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Representations of Women's Oppressions in Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Emma

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ABSTRACT

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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSIONS IN JANE AUSTEN'S *SENSE*
AND SENSIBILITY, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, AND EMMA

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This study examines Jane Austen's realistic interpretations of eighteenth-century English society with a particular focus on representing women's oppressions in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. Austen, in these three novels, criticizes several issues related to women's status in English society and focuses on how men and women should be treated equally. In the novels, she argues that English society creates social order, women's oppressiveness, and gender inequality through arbitrary social norms and traditions.

This paper mainly focuses on two areas that restrict women's roles in their society: the marriage plot and the educational system. Austen's purpose of presenting these issues is to voice women's rights and improve their conditions. She also offers her readers unusual descriptions of female characters in order to correct the stereotypical images of women during the period. Finally, this paper aims to show Austen's success in redefining women's status and change the misconceptions of women in British society.

REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSIONS IN JANE AUSTEN'S *SENSE*
AND SENSIBILITY, PRIDE AND PREJUDICE, AND EMMA

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is an old saying that literature is an epistemic way of knowing about any culture. According to Haiyan Gao, literature seeks to study any given society and to offer a realistic representation of the life and people living in that culture (384). Each literary work in this study focuses on controversial issues hidden within Jane Austen's work. This paper focuses on Austen's interpretation of eighteenth-century English culture. Austen intends readers to recognize such issues as inequality between males and females in education and in marriage, and, as a result, to find solutions to these problems in an effort to further the progression of their society. According to Anne K. Mellor, Austen's fiction also demonstrates the values of the English aristocratic class, women's position in English society, the significance of "women's culture," "Christian morality," "estate management," and the importance of belonging to a genteel class (205). The English gentry values possession of wealth, maintaining a good reputation, and inclusion in the aristocratic class. As a female writer, Austen captures the readers' attention relating to women's status and position in English society—both the aristocratic and the middle class—the former recognized in Emma, of the novel by the same name, Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen demonstrates that the social world of English society creates limited opportunities for women to represent and support themselves. Austen is conscious of the "economic vulnerability" of women who

have limited access to financial stability (Mellor 205). These women have few options--serving as governesses or marrying wealthy men. None of these options satisfies Austen. For example, in a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen writes about a governess, Miss Allen, who works for her brother Edward. She opines, "By this time I suppose she [Miss Allen] is hard at it, governing away—poor creature! I pity her, though they [the children] *are* my nieces" (Faye 194).

Austen illustrates the oppression of women through her criticism of the limited opportunities provided in her society. She argues that a governess is not highly respected; the position does not pay well nor provide good working conditions. Becoming governesses—or teachers—at that time brought a woman's status down and prevented her from charming a husband from the aristocracy (Gao 385). For instance, in *Emma*, Emma keeps silent when Mrs. Elton, the village vicar's wife, encourages Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates's niece, to apply for a governess job. Emma keeps it to herself that English society does not show any appreciation for governesses.

Although females hold a marginalized position in eighteenth-century English society, Austen's fiction primarily focuses on English women in order to show readers that women are as central to society as men. Austen's realistic notions of women show her contemporary views of female characters. She presents the females as strong and intellectual figures. Even though some of Austen's female characters obtain only a home education, they have the ability to dance, play music, sing, draw, and speak modern languages. They are also interested in reading literature and expressing their own thoughts on the arts. These females have rhetorical skills that allow them to converse nimbly with men; readers recognize this in *Sense and Sensibility*, but Austen breaks

the boundaries of the male dominant English society in some way or another in all of her novels. According to Mellor, Austen's works repeatedly illustrate what distinguishes "women's culture" from men's culture by illustrating the significance of sisterhood, female friendliness, "emotional support," "offered guidance" for other women, and appreciation of women's efforts through "motherhood and wifedom" (206). Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Emma, in *Emma*, are intellectual, not sentimental, female characters that have the ability to present their unique personalities through refusing to imitate the social norms of English society. Indeed, Jane Austen presents that English society creates gender and class oppression through arbitrary social norms and traditions and depicts female characters who rebel against society in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf claims that because of various historical and contextual events of literary achievement, “towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses” (4). Woolf implies that women from the middle class should participate in changing the history of British women through writing literary works that show women’s identity from a female perspective. Woolf argues that it was time for women to expose to the world the impact of their writing in order to change the stereotypical images of women and their marginalized position in society. Jane Austen is one of these early novelists who succeeds in “re-writing” women.

In fact, Austen is one of the most cultivated writers, and the influence of her writing about women extends to people in the present generation. She wrote six novels that depict the life of English women in the eighteenth century. The heroines of her novels are educated, intelligent women who achieve high proficiency in arts and letters. These heroines understand that they have limited opportunities to practice freedom and self-reliance because of patriarchal oppression. Eventually that oppression causes women to rebel against their society. Austen’s fiction expresses how the male dominated society prevents females from going to school, refusing any marriage proposal, becoming

financially secure, and even from possessing their due inheritance. Austen makes the heroines of the novels privileged women, all of whom have active roles in their community, in order to prove the importance of their existence, showing that women hold as significant roles as men. In doing so, Austen corrects the typical images of English women.

This paper will focus on three of Jane Austen's novels. Austen's first published novel is *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). It illustrates how English society with its grievance law, The Entailment and Property Law, prevents women from inheriting their fathers' money and land. In *Sense*, after his death, Mr. Henry Dashwood, left his second wife, Mrs. Dashwood, and her three daughters, Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret, with no home and very little income, only 500 pounds, to accommodate their lives. Instead of offering equal inheritance to his wife and daughters, Mr. Dashwood's money goes to his only son, John, from a previous marriage. The dilemma of the mother and her three daughters, especially Elinor and Marianne, starts after their father's death. Because of their financial plight, they move in with distant relations, the Middletons, who offer them a small house at Barton Park. At this point, Austen mainly focuses on Elinor and Marianne, who are the protagonists of the novel. These two heroines have different personalities that readers will recognize from the title of the novel. Austen presents Elinor as a woman of sense: she is reasonable and wise when she makes serious decisions. On the other hand, Marianne is a sensitive character who follows her emotions. When Elinor falls in love and becomes attached to Edward, the brother-in-law of her half-brother John, she is cautious of taking her emotions beyond fantasy. For example, Elinor does not tell anyone

that Edward loves her because she is not sure of his feelings for her. In contrast, Marianne becomes a victim of Willoughby, a deceitful man, who tries to start a romance with her. Willoughby takes advantage of Marianne's sensitivity, and, in the process, she loses her self-control and becomes fascinated by a hypocritical man.

In addition, the novel highlights another major problem of English women from the middle class. These women have less chance of getting married to men whom they love because they have no large fortune. This is obviously represented in Marianne's relationship with Willoughby, a man who benefits from other people. Willoughby rescues Marianne after she sprains her ankle in an accident; he seems to be a romantic hero and purports that he is attracted to Marianne. He tries his best to attract her attention. Unfortunately, Willoughby rapidly changes his mind and starts to avoid Marianne after he realizes that she is a woman with no money. He decides to marry a wealthy woman, Miss Grey, who makes him unhappy. Through this example, Austen clarifies the complications of a man's greed and a female's overblown feeling for a man she does not really know. Austen illustrates how large fortunes play an important role in determining women's marriages through representing Marianne's relationship with Willoughby. He leaves Marianne heartbroken because she is a woman with no fortune.

Austen's second published novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, is about the Bennet family that includes five unmarried daughters. Mrs. Bennet is eager to see all of her daughters married to gentlemen. Elizabeth, the heroine of the novel and the spokesperson of the author is, moreover, Austen's representation of prejudice. Actually, she shares the same class and characteristics with Austen. Elizabeth belongs to a middle class family who has

little dowry. Her father, Mr. Bennet, is a landowner who has a modest income, which is not enough to ensure that his five daughters marry gentlemen. Because Mr. Bennet has no son to inherit his land, Mr. Collins, who is a distant relation and a clergyman, is eligible to inherit Mr. Bennet's property. Gao claims that even though Elizabeth is an educated and intelligent woman, "it is difficult for her to marry a gentleman in Austen's time" because of her lack of wealth (384). Fortunately, Austen portrays Elizabeth as a character with "high spirit and courage, wit and readiness, good sense and right feeling" who influences the arrogant and wealthy gentleman, Darcy (Maugham 80). Elizabeth's behavior and perception affect Darcy's personality so that he ends up marrying her at the end of the story. Austen keeps repeating the same issues throughout her novels: women without wealth have less chance in marriage, in order to assure readers how women struggle to achieve marriages to gentlemen. Austen assures that love should be the ultimate purpose of marriage. Austen rejects the idea of economic gain or social marriage as she highlights how Elizabeth rejects Mr. Collins's proposal even though he stands to inherit her father's property. Austen emphasizes that marriage should be for love, not money.

Austen's last published novel in her lifetime was *Emma* which narrates a story about a complex character whose name is Emma. She is a "handsome, clever, and rich" character who plays multiple roles in her society (771). First, Emma is the head of her father's household because her mother is dead and her elder sister, Isabella, is married. She takes care of her father, Mr. Woodhouse, who is an old man, and she is responsible for attending the social events in her village. Her second role is a matchmaker who

convinces her best friend Harriet, an orphan, to be a gentleman's wife. Emma tries to save Harriet's future through encouraging her to marry a wealthy man who may offer her financial support. Before Emma offers her guidance to Harriet, she succeeds in matchmaking between her governess, Miss Taylor, and Mr. Weston, a village widower. Emma is happy for her governess who has financial security due to her marriage, which enables her to quit her job. According to Spratt, Emma does not appreciate the idea of becoming a governess, a position that she compares with slavery (203). Through *Emma*, Austen expresses how a governess job was negatively perceived by English society. In addition, Emma has a charitable role in supporting the needy families in her community. As such, Emma tries to help Miss Bates, a middle aged spinster, and her mother who live a modest life. The three aforementioned roles show how women, not only Emma, have effective roles in making progress in their society.

However, the heroines, Elinor, Marianne, Elizabeth, and Emma, represent the status of women who still occupy marginalized positions in English society. Through these heroines, Austen tries to give readers a real representation of women in Austen's time who struggle to practice their freedom in society. These protagonists face many problems that restrict women in a particular position, either becoming a wife, mother, or an old maid. Austen's novels highlight the major issues that maintain the continuation of women's inferiority, oppression, and dependency. They also explore these issues in depth in order to break the arbitrary norms and traditions that prevent women from attaining their rights.

CHAPTER III
AUSTEN'S "MARRIAGE PLOT": REPRESENTATIONS OF
COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

Novels from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries have given a realistic picture of English modern notions of marriage and family. Most of these novels concentrate on the courtship and marriage plot, one that represents the interpretation of marriage in English society as a religious institution. These novels deal with traditional marriage in Victorian culture. Also, readers can realize the cultural significance as well as the impact of these novels, which have spread throughout the world and have become especially relevant in contemporary popular culture. In fact, the current adaptations of these novels have impacted modern society.¹ But the original so-called marriage-plot novels present the traditional notions of marriage in English society in the eighteenth century. According to J. Jennifer Jones, marriage in English society is a social, religious, and legal union; however, marriage did not have to be a congenial match.² Eighteenth century authors were interested in writing about the marriage plot, especially female authors. Ann Radcliffe, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and a Victorian author, Charlotte Bronte, wrote about different issues of women, especially the marriage plot. Austen, one of these authors, was more experienced in courtship and marriage issues because of her father, George, who was a clergyman. George Austen served as the rector of the Anglican parishes, and Austen attended most of the wedding events that occurred in her father's

parishes. As such, Austen became “a critical observer of the marriages,” as Hazel Jones identified her, especially those that seemed to deviate from the norm. As a result, Austen was able to transform her real-life experiences of marriage into her six novels.

3.1 Austen’s Concept of Marriage

Austen’s novels explore the marriage plot in depth, allowing Austen’s views of marriage to come to light; several critics argue that she ultimately succeeds in redefining the concept of marriage. J. Jennifer Jones, addressing the Romantic view of marriage, states, “Marriage settlements, which are legal documents that specify how property will move in, through, and beyond a given marriage, are not just common in Austen’s novels but are often at the dramatic center of their plots and subplots” (130). Austen criticizes marriages that are formed solely for economic reasons, and she emphasizes marriage for love as a romantic and social ideal in her novels. She argues that love should be the primary reason for a happy marriage, but at the same time, she realizes that middle-class women should marry well in order to have a happy life. As Hazel Jones explains in *Jane Austen and Marriage*, “[Austen] recognized that affection, friendship, and respect were fundamental elements of any workable relationship, but discovered for herself that a man who combined the ability to inspire the necessary degree of love and esteem with the essential qualification of a good income was not easily come by” (5). Austen finds that it is difficult to find an ideal man. According to Gao, Austen’s view of the ideal man is a single man who is open-minded, has a good personality, and some wealth and social class (384). She argues that “the wrong choice” of a spouse may cause the downfall of a middle-class woman emotionally and financially.

As mentioned earlier, Austen writes in a “feminist tradition” centering on love and marriage; nonetheless, she shares with Mary Wollstonecraft, the eighteenth-century feminist writer, similar themes. Both of these feminists call for equality between men and women in different areas such as education, marriage, and inheritance. Austen, unlike Wollstonecraft, encourages her heroines to marry men under good conditions as mentioned above. On the other hand, Wollstonecraft claims, “The material state was little more than legal prostitution for those women who traded their bodies for economic security” (Jones 5). Austen, unlike Wollstonecraft, has a different view of marriage; Austen understands that women need to go through several stages in their lives, thus they need love, marriage, and motherhood. Austen’s heroines marry for money as well as for affection. Austen claims that happiness in marriage should not be “a matter of chance,” rather it should be a combination of both love and a good income (139). For Austen, English women could engage in happy marriages based on the two aforementioned conditions.

3.2 Areas of Difficulty in English Courtship and Marriage

Austen’s novels center on the marriage plot, and within that plot Austen focuses on different areas of traditional marriage. She illustrates, particularly, three areas of difficulty related to the several stages of English courtship and marriage rituals. Austen’s observations of marriage consultations, rituals, and ceremonies conducted by her pastor father, George Austen, allowed her insight into the various steps that lead to the actual marriage celebration. First, she analyzes the approach that male characters take in proposing marriage to female characters. Some male characters choose appropriate places and times for requesting a female’s hand in marriage while others make their proposals

in humorous ways. Austen is also famous for portraying characters who conceal their engagements for various reasons, sometimes for a period of years.

3.2.1 Methods of Marriage Proposals

In English society, it is expected that men of a certain age are in search for their future partner. Mary Harrison states that Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* with an “ironic” sentence: “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (235). With these words, Austen argues that men who belong to the aristocratic class accompanied by substantial wealth are expected to marry a lady of some status. Marriages for men of means are, thus, required to maintain one’s social position. Clearly, English society has a narrow expectation of marriage for females—they become the possession of their husbands. According to Mary Wollstonecraft, women’s obligations include domestic duties: they “manage [their] family and educate [their] children” (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* 154). Although these women may gain security through marriage, they also become passively obedient to their husbands. Austen, on the other hand, provides women in her novels the latitude to choose their spouses, and through the freedom of choice, Austen corrects the negative perception of women in relation to marriage.

As mentioned earlier, Austen’s novels demonstrate how men propose marriage to women in the eighteenth century. Bruce Stovel, in “Asking Versus Telling: One Aspect of Jane Austen’s Idea of Conversation,” discusses the two ways in which male characters propose marriage in Austen’s novels: either *asking* or *telling*. In proposal scenes, Austen’s novels present the difference between asking and telling that, thus, enables readers to distinguish that the first is a request while the second is a demand. *Sense and*

Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and *Emma* exemplify these two methods. Of the three novels *Pride and Prejudice* offers the most humorous version of a marriage proposal through the speech of Mr. Collins to Elizabeth. Mr. Collins, a clergyman and a relative of the Bennet family, is in search of a wife, and he believes that Elizabeth Bennet, the second oldest Bennet daughter, may be an excellent choice for him. With this in mind, Mr. Collins visits the Bennet family, choosing to propose to the unsuspecting Lizzy at breakfast. Collins recounts his numerous reasons for desiring marriage at this time:

Allow me to assure you that I have your respected mother's permission for this address [. . .]. Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life [. . .]. But the fact is, that being, as I am, to inherit this estate after the death of your honored father [. . .]. I could not satisfy myself without resolving to chuse [sic] a wife from among his daughters [. . .]. I am not now to learn [. . .] that it is usual with young ladies to reject the addresses of the man whom they secretly mean to accept [. . .]. When I do myself the honor of speaking to you next on this subject [. . .]. You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course. (qtd. in Stovel 105)

Collins is effusive in his speech; however, he makes a linguistic blunder in his proposal: he tells *not* asks, for Elizabeth's hand. Elizabeth realizes this omission and reminds Mr. Collins of his error by replying: "You are too hasty, sir [. . .]. You forget that I have made no answer" (qtd. in Stovel 105). Austen is aware of the linguistic impact of a proposal such as Mr. Collins's as readers can assess through Elizabeth's reaction to Collins's

words.

Linguist John L. Austin clarifies the linguistic error, differentiating between *telling* and *asking* in his investigation of the various aspects of speech acts in *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin considers *telling* as a locutionary act while he claims *asking* as an *illocutionary* act. In Austin's framework, the locutionary is an act of *saying*. It requires no response. On the other hand, the illocutionary act requests a person to react to an appeal. According to Austin, the notion of the illocutionary act is directly connected with "performativity" (Nolan-Grant 871). Candace Nolan-Grant illustrates more specifically Austen's utilization of these speech acts. In "Jane Austen's Speech Acts and Language-Based Societies," Grant exposes three forms of the performative speech represented in Austen's works: "the official performative (given force by institutions), the explicit social performative (given force by accepted social mores), and the implicit social performative (given force by peculiarities of context)" (863). The illocutionary and the perlocutionary are two forms of the implicit social performative acts. Both forms force one to perform an action. The illocutionary act forces a speaker to reveal his/her feelings while the perlocutionary act forces a listener to react to what he/she hears. However, the locutionary act does not force any reaction. Taking the speech acts into consideration, the reader recognizes that Mr. Collins's method of proposal does not stimulate Elizabeth to accept his offer; he does not encourage her to react. Austen, in *Pride and Prejudice* and other novels, illustrates how semantics play an important role in the interactions between people.

Pride and Prejudice clearly illustrates the differences between Collins's proposal and Darcy's first proposal to Lizzy. Darcy's marriage proposal is a request *asking*

Elizabeth for an acceptance or a rejection. Mr. Collins, on the other hand, fails in his declaration to state the required words of a proper marriage proposal. He shows his arrogance by expecting that Elizabeth will accept his proposal based on the qualities he lists on two full pages in the novel. He assumes that Elizabeth will accept his offer because he is the one that stands to inherit her father's property. His semantics are devoid of requesting Elizabeth's hand in marriage. On the other hand, Darcy's request is just that—an appeal for her to hear his request and accept his proposal by expressing his love for Elizabeth. In conclusion, the narrator states that “[Darcy] concluded with representing to her the strength of that attachment which, in spite of all his endeavours, he had found impossible to conquer; and with expressing his hope that it would now be rewarded by her acceptance of his hand” (qtd. in Stovel 106). Darcy's confession of love is an act of persuasion. Clearly, Darcy's proposal encourages Elizabeth's acceptance whereas Collins's proposal demands an affirmative response. Unfortunately, Elizabeth refuses his proposal because she thinks that Darcy is responsible for separating her sister, Jane, from Mr. Bingley, his best friend.

However, in *Emma*, Mr. Elton, the village vicar, proposes differently to Emma by professing his love to her while they are alone in a carriage ride. The novel's intrusive narrator explains that “Mr. Elton actually [began] making violent love to her [Emma]: availing himself of the precious opportunity, declaring sentiments which must be already well known, hoping-fearing-adoring-ready to die if she refuse[s] him [. . .] and in short, very much resolved on being seriously accepted as soon as possible”(849). Mr. Elton's high confidence causes him to suspect that Emma likes him. Erroneously, it also encourages Mr. Elton to express his love to Emma, which indicates that he should

propose to her. Mr. Elton's expectation is that Emma will accept his offer, so he interprets her silence as an approval. The truth behind Emma's silence and anger is Mr. Elton's misinterpretation of her attitude. Actually, Emma is speechless and surprised because she thinks that Mr. Elton admires and has affection for her best friend, Harriet Smith. Emma argues, "It is impossible for me to doubt any longer. You have made yourself too clear. Mr. Elton [. . .]. I have witnessed during the last month, to Miss Smith--such attentions as I have been in the daily habit of observing"(850). Emma supposes that Mr. Elton is in love with her friend, Harriet, and becomes upset because she could not make a match between Harriet and Elton as she had planned. At the same time, she is offended by Mr. Elton's way of expressing his love and assumption that she will accept him immediately.

3.2.1.1 Accepted Proposals

Austen's novels demonstrate that the accepted proposals indicate that male characters ask females for their approvals. According to Stovel, "the successful proposals in Austen's novels show the man [is] asking a genuine question and leaving himself on tenterhooks" (107). This is obvious in Darcy's second proposal to Elizabeth. His speech clearly implies a question. Darcy's words are an implicit imperative: his proposal highlights Grant's illustration of the "subjective statement about [Darcy's] feelings" (875). In this second confession of his love, Darcy tells Elizabeth, "You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever" (458). This act forces both the speaker and the listener to perform an act. Austen also shows the power of language through Darcy's second proposal. Mr. Darcy

makes a personal statement of his feelings to Elizabeth. At this point, Darcy waits for Elizabeth's answer. His words enable him to persuade Lizzy to perform a perlocutionary act, her acceptance of his proposal. Similarly, in *Emma*, Mr. Knightley asks Emma a genuine question: "You will not ask me what is the point of my envy [. . .]. You are wise—but I cannot be wise. Emma, I must tell you what you will not ask, though I may wish it unsaid the next moment [. . .]. Tell me, then, have I no chance of ever succeeding (1033-34). Antonina Harbus explains Emma's reaction to Knightley's passionate confession of love, arguing that Emma's awakening is not only neurological—the brain over self-reflection—but just as importantly, it is psychological: "Emma's conscious adoration of Mr. Knightley in psychological terms [includes] 'first [. . .] a flutter of pleasure', then 'of happiness' [and] later 'a fever'" (770). Harbus concludes, "This (commonplace) bodily metaphor for love develops the engrossing impact of the conscious realization of [Emma's] unconscious feelings" (770). Harbus sheds light on the rise of Emma's consciousness.

3.2.1.2 Secret Engagements

On the other hand, neither male nor female characters, in some cases, has freedom of choice partners in marriage because of the eighteenth century customs that discouraged marriage between different classes. By following arbitrarily the English system of marriage, arguably oppressive, both male and female characters are prohibited from marrying whom they love. As a result, some male characters are engaged secretly to females who belong to a middle or lower class. A secret engagement, an engagement kept hidden from society by a fiancé, is an example that produces adverse effects. As mentioned earlier, women with no fortune have little opportunity to marry men from the

upper class. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Edward Ferrars, a wealthy man, keeps his engagement to Lucy Steele, a middle-class woman, a secret for four years because Lucy does not have a fortune. In addition, he is afraid that his mother, Mrs. Ferrars, would not approve their marriage. According to Tara Wallace, *Sense and Sensibility* represents the authority of women who persecute men such as Edward who becomes a victim of his mother, his sister, and Lucy, his secret fiancée. Wallace claims that Edward is a passive character whose family influences whom he should marry. His mother and his sister not only force him into an economically advantageous marriage, but they also restrict him from acting freely in all aspects of his life. Wallace argues that Edward's family likes "great men or barouches" while he prefers "domestic comfort and the quiet of a private life" (152). On the other hand, Lucy, who is of a lower social class than Edward, tries to place herself in a position with Edward that would be financially advantageous to her. She gains this position through her uncle who is Edward's teacher. Unfortunately, Robert, the younger brother of Edward, inherits the money. Thus, Lucy changes her plan and starts to seduce Robert, who marries her at the end of the novel. As a result, Edward blames his family for his passiveness. Edward tells Elinor, "[. . .] instead of having anything to do, instead of having any profession chosen for me, or being allowed to choose any myself, I returned home to be completely idle" (220). Edward does not have the courage to confront any of the women in his life.

For the same reason, in *Emma*, Mr. Frank Churchill engages secretly to Jane Fairfax because he depends on his aunt's, Mrs. Churchill, money. After his mother's death, Frank is reared by his uncle and aunt Churchill and even takes their surname. Frank is afraid that his aunt may refuse to approve his engagement to Jane because Jane,

a governess, belongs to a lower social class. Jane reveals her feelings for keeping their engagement a secret to Frank:

I was only going to observe, that though such unfortunate circumstances do sometimes occur both to men and women, I cannot imagine them to be very frequent. A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards. I would be understood to mean, that it can be only weak, irresolute characters (whose happiness must be always at the mercy of chance), who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression for ever [sic]. (999)

Only after the death of his aunt is he able to marry Jane and maintain his aunt's inheritance. Frank becomes financially independent after this event thus enabling him to marry Jane.

3.2.2 Refusing a Marriage Proposal

The second topic in the marriage plot that Austen examines the power to refuse a marriage proposal from relatives, "endogamous marriages," or from other men, "exogamous marriages," and the perceptions of English society of women's refusal. Austen tries to clarify why a woman refuses a proposal--simply stated, the man is not appropriate for her. In fact, Austen, in her real life, received and accepted a proposal of marriage from Edward Bridges, a twenty-six years old clergyman. However, she changed her mind overnight and suddenly refused the proposal the next morning. Although that marriage would have given her financial security and would provide support for her parents and sister, she rejected it because it would not offer her love. As always, Austen rejected the idea of marrying only for wealth as she wrote about "a marriage of

convenience” to a niece, Fanny Knight: “nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without love” (Faye 299).

Likewise, Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* refuses to marry her distant relative, Mr. Collins, who will inherit her father’s money and property after his death. Elizabeth states the reason of her refusal: “You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make *you* so” (301). According to Elizabeth, even though Mr. Collins may offer her financial stability, he may not be able to complement her intellectually and emotionally. Danielle Barkley confirms Elizabeth’s opinion, stating, “Austen’s successful marriages pointedly defy the structures of families of origin [. . .]. Endogamous marriages are shown to perpetuate unsatisfying family structures and fail to offer the promise of sexual compatibility” (215). Mr. Collins also chooses an inappropriate time for a proposal; he proposes to Elizabeth at breakfast time. In English society, this is an unusual and unromantic time for a proposal. However, Elizabeth’s mother, Mrs. Bennet, a narrow-minded character, considers her daughter’s refusal a foolish decision because Mrs. Bennet only cares for her daughters marrying as early as possible. Mrs. Bennet argues, “Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself directly. She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will *make* her know it” (302-303). Through Mrs. Bennet, Austen shows that English society retains its traditional repressive customs relating to women.

According to Jones, unlike Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Harriet Smith, in *Emma*, does not have the courage to make any decisions, especially regarding accepting or rejecting a proposal (32). As a result, Emma easily is able to affect and control Harriet.

Emma ultimately takes charge of making Harriet's decision either to accept or reject a marriage offer made by Robert Martin. After receiving a letter from Robert, Harriet tells Emma that she has received an offer. She has an affection for Robert and considers him as a good gentleman, but she is confused about her feelings toward him. Thus, Harriet asks Emma to counsel her regarding this issue. Emma suggests that her friend should refuse Robert's proposal because of his socio-economic status. Although Robert is a farmer, he is in love with and attached to Harriet. However, Emma persuades Harriet to refuse his proposal because of his "inferiority." Emma states, "I lay it down as a general rule [. . .] that if a woman *doubts* as to whether she should accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. If she can hesitate as to 'Yes' she ought to say 'No' directly" (qtd. in Jones 32). Jones suggests that Harriet's uncertain feelings for Robert encourage Emma to advise and *convince* Harriet to reject Robert's proposal.

In "Reading Embodied Consciousness in *Emma*," Antonina Harbus shows that Emma controls her friend Harriet and wants to improve her personality and social status. Emma attempts to convince Harriet that she will gain social and equal class with Emma through marriage to an aristocrat. Harbus also states that Emma is unaware of her immoderate imagination, one that leads her to make false judgments of other people. Emma thinks that she is clever enough to understand other people's minds, and she encourages Harriet to reject Robert's offer based on her own false assumption about him. She tells Harriet, "I understand [Robert's] sort of mind" (800). In addition, Michael Kramp interprets Emma's dismissal of Robert as being the traditional thinking of English society: the expectation that a woman should marry a wealthy man. In relation to this

point, Kramp notes Lionel Trilling's explanation of Emma, in "*Emma*,": "[. . .] when Emma presumes to look down on the young farmer, Robert Martin, and undertakes to keep little Harriet Smith from marrying him, she makes a truly serious mistake. It is a mistake of nothing less than national import" (147). Austen represents Emma as a privileged character who would naturally make many unconscious mistakes in her life because of the social customs of her society.

On the other hand, Mr. Knightley, who is a friend of Emma and later becomes her husband, objects Emma's decision and argues that Robert is the perfect match for Harriet financially and emotionally. Mr. Knightley blames Emma for discouraging Harriet from marrying Robert because Harriet may never receive another offer of marriage as she is illegitimate. Mr. Knightley leads Emma to claim, "It is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her" (qtd. in Jones 32). Jones argues that although Emma's claim that a woman should not accept *any* proposal may be true, this truth is not always appropriate for a variety of reasons. The reader later recognizes that Harriet will make the decision to marry Robert, illustrating that sometimes a woman who cannot seem to make up her own mind ultimately does so. Kramp illustrates Seeber's explanation of the union of Harriet and Robert, stating that "the harmony of the social order depends upon Harriet's 'unmerited punishment' of exclusion" (161). Even though Harriet does not become a member of a higher social class through marriage to Robert, she has a good man who takes care of her and makes her happy.

Emma not only encourages Harriet to reject an offer, but also Emma, herself,

refuses the offer that is made by Mr. Elton. In “Jane Austen and the Pleasure Principle,” Stovel confirms that the reason behind Emma’s refusal is that she is a wealthy woman who enjoys financial stability. Emma also believes that love and marriage are important for other women, but not necessarily for her. She tells Harriet:

Never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s [. . .]. I shall not be a poor old maid [. . .] [A] single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else [. . .]. I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about [. . .]. It suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder. My nephews and nieces: I shall often have a niece with me. (822-823)

Emma thinks that love is a menace to her life and independence, but she discovers at the end of the story that she needs Mr. Knightley’s love, and she wants to be a good wife and mother. In the end, Emma recognizes that she loves Mr. Knightley. Through Emma, Austen clarifies another reason that female characters fear marriage. In fact, Austen’s prediction for women of the future suggests that, because of their sense of independence, women will not have a desire to marry or at least will delay marriage. In fact, Austen’s prediction has come true.

Austen tries to show the notions of both genders relating to the issue of the marriage plot. She emphasizes that men fail to propose to women for the same reasons that women fail to accept proposals: inferior social status and lack of fortune. Wealth and

class played important roles in selecting partners in English society in the eighteenth century. The two obvious examples of men's reactions toward marrying women from a middle or lower class occur in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*. The first one, as previously mentioned in *Sense and Sensibility*, is when Willoughby, a deceitful and hypocritical man, refuses to choose Marianne as his wife because she is a woman with no fortune. Earlier in the novel, Willoughby manipulates Eliza William, Colonel Brandon's protégé, and, then, abandons her. He leaves Eliza alone even though she is pregnant. When his aunt, Mrs. Smith, knows of this incident, she requests Willoughby to rectify his mistake. Unfortunately, he refuses his aunt's request to marry Eliza because of her illegitimacy; thus, Mrs. Smith disinherits him. He is left with no money and large debts. As a solution to his problem, he chooses Miss Grey, a wealthy single woman, as his wife. In addition, Wallace explains that Willoughby, like Edward, blames other people for his mistakes. Willoughby declares that he becomes a victim of Miss Grey's authority and manipulation. However, the truth is that "Sophia Willoughby [Miss Grey], [is] married to a man [Willoughby] who values her only for her money and who abandons her shortly after marriage in order to seek Marianne's forgiveness" (Wallace 158). Through Marianne, Austen explains the reason behind women's oppression: women from the middle class who have no large fortune have less chance of marrying men whom they love.

Large fortunes are not the only reason causing male characters to avoid marriage. Males also avoid marriage to women who are in a lower class than they. This is obvious in *Emma* when Emma suggests that Mr. Elton marry her friend, Harriet. He refuses Emma's suggestion and argues that Harriet is not a perfect choice for him because she

is illegitimate. He states, “Everybody has their level: but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith! No, madam, my visits to Hartfield have been for yourself only” (851). Mr. Elton reminds Emma of the social and financial distance between Harriet and himself. He also illustrates the reason of his visit to Hartfield because of his love for Emma. Obviously, males and females both suffer in relation to finding compatible relationships due to the many obstacles placed in their path toward finding good partners.

3.2.3 Old Maids/Spinsters

The last topic that Austen concentrates on in the marriage plot is that a woman, as a result of refusing marriage for any reason, becomes an old maid or a spinster, a negative perception of a woman in English society. Breanna Neuberger notes John Halperin’s suggestion that spinsterism in the eighteenth century was considered to be a “failure” for women. Halperin, Jane Austen’s biographer, writes about this notion of failure in *The Life of Jane Austen*. Halperin opines that women of the era who married “for a home and independence and companionship and children, and to avoid diminishing consequence, and financial and social dependence on others” escape being thought failures (125). Austen’s novels explore the struggles of unmarried women whose society called them old maids. However, “the old maid” is not the only term that is used for unmarried women in English society. In *Jane Austen and Marriage*, Hazel Jones illustrates several terms used for unmarried women. She states, “single blessedness” was a respectful term used at that time equally for unmarried men and women to show the scorn of old maids’ statuses.

On the other hand, some terms had negative descriptions of an old maid such as “Ape Leader.” This term is recorded in a common slang dictionary, Francis Grose’s *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, and defined as “An old maid: their punishment after death for neglecting to increase and multiply, will be, it is said, leading apes in hell” (Jones 193-194). Austen applied the term “old maid” in several of her novels to show the negative perception of unmarried women. According to more than one Austen critic, Austen included the term because it was the pervasive term used in her society. According to Jones, in *Emma*, Harriet calls Miss Bates, who remains single in order to take care of her elderly mother, an “old maid.” Also, Lydia Bennet, the sixteen year old in *Pride and Prejudice*, mocks her older sister Jane, who is only twenty-three, as being “quite an old maid” (194). Male characters as well as female characters call unmarried women spinsters. For example, the brothers of Charlotte Lucas, in *Pride and Prejudice*, assert that their twenty-seven year old sister Charlotte is a spinster. In addition, Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* claims that any woman who reaches age twenty-seven is at the end of her “romantic hopes” (194). If she chooses to marry an older man for a comfortable life, she will become an “unpaid nurse” for her husband. According to Jones, Austen transfers her views of women who seek only comfortable marriages onto the character of Marianne who believes that such marriages result in a wasted life.

Neuberger states that even though English society did not recognize the importance of unmarried women’s identities, these women have some “small measures of freedom and identity” that married women do not have. According to societal mores, an unmarried woman in the eighteenth century faces both the “disgrace and the shame of failing to get a husband [. . .] [and her] denial by society of any identity” (126). However,

unmarried women, especially women from the upper class, who remained single and independent had some benefits and some “level of power” to spend their own money. Neuberger reminds us that Austen herself, as a single woman, had the time to write and publish her novels.

Although unmarried Victorian women had some sort of independence and freedom, most English women of the era preferred to marry in order to avoid their society’s criticism. In fact, Neuberger emphasizes historian Bridget Hill’s realization of a single woman’s status in her *Women, Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*. In this work, Hill explains that upper class “single women could own property, and common law imposed no restrictions on their right to trade independently” (qtd. in Neuberger 126). Neuberger, however, responds to this point, adding “more often than not they [unmarried women] faced extreme societal prejudice and ostracism if they chose to fully exert this right” (126). In relation to this point, most of Austen’s female characters do not wish to be considered spinsters. Thus, they have to face “the choice of marrying for security, marrying for love, or marrying not at all” (Neuberger 127). Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth’s close friend, marries Mr. Collins for “security.” She prefers to be married to an unintellectual man rather than to become a spinster and face the disrespect of her society. According to Charlotte, “Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance. If the dispositions of the parties are ever so well known to each other, or ever so similar before-hand, it does not advance their felicity in the least” (247). Charlotte tells Elizabeth that she prefers marriage to a man for whom she has no affection rather for becoming an old maid. On the other hand, Miss Bates, in *Emma*, chooses to remain single and depend

on her little income and people's charity. She prefers to be a single woman and to take care of her elderly mother.

Austen's novels focus on the courtship and marriage plot and represent different issues that oppressed British women through traditional marriage. Austen concentrates on presenting three areas of difficulty that illustrated in English courtships and marriages. She proffers the different proposal methods that men exercised when asking women for their hand in marriage—either by *telling* or *asking*. She also illustrates the reasons behind women's rejections of a proposal. The last topic that she writes about is spinsterhood: Austen deftly presents the struggles that unmarried women face in the event the choice of remaining single.

Notes

1. *The Entertainment Weekly* website ranks thirteen different adaptations of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* from the top to the less popular: *Pride and Prejudice* (miniseries), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005 film), *Pride and Prejudice* (1940 film), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (film), *Longbourn* (book), *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (web series), *Death Comes to Pemberley* (miniseries), *Lost in Austen* (miniseries), *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (book), *Pulse and Prejudice* (book), *Pride & Prejudice* (Marvel comic), and Colin Firth as Wet Shirt Darcy statue.

2. In history, some of the royal marriages were arranged for political expedience: this is obvious in King Louis XVI's of France marriage to Marie Antoinette, an Archduchess of Austria. This royal marriage could not be termed "congenial" for the union was not consummated until seven years after the marriage; the first offspring was produced quite late in the marriage because Louis XVI was unaware of conjugal the relationship in marriage.

CHAPTER IV
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EDUCATIONAL
SYSTEM

The educational system in eighteenth-century England was influenced by different social and traditional elements. In *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, Thomas Heyck realizes in his research on the topic of education in England several aspects that have an effect on the educational system, including “the rapid expansion of demand for education for all levels of society and at all levels of learning; the formation of class divisions in the social structure: the secularization of both thought and institutions; and rigidity in assumptions about gender differences” (194). He argues that Victorian society ultimately became a “schooled society” which encouraged people to learn and gave teachers opportunities to obtain a special status in society. Also, the English educational system became “secularized,” transferring the authority of the educational institutions from churches to “secular authorities” (194). Teachers, at first, were clergymen who were controlled by the churches. According to Thomas Arnold, education at that time was a religious matter: clergymen taught students in public schools good morals, and they encouraged them to avoid bad manners and evil (qtd. in Heyck 200). These institutions cared only about the spiritual education of students and disregarded the intellectual. Fortunately, when the educational system became secularized only professional teachers could take positions in schools.

Interestingly, education in British society exposed only traditional thinking to students: distinctions between class and gender were always applied in the educational instruction relating to socio-economic status. After the Industrial Revolution, English society was divided into three socio-economic levels: the upper, middle, and working classes (Heyck 194). According to Harold Silver, English education and society reformed because of the “social structures” and “social changes” that happened in the eighteenth century (62). Silver adds that these circumstances changed the ideological obligations of British society. Heyck points out that Victorian society proposed that education should be available to everyone, but that it should be hierarchical depending upon socio-economic class distinctions. However, the distinction between classes was not the only issue that affected the education system in England; the discrimination between genders was another issue that applied in education. In this chapter, first, I will give an overview of the different kinds of schools that working, middle and upper class, (especially males) attended in order to show the aforementioned socioeconomic distinctions. This leads into my main foci concerning the education system: the different treatment, in terms of curriculum, between males and females, the role of the governesses in relation to the “accomplished” females that they guide, as well as those problems more directly facing governesses relating to the position of the governesses in society. All of the aforementioned issues will be discussed through Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*.

4.1 Education of Males

In the eighteenth century, class distinction was the main problem that affected the English educational system. There were three kinds of schools that reflected the socioeconomic status of students who attended these schools. First, Christian and secular organizations instituted “charity schools,” also known as Sunday schools, which became significant social and religious institutions that were intended to help improve the knowledge of children from the working class (“Charity Schools and Education for the Poor”). These institutions’ main purpose was to provide clergymen the opportunity to teach Christianity to poor students. Clergymen also offered these students limited fundamental education such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Classes for the working class children taught basics; however, the classes did not prepare children for work beyond physical labor. By the age of eleven, children only remained in school if they were able to complete their daily labor (Heyck 205). Some working class boys and girls could not remain in school because they had to work full time in order to support their family.

On the other hand, middle class families sent their male children to what were called public schools—actually private schools—that required some tuition from students. These schools, also called “old grammar schools,” were under clergy control. These schools taught students modern language, reading, writing, and science. Arnold, a headmaster of Rugby school, informs us that clergymen who taught in these schools taught middle-class students not only “religious and moral principles” but also “gentlemanly conduct” and “intellectual ability” (qtd. in Heyck 200). In the late

eighteenth century, the conditions of public schools were considerably better than charity schools which failed to prepare students for any occupation other than those that required physical labor. Further, the male gentry children were the privileged students who had the opportunity to receive a good education: their parents either taught them at home, hired governesses to teach them, or enrolled them in private boarding schools. This is obvious in Jane Austen's novels; most of her male characters are gentlemen who receive a good education such as Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Edward in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Mr. Knightly in *Emma*. The boarding schools offered a good educational system for genteel boys: students received lessons in music and were taught modern languages. As a result, the upper-class males learned to behave like gentlemen. Thus, private schools allowed the gentlemen to master variety of skills and maintain an appropriate social status upon graduation.

Moreover, Mary Wollstonecraft voiced several important views relating to late-eighteenth-century British education. First, in relation to the lower, middle, and upper classes, Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, realized the marked difference between the educational system of public and private schools, especially for males: she argued that the level of education for males depended on socio-economic class. Wollstonecraft also criticized the misapplication of religious training, claiming that religion was central in public schools, thus allowing the clergy to make connections between religion and all spheres of life. She noted that the abstruse nature of the lessons retarded the curiosity of the students, making them dislike religious lessons that could and should spark students' interest in spiritual matters (170). In addition, Wollstonecraft

expressed her aversion to the boarding school system because the nature of these schools, by implication, was to teach males to differentiate themselves from the other classes. These elite boarding schools focused too carefully on teaching students the behavior expected of gentlemen. Wollstonecraft also criticized an additional problem that emphasized the distinction between classes in the English educational system—selection of male students for acceptance into universities. She argued that the practice of selecting only the brilliant students of the upper class excluded consideration of the brilliant students of the lower classes. Wollstonecraft claims, “It is not for the benefit of society that a few brilliant men should be brought forward at the expense of the multitude” (171). She believed that an important purpose of education should be to connect people of all classes, and, therefore, equal education should be granted to all. Wollstonecraft emphasized the invalid discrepancies between the educations among the socio-economic classes. It is the very division of classes that leads readers to Wollstonecraft’s special concern over the quality of female education. Considering the marked difference between the formal and the basic education of the elite and the working class males, it becomes evident that women’s education would have been decidedly less formal than would men’s of any class. Second, Wollstonecraft criticized the English educational system suggesting that, in regard to males and females, the system failed to offer a rigorous academic program for women. Men of the upper classes were offered courses that stimulated the intellect, whereas women were provided courses tantamount to those of finishing school—social graces, household responsibilities, and child rearing.

4.2 Education of Females

In the eighteenth century, women were not allowed to attend school; they received a different kind of education than men received either in public or private schools. Women, especially from upper and middle class, partook in a non-domestic education that was in the form of acquiring “accomplishments.” These females’ parents hired governesses or sent their daughters to boarding schools where they had a liberal arts education, taking lessons in music, art, dancing, drawing, and modern languages. The purpose of this kind of education, called “accomplishments,” was to “enhance their value on the marriage market,” according to Deidre Lynch (13). Jane Austen, as a realistic exemplification of British women’s education, portrays the nature and purpose of women’s education in her literary works. At the age of eight, Jane and her elder sister Cassandra attended Mrs. Crawley’s boarding school in Oxford to start their formal education. Because of the poor conditions of the school, Typhus fever broke out and, as a result, both Jane and Cassandra left the school and returned home (Renee Warren, “Jane Austen Biography”). When Jane was ten years old, she and her sister, Cassandra, attended the Abbey House in Reading, a boarding school for clergymen’s daughters and middle class women. At the Abbey House, women were taught to dance, play music, speak modern languages, and do needlework. That kind of education was ineffective in cultivating women’s understanding. However, Austen’s daughters received most of their education at home by their father, George. He was a clergy who taught male students in order to increase his income. Both Jane and Cassandra took advantage of their father’s library and his less formal way of teaching. Jane increased her educational outcome by

depending on her father's assistance and reading books from her father's library.

Unfortunately, Austen's daughters, at that time, had limited opportunities to get formal education; they could attend neither a formal school nor a university.

Jane Austen criticizes the education system of women during the Regency time and portrays her arguments through her female characters. She presents that British society insists on "accomplished" women in order to attract husbands. Obviously, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen presents society's views and the informal way of women's education through Lady Catherine de Bourgh's conversation with Elizabeth. Austen illustrates Lady Catherine's thoughts of women's accomplishments as a representation of the traditional thinking of British society. On the other hand, Elizabeth becomes the spokeswoman of the author's criticism. Lady Catherine is surprised when Elizabeth replies that she plays music "basically," and she is not able to draw a picture. Additionally, Lady Catherine is more shocked when Lizzy tells her that she has no governess. This leads Lady Catherine to question Elizabeth about her mother's ability to rear five daughters without a governess. She tells Elizabeth, "I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it" (qtd. in Maskell 160). According to Duke Maskell, the English education system at that time "instructed" women to be ladies. He argues that Austen disliked education that depended solely on instruction. Austen implies that directing is an insufficient and useless method of education that would not settle a woman's mind. On the other hand, Lady Catherine shows that a woman should be accomplished—"ladylike"—in order to be able to achieve many skills. At the end of the novel, Lady

Catherine expresses her dislike of Elizabeth's behavior because she has heard a rumor about Lizzy's engagement to Darcy, Lady Catherine's nephew, who refuses to marry her daughter. Caroline Bingley is a woman who shares Lady Catherine's same views. In fact, Caroline Bingley portrays the views of the acceptable behavior of women in English society; a female can be called an accomplished lady only if she "[has] 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" (qtd. in Maskell 161). On the other hand, Darcy has a different view of women's education. He thinks that women should be more intellectual than accomplished. Through Darcy's argument, Austen additionally presents her critical view of women's education in English society.

In the introduction of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*, Lynch argues that the accomplishments of women led to weakening their bodies and minds and encouraged the incorrect usage of women's beauty to attract husbands. She claims that although English society sought to mentor accomplished women without building their intellectual capacity, these accomplishments would make women's beauty worthless in their society, especially when they became older (13). In addition, Lynch discovers the following in her research on the topic of women's education in *Vindications*: Wollstonecraft concludes that male-authored works regarding women's proper instruction are nothing more than "a false education" (10). Male writers, argued Wollstonecraft, who, "considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational

mothers” (10). Additionally, Wollstonecraft points out that the development of women’s comprehension depends on achieving physical accomplishments and mannerly behavior (26). She argued against the “accomplishment” concept of education that formulates women’s minds in a certain way and prevents their bodies from moving freely. Wollstonecraft takes a strong stance on the importance of a female’s physical health and strength relating both to one’s ability to her intellectual growth: Wollstonecraft opines that “genteel women are, literally speaking slaves to their bodies [beautifying themselves] and glory in their subjection [by men]” (47). Clearly men of the eighteenth century objectified women in terms of biology and intelligence. Catherine Akca and Ali Gunefi agree that British society was a patriarchal society that made a distinction between men and women in all aspects of life. By creating this system of gender differences, English society became dominated by masculinity that enabled men to have active roles and control their society (1). British society theorized that men and women should receive different types of education because of their biological differences. They thought that men and women had different natural qualities. Men were supposed to be dominant, active, and strong while women were supposed to be “passive,” self-abnegating, and patient (2-3). Thus, women’s qualities make them “virtuous” and able to accomplish the domestic duties of the family. Through Austen’s novels and Wollstonecraft’s criticism, readers can realize that women’s education is restricted by different social and traditional misconceptions that delayed the improvement of their education in English society. Through their long journey in suffering, they faced many difficulties in order to change their social roles from passive to active women who

occupy important positions in society.

4.3 The Role of Governesses

Austen discusses another issue in education: women who lack income have no choice as to whether or not to become governesses because they have limited opportunities to support themselves may become governesses out of lack of choice. Governesses' duties are to train girls in accomplishment, especially girls who belong to upper and middle-class families. In *Emma*, Austen conveys the situation of governesses. Women cannot teach in public schools due to the fact that only males and clergymen are permitted those teaching positions. Through Miss Taylor and Jane Fairfax, who are governesses, Austen illustrates that governess positions are considered only slightly higher than maids. For instance, Miss Taylor works as a governess for Mr. Woodhouse, Emma's father, and becomes a mother figure for Emma because "[Emma's] mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess [Miss Taylor], who had fallen little short of a mother in affection" (771). Emma helps ensure that Miss Taylor does not become an old maid nor die as a governess by manipulating a marriage between Miss Taylor and Mr. Weston. Mr. Woodhouse continues to call Miss Taylor "poor Miss Taylor" even after her marriage to the wealthy Mr. Weston indicating that once a person is acknowledged to be of the working class, one remains in that class. In *Emma*, it becomes clear that English society does not appreciate the position of the hard working governesses.

4.4 Governesses' Conditions

Nineteenth-century novels explored the condition of governesses who became popular characters in English society. According to Nora Gilbert, the reason behind the rise of governesses was connected to some historical changes that happened in the middle of the eighteenth century. The first reason was related to the increase of middle class families that sought to show their status as the newly enfranchised “leisure” class by exempting their children from doing household chores and hiring governesses to provide their children with a good education (457-458). The families depended on their governesses; they taught their daughters to behave in a “ladylike” manner in order to prepare them for the marriage market. Governesses’ numbers also increased as a result of spinsters, or unmarried women, choosing the job to secure their financial stability. Nonetheless, governesses suffered from isolation, bad treatment, hard work, being inferior, and being ignored by their society. Free time was minimal for these women, and just as importantly, it was spent alone. Gilbert points out, “The governess’s free time was not uncommonly spent on her own—even, more specifically, in a room of her own” (456). Even though governesses were educated teachers who reached a high level in the arts and could perform many tasks, they were paid a low salary that could not be considered a living wage. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax, Miss Bates’s niece who works as a governess, compares the governesses’ job to the “slave trade” (Gilbert 455). Jane Fairfax facetiously suggests to Mrs. Elton who tries to offer a governess job to Jane, “I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade [. . .] the governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view [. . .]” (954). Jane thinks that the governess-trade encourages “the sale,

not quite of human flesh, but of human intellect” (954). As other Austen critics have pointed out, luckily, Austen saves Jane Fairfax’s life as a governess by ensuring her marriage to a wealthy man, Mr. Frank.

The idea of the poor conditions for governesses extended until the nineteenth century. Victorian women, especially the Bronte sisters, Charlotte and Anne, experienced the occupation of governesses. Their impressions were negative because of the poor conditions, bad treatment, and low wages of governesses during the Victorian era. According to Gilbert, Anne endured a governess job for six years while Charlotte shortened it to two years. Charlotte wrote in a letter to her sister Emily, “I can now see more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfill” (qtd. in Heyck 203). Charlotte conveys her negative views of governesses’ status in English society through her literary work *Jane Eyre*. She portrays the poor conditions and bad treatments of the private school that Jane attends. In Lowood School, Jane spends eight years before she accepts an offer of a governess job and starts her financial “dependence.” Mr. Brocklehurst, the headmaster of Lowood School, keeps the girls hungry and cold. Also, he treats the girls very badly by punishing them. It is well documented that one of the problems that children from the working and middle classes faced in schools, rather than social distinction, is physical punishment.

In “Aspects of Neglect: The Strange Case of Victorian Popular Education,” Harold Silver investigates the “corporal punishment” that was used in English schools. In his research, he claims “Historians have *assumed* that physical punishment

was the rule in the Victorian elementary school—because it was the rule in the grammar and public school” (63). He argues that there is no accurate statistic about how much physical punishment was used in poor and middle schools. Teachers in English schools thought that corporal punishment was a useful way to educate and instruct children. According to “Victorian Schools Facts for Children,” teachers used several kinds of punishment for students who were lazy or naughty in classrooms: beating the boys with canes on their backsides while punishing girls on their hands or legs. Teachers also punished students who were slow at their lessons, making them wear dunce hats and sitting them in a corner for an hour. Although students might have had difficulties in learning, teachers kept punishing these students. Left-handed children were even forced to use their right hands for assignments.

Through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte shows the reality of governesses’ jobs that make their lives miserable. However, the Brontë sisters started to establish their own private school in order to provide a good environment and formal education for girls. Unfortunately, their project failed because they had no financial or governmental support for their school. Consequently, the Brontë sisters, as well as Jane Austen, transferred their efforts to writing literary works that criticized the educational system, along with other social problems, in England. These literary works highlight people’s suffering based on class distinction, especially among females who are considered inferior and hold unequal positions in English society. These class and gender discrepancies led the liberal party to legislate reformations.

4.5 The Education Act of 1870/Forster Act

In 1868, William Forster, who was a member of a liberal political party, drafted the Education Reform Bill that sought to establish an equal educational system, especially for children (Hughes, *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture* 37). After two years, the Parliament passed the bill, the Education Act of 1870 or the “Forster Act.” According to Sascha Auerbach, the Forster Act is considered a turning point in the history of England that helped the social reform in English society (64). Initially, this act instituted the first public elementary school for children from all social statuses. Also, that act enforced the compulsory attendance of all elementary school children until the age of thirteen. Prior to the Education Act, as mentioned earlier, children from the working class were often deterred from school attendance as they were expected to help support their family. This latter situation is obvious in *Emma*, where Robert Martin, a farmer, was unable to attend school because he has to work in the farm field to help his family financially.

The Education Act legislated another law forcing elementary schools to hire female teachers in addition to male teachers. As such, the Forster Act provided an important occupation for women who became official teachers. According to Auerbach, the first British official “School Attendance Officers” were endorsed to hire “women who have had experience in similar work” (qtd. in Auerbach 65). Hughes shows that women, after the Education Act, were able to vote and nominate themselves as headmistresses of these schools, giving them some authority in the English educational system (39). Female writers, including Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, dreamed of attending and/or

working in the schools at that time. It becomes clear that the Education Act of 1870-or Forster Act-provided women the opportunity for financial stability and enabled females to gain the respect that governesses lacked.

Many weaknesses of the English educational system in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries are exposed in Jane Austen's novels as in well other female novelists and critics' works. One of the main issues prohibiting equality of the masses was the socio-economic distinction among people. At that time, the inequality among classes was carried out not only in the social realm and in the workplace, but also in the educational system. At that time, the distinctions in classes included gender discrimination. All of these facets of differentiation became important focuses of literature. However, the most obvious among these gender discrepancies were the following: generally, women could not attend school, and the "schooling" that they did receive was varied, but it was not the formal education that English schools provided for men. Also, women of the middle class were forced to work as governesses rather than the more highly paid work of "official teachers," jobs that were available only to men. The several issues presented in this study illustrate the importance played by female writers of the Victorian era. Their works helped to create a new setting for women of all classes, allowing them to earn not only their rights but also the privileges that previously had been awarded only to males, especially those of the upper class.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Jane Austen's novels clearly and accurately portray eighteenth-century English culture and tradition. In her novels, Austen presents several issues relating to English society, especially the problems facing women: the inequality between males and females in education and the inheritance and marriage laws that inhibited women's rights. She also demonstrates the difficulties that women of the middle class experience in supporting themselves. They have only two choices of survival—either working as governesses or marrying “secure” men, including clergymen and landowners, or, for the upper classes, independently wealthy men.

Even though women were marginalized in English society, Austen portrays the female characters as intellectual, eloquent, and creative characters. Her main purpose in writing novels focusing on females is to show that females are capable of managing their households, of maintaining leadership roles, and of making important decisions. In creating such characters, Austen participates in correcting the stereotypical image of women as being inferior to men. According to Lynne Kohm, Austen refused to marry in order to devote her time to writing about the social and economic difficulties that had prevented women from their full enfranchisement (327). As a result, Austen's novels have been immortalized by all cultures as recognized in the fact that they are read in all most languages.

This paper focuses on various representations of women's oppression in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. In these three novels, Austen demonstrates the arbitrary social norms, traditions, and laws of English society that create class distinctions, female oppression, and gender inequality. Austen also portrays the heroines of these novels, Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elinor, in *Sense and Sensibility*, and Emma, of the novel by the same name, as significant characters who deviate from the norm and rebel against the staid traditions of their culture. In addition, this paper presents two areas that best illustrate English women's conditions: the marriage plot and education. Both of these issues were major concerns to Austen and to social reformers of the time. One could argue that Austen was implemental in creating social change in her society.

In chapter one, I offer a brief introduction and present the main issues illustrated in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen shows that the Entailment and Property Law arbitrarily prevents women from inheriting their fathers and husbands' money and land. In addition, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* highlights another problem experienced by middle class women: arranged marriages for money rather than marriage for love. Finally, in *Emma*, Austen presents a special type of a woman, one who refuses to marry, thus becoming a spinster. Some of these women, such as Jane Fairfax, work as governesses to support themselves. The condition of unmarried women, thus, allows Austen to express her dissatisfaction with women's statuses that limit their financial security.

Chapter two illustrates in depth the representation of the courtship and marriage

plot, albeit all three novels under discussion retain the old notions of marriage in Victorian culture. A legal as well as a religious institution, marriage was considered permanent. Austen succeeds in redefining the concept of marriage by proposing that love should be the ultimate purpose of marriage. She criticizes marriages that are based solely on financial and economic reasons, illustrating in all of her novels that money cannot bring happiness. According to Chris R. Bossche, in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, the concept of marriage changed in the nineteenth century; Bossche argues that, “[. . .] personal affection, physical attraction, and romantic affinity had come to be considered legitimate grounds for marriage” (89). In Austen’s criticism of the difficulties related to the traditional English courtship and marriage rituals, it becomes clear that Austen made a determined effort to ensure that the new thinking about marriage would take hold.

As a critical observer, Austen questions the marriage rituals and ceremonies of her society allowing readers to consider her new concept of marriage. First, she presents two different linguistic methods implemented by male characters who offer marriage proposals. Austen also demonstrates that some characters keep their engagements secret because of the eighteenth century customs that deter marriages between classes. Second, Austen presents another issue related to marriage: some female characters have no power to make a decision related to a marriage proposal. Male characters are not exempt, either, from the powerlessness relating to marriage choices. Family as well as society prevents intermarriage between classes. The final issue that is illustrated in chapter two is the idea of spinsterhood. English society uses the term “spinster” for women who insist on

remaining single. Because of that decision, unmarried women face the scorn of their society.

Chapter three introduces readers to a brief historical background of social classes and the educational system in English society. Then, the chapter presents a criticism of the English educational system that applied the distinction between classes as well as gender in education. As a result, the admission, particularly of male students, to the three levels of education depended on a male's socioeconomic status. This leads readers to my main focus in this chapter—Austen and other female writers' critical views of women's education. In her novels, Austen conveys the fact that Victorian women could achieve several skills; however, they could not receive the formal, more rigorous education as that was available to males. In addition, Austen focuses on the financial instability of middle-class women who are forced to apply for governesses' jobs. She shows that working as governesses is the only obtainable job for these women. Austen also illustrates her resentment of the poor conditions of governesses. Finally, readers may infer that various female authors' works, including Austen's novels, help to develop new thinking about offering additional privileges to women and reform of women's positions in society, education, and politics.

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