novels. Also in this aspect we find different approaches, which show the intentionality of the author in each moment.

In some occasions, musical scenes are offered to express a feeling or to show an evocative situation. These are very visual passages, which seem designed to be adapted to the cinema. In this first excerpt, we are shown Marianne exposing her pain through the keys of the piano, releasing her feelings through music.

She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftenest joined, and sat at the instrument gazing her heart was so heavy that no farther sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears. (S&S: 71)

Very different is the following picture, in which the lovely Mary Crawford is seen delicately strumming the harp. The romantic setting of the scene adds even more beauty to the image, and multiplies the attractiveness of the young lady.

The harp arrived, and rather added to her beauty, wit, and good-humour; for she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming, and there was something clever to be said at the close of every air (...). A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself, and both placed near a window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, surrounded by shrubs in the rich foliage of summer, was enough to catch any man's heart. (MP: 57)

Musical excellence is the result of effort and perseverance, which will improve a greater or lesser natural ability. Therefore, artists who have achieved this mastery are supposed to possess virtues, which will be lacking in those who abandoned the practice. This is the contrast between Jane Fairfax and Emma Woodhouse, which sums up in some way the personality of the young women. Jane Fairfax is always shown as discreet, persevering, correct, self-sacrificing, willing to work to get ahead, without rebelling against her situation. While Emma is much more ostentatious, she wants to be the center of attention, gets carried away by whims and fantasy, and is accustomed to a comfortable life.

As a cultural detail, it is striking that on several occasions, it is commented that many women abandon musical practice when they get married..

The songs which Lady Middleton had brought into the family on her marriage, and which perhaps had lain ever since in the same position on the pianoforte, for her ladyship had celebrated that event by giving up music. (S&S: 29)

What are the reasons for this? At some point the lack of time is alluded to, since their new condition brings with it an increase in responsabilities. But it does not seem that this reason is too convincing. Rather, it is shown to us as something voluntary. Perhaps, and this is a very free interpretation on our part, a determining factor is that of having already achieved the desired stability, and not feeling the need to perfect the skills to to charm a future suitor. In any case, we do perceive some malice of the author when dealing with this topic, as can be appreciated in the following piece.

> "For married women, you know– there is a sad story against them, in general. They are but too apt to give up music."
> "But you, who are so extremely fond of it--there can be no danger, surely?"
> "I should hope not; but really when I look around among my acquaintance, I tremble. Selina has entirely given up music--never touches the instrument--though she played sweetly. And the same may be said of Mrs. Jeffereys--Clara Partridge, that was--and of the two Milmans, now Mrs. Bird and Mrs. James Cooper; and of more than I can enumerate (...)
> Emma, finding her so determined upon neglecting her music, had nothing more to say. (E: 246)

The narrator also resorts to different attitudes towards music to show us some personality traits of the characters. Interestingly, the "good ones" tend to be great fans or performers, and the "bad ones", although they boast of appreciating it, lack the good taste necessary to do so. Such is the case of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who after having claimed that she could have been a great pianist if she had wanted to, and that there are few people in the country with greater musical taste than herself, is unable to listen to one piece in silence.

When coffee was over, Colonel Fitzwilliam reminded Elizabeth of having promised to play to him; and she sat down directly to the instrument. He drew a chair near her. Lady Catherine listened to half a song, and then talked, as before, to her other nephew. (P&P: 152)

To refine the simplification that we made previously, we could add that not only the "bad ones" are unable to appreciate the music, but also the undeducated and rude ones. For example, in the following passage, through the various reactions, character categories are established.

Marianne's performance was highly applauded. Sir John was loud in his admiration at the end of every song, and as loud in his conversation with the others while every song lasted. Lady Middleton frequently called him to order, wondered how any one's attention could be diverted from music for a moment, and asked Marianne to sing a particular song which Marianne had just finished. Colonel Brandon alone, of all the party, heard her without being in raptures. He paid her only the compliment of attention; and she felt a respect for him on the occasion, which the others had reasonably forfeited by their shameless want of taste. (S&S: 29)

The irony of the narrator ensures, with just a few strokes, that the reader perceives the reality that is shown behind each situation.

c) Drawing

When analyzing the different scenes in which the narrator alludes to the skill to draw and the taste for portraits and landscapes, we find a certain parallelism with what was just mentioned when talking about music. The author uses this resource to show different features of the characters, or to give more strength to a situation.

During a pleasant walk, Catherine Morland, surprised by the comments of the Tilney siblings, who are able to appreciate in more detail the landscape that surrounds them thanks to their fondness for drawing, displays her usual innocence and simplicity, and recognizes her ignorance in this respect and her desire to learn. Thus, she gets a careful explanation from Henry. After just some minutes, the opportune indications of the young gentleman, together with her admiration for him achieve some surprising advances.

In the present instance, she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge, declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture on the picturesque immediately followed, in which his instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him, and her attention was so earnest that he became perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste. (NA: 69)

The lack of taste will be shown once again as something typical of uneducated, vulgar or evil characters. On the one hand we have those who, following fashions, manifest an attraction for the arts that they do not really feel, and that the narrator will be at pains to point out.

> "Oh! dear, how beautiful these are! Well! how delightful! Do but look, mama, how sweet! I declare they are quite charming; I could look at them for ever." And then sitting down again, she very soon forgot that there were any such things in the room." (S&S: 93)

And we also see how at times subjectivity plays an important role at, and the author uses this fact to show us different attitudes provoked by the same stimulus.

In this first example, some drawings made by Elinor will be judged by those present, not so much for the quality of the pictures as for the relationship of each one with the artist.

> "These are done by my eldest sister," said he; "and you, as a man of taste, will, I dare say, be pleased with them (...)".
> The Colonel, though disclaiming all pretensions to connoisseurship, warmly admired the screens, as he would have done any thing painted by Miss Dashwood (...). Fanny presented them to her mother, considerately informing her, at the same time, that they were done by Miss Dashwood.
> "Hum"--said Mrs. Ferrars--"very pretty,"--and without regarding them at all, returned them to her daughter.
> Perhaps Fanny thought for a moment that her mother had been quite rude enough,--for, colouring a little, she immediately said,
> "They are very pretty, ma"am--an"t they?" But then again, the dread of having been too civil, too encouraging herself, probably came over her, for she presently added,
> "Do you not think they are something in Miss Morton's style of painting, Ma"am?--She does paint most delightfully!--How beautifully her last landscape is done!"
> "Beautifully indeed! But she does every thing well."
> Marianne could not bear this (...) "This is admiration of a very particular kind!– what is Miss Morton to us?--who knows, or who cares, for her?--it is Elinor of whom we think and speak."
> And so saying, she took the screens out of her sister-in-law's hands, to admire them herself as they ought to be admired. (S&S: 203)

Something similar happens in the following excerpt, in which

we can see the different attitudes of the gentlemen towards Emma and, consequently, towards her portrait of Harriet. Mr. Knightley expresses what he really thinks, Mr. Elton flatters her intentionally and Mr. Dashwood acts as the consenting father he is.

Every body who saw it was pleased, but Mr. Elton was in continual raptures, and defended it through every criticism.(...)

> "You have made her too tall, Emma," said Mr. Knightley.
>
> Emma knew that she had, but would not own it; and Mr. Elton warmly added,
>
> "Oh no! certainly not too tall; not in the least too tall. (...) - Oh no! it gives one exactly the idea of such a height as Miss Smith's. Exactly so indeed!"
>
> "It is very pretty," said Mr. Woodhouse. 'so prettily done! Just as your drawings always are, my dear. I do not know any body who draws so well as you do". (E: 41)

And finally, we will hear Marianne judging Edward critically for his lack of artistic sensitivity. The young woman is aware that he admires Elinor's drawings, but from her perspective as an artist and art lover, she discovers that it is not good taste that leads him to value these works, but the affection he feels for her sister..

And though he admires Elinor's drawings very much, it is not the admiration of a person who can understand their worth. It is evident, in spite of his frequent attention to her while she draws, that in fact he knows nothing of the matter. He admires as a lover, not as a connoisseur. (S&S: 14)

But, as Marianne herself will recognize, good taste is sometimes confused with the appearance and repetition of common opinions. Not everyone has the ability to appreciate the beauty or technique of a work of art. But the desire to pretend can lead some to make bold judgments, which will reveal their ignorance before the experts in the field.

> "It is very true," said Marianne, "that admiration of landscape scenery is become a mere jargon. Every body pretends to feel and tries to describe with the taste and elegance of him who first defined what picturesque beauty was." (S&S: 83)
>
> So, perhaps, the attitude of Edward, who recognizes his limitations and lets affection, and not his artistic skills, govern his choices, is preferable.

4. Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, the works of Jane Austen are novels of character and, for this reason, it is the author examining in minute detail that gives greater realism and depth not only to the protagonists, but also to other less important characters.

Education, both in the sense of training in values and as the acquisition of knowledge and skills, is a key part of the person and marks in a decisive way his or her personality. For this reason, in the novels of Austen we can find numerous references to education or educational shortcomings of different characters, as a way to justify their behaviour.

In addition, through the many examples in these novels, Jane Austen conveys a true picture of the society of her time and allows us to better understand the sociocultural context in which the characters in her works are framed.

Education as usually understood today - schooling in certain skills, practices and bodies of knowledge - formed only part of education as Jane Austen and her contemporaries understood it: a process of socialisation and acculturation based on moral self-discipline and designed to fit the individual for a range of related roles in life, according to sex and rank. (Todd 252)

Although the works of Austen do not fit within the Conduct Books, the readers can find in them a great number of examples and reflections that will serve as a guide to behaviour according to the rules of the society of their time. But, in addition to external behaviour, Jane Austen often stresses the need to abide by moral principles so that the rules of education, knowledge, skills and good manners are an integral part of the person and not just habits learned but not internalized.

References

1. ———. *Mansfield Park*. Richard Bentley, 1833.
2. ———. *Northanger Abbey*. Wild Jot Press, 2009.
3. ———. *Persuasion: An Annotated Edition*. Ed. Robert Morrison. Harvard University Press, 2011.
4. ———. *Pride and Prejudice*. Richard Bentley, 1853.
5. ———. *Sense and Sensibility*. Richard Bentley, 1833.
6. Austen, Jane. *Emma*. Richard Bentley, 1841.
7. Barker, Hannah y Elaine Chalus. *Women's History: Britain, 1700-1850 : An Introduction*. Psychology Press, 2005.
8. Devlin, David Douglas. *Jane Austen and Education*. Macmillan, 1975.
9. Edgeworth, Maria. *Letters for Literary Ladies, to Which Is Added, an Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification [by M. Edgeworth]*., 1799.
10. Fish, Stanley Eugene. *Is There a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*. Harvard University Press, 1980.
11. Jordán Enamorado, Miguel Ángel. «Análisis del estilo literario de Jane Austen». Universitat de València, 2017. http://roderic.uv.es/handle/10550/59048.
12. Kloester, Jennifer. *Georgette Heyer's Regency World*. Random House, 2011.
13. Le Faye, Deirdre. *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels*. Harry N. Abrams, 2002.
14. Macaulay, Catharine. *Letters on Education*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.
15. More, Hannah. *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*. Garland Pub., 1974.
16. Teachman, Debra. *Student Companion to Jane Austen*. Greenwood Press, 2000.
17. Todd, Janet, ed. *Jane Austen in Context*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
18. Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. Unwin, 1891.