

Jane Austen

1775-1817



- Perché studiare Jane Austen, se la critica l'ha a lungo tacciata di conservatismo e moralismo?
- Perché il cinema dagli anni Ottanta in poi si è tanto interessato alla Austen?
- Jane Austen appartiene più all'Illuminismo o al Romanticismo?
- È proprio così convenzionale la sua tecnica narrativa?
- Si può già parlare forse di polifonia e eteroglossia nella Austen?

- Che funzione hanno i dialoghi frammisti alla narrazione in terza persona?
- I personaggi sono sottomessi alla coscienza autoriale, al narratore onniscente tipicamente settecentesco?
- Se Elizabeth e Elinor sono i fulcri caratteriali e narrativi, allora a cosa servono le altre “voci”?

IRONIA

- RHETORICAL
- ROMANTIC
- DRAMATIC
- OF EVENTS (OBJECTIVE)

“If we strip away the period settings and costumes, we find that Austen’s extraordinary moral clarity about the decency we owe to others and the dignity we owe to ourselves illuminates our own confusion and self-betrayal”

(Elizabeth Langland)

“Three or four country families is the very thing to work on”

- Birthplace as microcosm:
Hampshire/South-West (Steventon-Bath-Chawton)⇒her world
- Reserved, anonymous existence, practiced self-denial (except in Bath)
- What about History?
 - Two brothers in the navy
 - Her cousin’s first husband guillotined during the Terror in 1794

Novels of manners: 2 groups

1790s:

- *Elinor and Marianne* (rev. *Sense and Sensibility*, 1811)
- *First Impressions* (rev. *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813)
- *Northanger Abbey* (posthumous)

Since 1811 – more mature works

- *Mansfield Park* (1811-1814) – theatricality vs reality/complex relationships
- *Emma* (1814-1816) – large use of free indirect speech
- *Persuasion* (1815-posth.) – more complex inwardness/→Brontës

Austen and the Enlightenment

18th-century novel

❖ Richardson

- Epistolary convention (private vs public spheres)
- Insight into the character's psychology

❖ Fielding

- Omniscient narrator
- Dialogic form – bringing characters into existence
- Epic dignity of ordinary life: sociological study of characters' whims, habits, behaviours, conversation ...

Harmony of contraries

1) Characterisation

2) Narrative technique

3) Language

Characterisation

 **Darcy vs Elizabeth**

- ❖ **Pride vs prejudice**
- ❖ **Social conformity vs excessive self-reliance**

 **Elinor vs/and Marianne**

- ❖ **Sense vs sensibility**
- ❖ **Reason vs emotion**
- ❖ **Society vs individualism**

Narrative technique

■ Point of view

- Third-person narrator
- Free indirect speech – internal perspective (gradual author's self-concealment)
- Direct speech – dramatization

■ Ironical vision

- One single perspective is never enough (cf. I. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 1957)

■ Gary Kelly:

“A formal homology for a hierarchical yet open social structure”

- Austen's need of a central authority
- Austen's awareness of ideal compromise in a changing society in which the centre of authority was being replaced by decentred individualism

Language

- Irony throughout
 - To say one thing and mean another
- Use of the language of genteel society
- Strategy to expose the rottenness and internal contradictions of that society (parody)

Austen's dialectics

- 18th-century reasoning through antitheses (e.g. Locke) towards synthesis
- Yet: flexibility vs extreme oppositions
- Marianne has some sense and Elinor shows sensibility
- Tension between individual instabilities and stabilities of society

Sense and Sensibility (1811)

📖 Structure: 3 books \Rightarrow dialectics

- 1) The two sisters and their different attitudes towards the men they love
- 2) London scene: both seem to have to give up their loves
- 3) Swapping roles: each takes something of the other – more complete people ... maybe

📖 Alliterative Title: apparent opposition

- Elinor's sense = caution in dealing with her own and others' feelings; concern for others' happiness rather than her own, ability of self-concealment
- Marianne's sensibility = a life doctrine leading to excessive enthusiasm and sincerity, yet eventually tempered by sober judgement or capitulation?

Characterisation

- ❖ Elinor: central conscience (Austen's?)
- Balance between sense and sensibility, reason and emotion
- Ability to stick to social conventions without giving up her personality
- Embodiment of the integrated woman able to compromise between individual passion and social demands

Elinor's "*plan of general civility*"
(separation public-private spheres)

"Though I think very well of Mrs Jennings' heart, she is not a woman whose society can afford us pleasure, or whose protection will give us consequence" (II.iii)

- ❖ Marianne: counterpart to highlight Elinor and target of irony
- Vs social conformity (“decorum”)
- Inclined to rely on first impressions
- Sensitivity (sensibility) embraced as idiom and code of behaviour
- Final change towards a prudent middle-class settlement (final bitter irony?)

Marianne’s openness and sincerity:

“It was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion, and upon Elinor therefore the task of telling lies when politeness requires it, always fell” (I. xxi)

Narrative technique

- ❖ Third-person narrator: central “authority”
- ❖ Filter of Elinor’s consciousness
- ❖ Introspective filter more important than dialogue (free indirect speech: narrator/character)
- ❖ Author’s irony as a means of delineating character and expressing implicit moral commentaries

Free indirect speech

“Had Edward been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel? Was his engagement to Lucy, an engagement of the heart? No; whatever it might once have been, she could not believe it such at present. His affection was all her own. She could not be deceived in that” (II.i)

F.i.s. vs direct speech

- Private consciousness as source of meaning over public speech and behaviour
- Alternation between the two forms: embodiment of Elinor's crucial distinction between the private and the public self

Themes – social setting

- ❖ Politeness
- ❖ Decorum
- ❖ Marriage
- ❖ Money
- ❖ Relationship “nature” – “society” and need of compromise between them

Pride and Prejudice (1813)

Characterisation

- ❖ Lively through vivid dialogue
- ❖ Stage personalities : Lady Catherine and Mrs Bennet
- ❖ “Flat” characters: e.g. candid and sweet Jane
- ❖ Ridiculed caricature: Mr Collins, the pompous clergyman reading Fordyce’s *Sermons for Ladies*.

- ❖ Hero and heroine: Darcy vs Elizabeth
- Initial imperfect understanding of themselves and each other
- Whose pride vs whose prejudice?
- Liveliness vs unsociability
- Elizabeth’s unconventional womanhood (“abilities of discernment”; partly impertinent)
- Union of apparent contraries leading to completeness

Themes

- Marriage and money: *"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"*
- Marriage and security: Mr Collins and Charlotte
- Marriage and physical infatuation: Lydia and Wickham
- Marriage and love (and prudence): Jane/Bingley and Elizabeth/Darcy

- Romantic comedy: the established order (aristocracy: Darcy and Bingley) is legitimised since it is able to absorb the new order (middle class: Elizabeth and Jane)
- Parody of Richardson's "Cinderella story" (imitation and revision of tradition: another ironic stance)

Central theme encompassing all

- Main characters' journey towards self-awareness and self-knowledge
- *"I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away"*
- *"Till this moment, I never knew myself"* (reality vs appearance)

- *"By her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgement, information and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance"*

Style – Irony

- Double perspective:
 - Characters ignore things are not the way they seem
 - Narrator and readers' get to know it
- Yet central consciousness:
Elizabeth
- We get to know some things before her

