

**Austen's Implicit Realism: a Critical Discussion of Austen's Allusions to
Political and Social Reality in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion***

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Introduction

The general opinion professed by many readers of Austen's work, is that it is very realistic and truthful. The setting of her novels runs parallel with events and changes that took place in Austen's time. Austen incorporates references to colonial matters in *Mansfield Park* (1814) or naval encounters during the Napoleonic wars in *Persuasion* (1817). Austen's realism has become such a feature of the popular understanding of her work that many people today believe that the England she describes in her novels still exists.

Recently, a friend of mine won the Dutch travel guide *Het Engeland van Jane Austen* (2014) and raved about her upcoming visit to Austen's England, not seeming to realize that Austen's novels are fictional and set in a now distant past. This notion that Austen's world can be experienced in the here and now is enhanced through modern mass media. The Internet holds a vast number of websites that promote Austen's novels as vehicles through which tourists can encounter the "real world of Austen". Two good examples of such websites are "How to Tour Jane Austen's English Countryside" and "Jane Austen Tour". It is remarkable that after more than 200 years a large part of Austen's readers consider the imaginative world Austen created in her novels to be still explorable in present-day England.

Austen wrote her novels during turbulent times. When Jane was still a toddler Britain was involved in the American War of Independence, which had a huge impact on the expansion of the British Empire and the economical development of the West Indies. As a teenager, Austen witnessed the French Revolution. Her major novels were published during the ensuing Napoleonic Wars, which lasted from 1803 till 1815. Another war with the United States was fought from 1812 till 1815. The Industrial Revolution, which had begun in earnest in the eighteenth century, picked up steam in Austen's day and changed rural and urban life immensely. In the course of these events, and despite losing the American colonies, Britain became a global empire with a strong naval fleet, according to Paul Kléber Monod (379). A fleet

that, according to Richard Harding, "was without a near equal in the world" (481) at the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

Despite the fact that Britain was economically successful, wealth was not distributed equally to its inhabitants. Many of the events recounted above changed many people's views on society, politics and imperialism. Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, slavery and slave trade were considered ethically correct by the majority of people since they were convinced of the racial inferiority of Africans. This notion dates back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Elizabethans regarded "their blackness as a physiological defect" (Greenblatt, 8th ed. Vol I 497). Adding to this physiological inferiority, slave trade was a highly profitable venture. Greenblatt gives an example of 300 slaves, transported from the Guinea coast, "who were sold for 10,000 pounds" (8th ed. Vol I 497). This profitability probably made people less conscious of their questionable ventures.

In the late eighteenth century, under the influence of the Evangelical reformer William Wilberforce, people began questioning Britain's prerogative to slavery and slave trade, urging for socio-political change (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 88-89). The increasing critical awareness concerning important socio-political issues is exemplified by the writings of William Cobbett, who through his *Political Register* (1802-1835) became one of the most outspoken advocates for radical political reform, literally spreading the news concerning "the plight of English workers" across Britain (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol D 110-11). Austen's novels were conceived and written in the same era when Cobbett was showing English readers the "realities" of their situation. Whereas Cobbett's realism is characterized by his depiction of the hardships and poor economical situations of ordinary working Englishmen and women, Austen's notion of realism stems from the detailed portrayals of her characters' emotions and the social environment of the landed gentry.

Various scholars – including Raymond Williams and Harry Shaw – have questioned whether Austen's work really gives an accurate picture of the society she herself was a member of. Shaw and Williams explore the question whether her work contains adequate references to current affairs that had a strong impact on Britain's society and politics during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. In order to come to a fuller understanding of Austen's realism, it is necessary to critically explore the published scholarship on Austen's realistic style and to complement this critical exploration with close textual analysis of her mature novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

Since Austen's novels come across as socially realistic, references to current events and important social or political changes should be expected in her novels, next to a realistic narrative. This thesis will explore the extent to which *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* are "truthful" from a socio-historical perspective. To what extent are events such as the French Revolution, Britain's exploitation of her colonies and the continuing military and economic struggles with America incorporated into *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, in order to create a realistic context for the lives and experiences of her protagonists? The first chapter will outline the most important events and social changes during the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth century. The second chapter will discuss realism as a literary-critical term, since various scholars have defined it in different ways. The third and fourth chapters contain close readings of the novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* focusing on their realistic characteristics and their perspective on contemporary political events and social issues. Together the four chapters will show that Austen's realism is implicit. The novels contain only few references to important contemporary social, economic and political dilemmas of her time, and seem not to occupy the minds of her genteel female protagonists for any length of time. This lack of direct and critical engagement with the wider social, economic and political realities can in itself be considered a form of realism, as young girls of the gentry had their own specific concerns

regarding their future well-being. These concerns did not include critically exploring social or political dilemmas that emerged in the late eighteenth century but entailed securing a wealthy husband as soon as possible.

1 The World of Jane Austen

Before it is possible to determine to what extent Austen incorporated events and social dilemmas of her time into her work, it is necessary to discuss the period in which Austen lived. The following paragraphs will discuss important political events and social changes which affected large parts of British society, including the social sphere in which Jane Austen lived and wrote: “the professional class” (McMaster 116), to which her father, as a clergyman, and her brothers, as naval officers and clergymen, belonged. This synopsis will function as the basis from which to explore the extent of the social and historical realism in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

1.1 Main Political Events 1775 - 1815

1.1.1 The French Revolution and its Aftermath

During Austen's lifetime several important events took place. The French Revolution was geographically not far from Britain and the political and ideological consequences of this revolution were a constant subject of debate. Bromwich states that Edmund Burke, with his publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) “opposed democracy in the sense of the word that implies popular sovereignty, or active participation by the people in government” (16). Bromwich explains that Burke had witnessed the Gordon Riots in 1780 and the Regency Crisis in 1788. Those events had made him aware of the consequences of civil liberty and he came to believe that “a spirit of innovation is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views” (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 188).

Burke's *Reflections*, in which he called on the British people to accept “an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and an house of commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors” (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 188),

gave rise to a wide range of views from various radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine. Both vented their own views on the debate regarding the consequences of the state of affairs in France in the 1790s. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the earliest to publish a response to Burke's views on politics. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) she criticizes Burke's account of events, his "antipathy to reason" (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 196), as well as his philosophical and moral vision regarding leadership of a country: "this implicit submission to authority" (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 197). Wollstonecraft advocates what she perceived to be the virtuous and democratic politics offered by the French Revolution.

In reply to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Thomas Paine published *Rights of Man* (1791), in which he expresses his views on the radical change in France during the French Revolution. Paine was against hereditary monarchy, describing Burke's emphasis on hereditary authority as "the vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave" and rejecting it as "the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies" (Greenblatt, 9th ed. Vol. D 200). As such, Paine and Burke were considered literary and political opponents of each other, with their widely different views on the revolutionary situation in France. These publications of the aforementioned political critics show how controversial views on the ideas of the French Revolution were and also indicate a lively debate by proponents and opponents at the time of the French Revolution. Mary Spongberg has argued that Austen's juvenile *History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles I, by a partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian* "was in fact shaped specifically to refute Burke's spurious account of English history" (56). This shows that the young Jane was participating in, if not publishing her views on, contemporary political debates.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte involved many countries in the French wars. Although he advocated the political ideas of the French Revolution at first, in the following decades he attempted to dominate Europe. Hamish Scott observes “revolutionary and Napoleonic France remodeled the domestic governments of the conquered territories... transforming the political geography of continental Europe” (444). He continues that Britain’s political independence was sustained by her naval mastery and she succeeded in making “important series of colonial conquests from France and her Spanish and Dutch dependants” (Scott 444).

The Napoleonic Wars were a constant factor in the daily lives of people on the mainland as well as on the British Isles. According to Michael Duffy, many families were faced with the drafting of young men due to “imposed recruitment quotas for the army and navy on the localities” (219). Duffy continues “patriotism, fear of French rule... played their part in this great mobilization” (219). The militia was reintroduced to England in the mid eighteenth century and by the end of the century it had tripled in numbers (219). The British “declared war to Revolutionary France in 1793 to counter Napoleon’s creeping expansion on the continent” (218). This battle was not only instigated because of Napoleon’s aspirations to rule European mainland but also to eliminate the French threat to Britain’s overseas commercial control (218).

1.1.2 The British Empire as an Imperial Power

As Britain positioned itself as a colonial superpower in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the wealth of prosperous British families increased. Not only aristocrats with old money thrived, so did families with new money, their money earned in trade and commerce. Britain had large, highly profitable colonies in the West, but Britain lost thirteen of its oldest colonies in 1783, in the aftermath of the American War of Independence. This battle with the American colonies led to instability in the West Indies. According to Selwyn

Carrington, the decline of British power in the West Indies began with the American War of Independence (2). North America had been a large supplier of materials and food but since North America was at war with Britain, the West Indies experienced shortages of food and materials. This lack of supplies and food combined with continuous bad weather, soil exhaustion (Carrington 3) and high mortality rates among slaves due to malnutrition and ill treatment (Carrington 44), resulted in the drop of the revenues from the West Indies colonies, year by year (Carrington 55).

1.1.3 Britain at War with America: War of 1812

From 1812 till 1815 Britain was involved in yet another war with the United States. This war can also be classified as a result of the Napoleonic Wars. George Tindall Brown mentions that Britain set up trade limitations for American goods (358). British courts ruled that British ships could seize American ships, confiscate goods on board and command British born U.S. citizens to serve in Britain's navy (Brown 358). Trade limitations and rules were imposed on American merchant ships to weaken Napoleon's position as France also had large colonies in the West (Brown 358). It was not until the end of 1814, that peace was negotiated between the United States and Britain (Brown 373).

To finance this state of constant war with both continents Dauntton explains that Britain imposed an increasing tax regime (162), taxing even the use of male servants or carriages (162). Pitt introduced income tax and tax on agricultural profits and rents (Dauntton 163). But extra tax on income and customs duties were not enough to fund Britain's army and navy expenditure: additionally the British government borrowed huge sums (Dauntton 163).

Since Austen's novels are often considered to depict Britain's contemporary social and political situation; the French Revolution and its ensuing instability in Europe and the West Indies and the wars with France and the United States are major factors to be taken into

account when exploring realism in Austen's work. Additionally, the financial consequences of a country in need of money to finance its wars are significant and impacted people's way of life and spendable income severely. Chapters three and four will show, however, that this is not discussed to great extent in Austen's novels.

1.2 Social and Societal Changes

Apart from the political instability in Europe, which gave rise to various political views and opinions, Britain's society experienced major changes as well. This was caused by a number of factors such as industrialization, the decline of the small gentry, the enclosure of property, and an already poor population becoming even poorer thus widening the economical gap between the prosperous and the poor.

1.2.1 Industrialization affecting British Societal Cohesion

Industrialization emerged in the eighteenth century and caused the former social cohesion cease to exist. The status quo between land owners and land laborers changed as their coexistence disappeared because wealthy families came to the country only for leisure, having acquired their fortunes through trade and exploiting overseas colonies. Poverty increased and many people migrated from rural areas to towns and according to Daunton "Britain became the most urban country in Europe" (174). Almost a quarter of England's population lived in towns of more than 10,000 inhabitants (Daunton 174).

1.2.2 Growing Population

Daunton mentions that in the eighteenth century the population grew exponentially in Britain. This had several causes. One was a change in the population's view on the marriageable age, which went from 27 early in the eighteenth century to 23 at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Daunton 143). This changed view on marriageable age resulted in a higher birth rate. To this must be added the drop in infant death rate: "it

dropped from 191 deaths in the first year of life of every 1,000 live births at the start of the eighteenth century to 136 at the start of the nineteenth century” (Daunton 146).

The exponential growth of population and the failure of harvests in 1795, 1800 and 1810-13, caused periods of social unrest as increasing numbers of people struggled to provide for their families (Joanna Innes 133). An aggravating circumstance, according to Daunton, was that in spite of the fact that agricultural output rose as the result of “a change in land from low to high intensity use” (149) food prices rose faster, only to lower at the end of the war with France.

1.2.3 Increasing Produce and Productivity

Ensuing this gain in productivity of land and labor, Daunton states that “considerable changes in the institutional and social structure of English agriculture” (152) took place. The proportion of land in possession of great landowners increased, small farmers could not keep up and successful farmers “bought out their neighbors” (Daunton 152), which led to a polarized rural society disrupting former existing structural cohesion of the agricultural sector.

The changes mentioned above impacted Britain's societal setting as a whole, affecting every social class. Since Austen's novels are considered to be realistic and contemporary depictions of a specific social class and its social sphere, it would seem logical that she incorporated references to these important societal changes in her novels. This thesis will explore to what extent Austen connects her novels to Britain's changing contemporary social and political background.

2 Austen's Realism Denominated

Realism in literature and realism in daily life are two widely different notions. Realism in life is what can be sensed, whereas realism in literature is harder to grasp and the determination whether a novel belongs to the genre of realism or not, will vary depending on the reader's understanding of the term and its critical framework.

In *Realism*, Pam Morris discusses the ways in which the terms “realism” and “realistic” are used in literary criticism regarding the status of novels. Morris states that “realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules” (3). This is probably one of the most important markers to define whether a novel is classified as literary realism. Literary realism would demand that a narrative develops “in terms of natural causation without resort to the supernatural or divine intervention” (Morris 3). Austen's novels fit this definition, but her work can be explored for realism in other ways as well. Another approach to explore whether or not and to what extent Austen's novels are realistic is to determine how the novels' setting refers to contemporary society. This chapter will outline the realism in Austen's work by comparing various critical explorations conducted on this topic by literary scholars.

2.1 Types of Realism in Austen's work

Realism in literature is a notion that needs to be clearly defined before it can be fruitfully employed as a critical tool to analyze *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. Martin Gray explains that definitions of the term vary. Realism can be employed as “a categorical label for a particular style of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing,” but is also invoked as “the vaguest kind of assertion that a particular literary approach is more ‘realistic’, more ‘like reality’” (Gray 240). These two different approaches show how comprehensive the

term realism is. Firstly, realism was a trend in literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to Gray, it was not a literary movement but encompassed more the manner in which nineteenth-century novelists tried to capture and describe the “new truths about people in society” (240). The other view on realism is that a novel can be more realistic in its portrayal of everyday life and conversations. Morris concurs that realism can be defined as “rendering of precise details” and is “judged according to how faithfully it corresponds to things and events in the real-world” (5). This shows realism is a broad concept: it can refer to the narrative mimicking everyday life in a small setting, or it can refer to the idea that a novel can realistically reflect society on a large scale. The first kind is applicable to Austen's works. The latter kind of verisimilitude is often associated with the works of Charles Dickens and George Eliot, for instance, with their large cast of characters active in a widely cast social web.

In her in-depth study of realism, Mineke Schipper follows Gray in claiming that “Realism, [is] a problematic concept“ (1). She explains that reality is typically a notion that literature is considered realistic when it narrates every day realities. Realities people can relate to, small things they will be able to connect with in their own daily lives (Schipper 1). Schipper mentions that realism in England developed slowly, going through various stages: it was not a sudden or radical change (48). While she does not discuss any author in detail she alludes to the work of Samuel Richardson and George Eliot as exemplary of British realism, both of whom are generally concerned with chronicling the everyday life, thought and feeling of ordinary folk. She also states that it varies in each country; in France realistic literature contained criticism of society (48), whereas in Germany realism is referred to by F.W.J. Schelling as poetic realism; a balance between reality and an ideal (Schipper 44). Realism is defined differently in each country and varies in perception.

Gray concurs with Schipper's view on realism as he poses "writers who attempt to be 'realistic' tend to portray life of ordinary people in ordinary situations" (240). Writers of this kind of realism also include false hopes or disappointments in their narratives, not just gratified desires or thrilling events, as found frequently in the world of romantic literature. According to Gray, realism is most frequently thought of as exploring day-to-day life with all of its characteristics (240).

The type of realism defined by Morris, Schipper and Gray, is the type of realism that is portrayed throughout Austen's novels. She gives her reader detailed descriptions of conversations between characters, characters' identities, their opinions and even their private feelings. These descriptions reveal flaws and vices, hopes and fears, anxieties and desires. Additionally, Austen writes about her character's disappointments and aspirations. Notwithstanding the fact that Austen's novels often fail to reveal the world outside of the walled gardens, rooms and country houses that make up their settings, they are permeated with everyday small intricacies, detailed conversations and allusions to current events. All these details will induce most of her readers to view the novel as realistic.

Austen is also able to bring across an intimate setting of a family and their relatives. The characters become "real" through their dialogues. Austen presents minute observations on room interiors, houses and gardens and reveals characters' virtues and vices. The fictional characters appear to be part of the reader's own circle of family and friends. Readers are drawn into the novel, as if they are present in the room with the novel's characters. The reader can easily sympathize with the characters and relate to their emotions. This detailed manner of writing makes Austen's novels appear very realistic and enables her readers to be completely absorbed in her novels. Readers will and often still believe in the fictional world Austen has created.

2.2 Austen's Limited Realistic Representation in Literary Criticism

While many readers of Austen's work take the realism of her novels for granted, scholars have debated whether Austen's work is accurate from a social and historical point of view. In *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, Christopher Kent discusses the social historians' dilemma regarding Austen's limited historical reference. Kent concludes that criticism on Austen's apparent lack of historical reference in her work emerged in the mid-Victorian period, as opposed to earlier opinions "praising the accuracy of her [Austen's] portrayal of society" (87). Kent uses an illustration of Johnson's dictum: "all works which describe manners require notes in 60 or 70 years" (87) to show that opinions on a novel's social historic authenticity will meander over time.

This meandering of opinion is due to the fact that over time opinions on historic events and context are adjusted to new insights. Kent states that in general "the novelist is in danger of being judged chiefly by the degree to which he fits retrospectively prescribed emphases and directions into the historical background of his work" (86). For instance "the industrial revolution was itself not named until well into the nineteenth century, and historians still differ very strikingly over just what, and when, it was" (Kent 95). This statement shows that the degree of historic authenticity of a work can vary over time as opinions on and interpretations of historical facts are subject to change.

For years now it has been a subject of debate amongst scholars whether Austen's novel are historically accurate. According to David Monaghan, "it has been argued (Jane Austen) owes nothing to her experience of the major events of her day – the French and Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars – but rather derives from her ability to create timeless fantasies" (1). From a socio-psychological perspective, these fantasies may seem very realistic. However, they appear less truthful from a socio-historical point of view. Read in the light of key historical circumstances and events, which make up the

direct historical context of the novels, Austen's novels rarely contain overt or extensive references to key historical events that occurred during her lifetime.

In his book *Romanticism in the Shadow of War*, Jeffrey Cox states "Austen's wedding bells sound in a world that also echoes to naval cannonades" (2) and Wordsworth's "beautiful landscapes contain demobilized soldiers, cottages ruined by wartime economy" (3). Austen and William Wordsworth both wrote works of literature during periods of war and it would seem inevitable that this would show in their works. However, views held by Austen and Wordsworth on contemporary situations are quite different in this case. In many of his poems, "Simon Lee," and "The Old Cumberland Beggar," for instance, Wordsworth includes vivid depictions of disturbed country life. Wordsworth even sent a copy of *Lyrical Ballads* to Charles James Fox, the leader of the Whig Opposition in Parliament "asking him to read *Michael* and *The Brothers*, not for their poetic merit but because they illustrate 'the weakening of the bonds of domestic feeling among the poor'" (Purkis 58). Austen refrains from foregrounding the socio-critical aspects of her time in her stories and merely shows ballroom parties as her protagonist exclaims her gratitude "she could hardly believe it. To be placed above so many elegant young women! The distinction was too great" (*Mansfield Park* 228), dashing officers on leave; Wentworth who is described by Lady Dalrymple "a very fine man indeed... more air than one often sees in Bath" (*Persuasion* 222), splendidly furnished estates as Rushwood's in *Mansfield Park*; "number of rooms, all lofty, and many large, and amply furnished in the taste of fifty years back, with shining floors, solid mahogany, rich damask, marble, gilding and carving" (71) and idyllic sceneries like in *Persuasion*; "they went to the sands, to watch the flowing of the tide, which a fine south-easterly breeze was bringing in with all the grandeur which so flat a shore admitted" (120).

While her novels are permeated with such elaborate and elegant descriptions, the question rises whether Austen herself was keenly aware of and engaged with the political events and social dilemmas of her time. According to Paul Langford, the British people did not forget important battles: “each war, successfully or otherwise, was marked by ‘an annual fast’ or services held in every church throughout the land” (12). Due to these widely dispersed remembrances, one has to assume that the collective memory was constantly recalling historical events. It would have been quite common to comment on such events, again and again, during social gatherings or when a family sat together. Furthermore, news was spread through increasing numbers of broadsheets, journals, magazines and pamphlets, creating “a cultural arena, free of direct government control, consisting of not just published comment on matters of national interest but also the public venues – coffeehouses, clubs, taverns – where readers circulated, discussed, and conceived responses to it” (Greenblatt, 9th edition Vol. C 2189). When, in the 1790s, intellectual critics like Burke, Paine and Wollstonecraft published papers and pamphlets professing their views on the ideology of the French Revolution, and its possible consequences for British society, people were able to form their own views and opinions. Since Austen describes the characters’ dialogues in detail, she could have easily included the political and social views held by her characters in her novels, but most of her characters seem not to spend much time in the public sphere of letters.

There are occasions when Austen mentions contemporary events in her novels. For instance, in *Mansfield Park* references are made to the slave trade, poaching, dropping revenue from colonies and naval matters. *Persuasion* is quite outspoken regarding naval matters and the fact that peace had been negotiated recently. However accurate these allusions may be, they do not play an important role in the novels as chapter three and four will show.

In his book *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams argues that the shift in perspective on the rural way of life often portrayed in Austen's novels, as opposed to city life, was due to the rise of capitalism as the dominant economic system (46). Williams explains that country-house poems such as Jonson's *To Penhurst* (1616) already represented "an idealization of feudal and immediately post-feudal values: of an order based on settled and reciprocal social and economic relations" (35). Williams continues to argue that these idealized perspectives of contrasting urban and rural societies changed over time and not always in the same pace, depending on the situation in parts of the country. The idealized view on country life as manifested by many writers contrasts with "thrusting ruthlessness of the new capitalism" and with "property in men as well as in land" (Williams 37).

Austen refrains from providing details regarding lower or higher social spheres surrounding her characters. In her narratives, Austen keeps her characters in their direct social circle and rarely sets her characters in settings outside their own social scope. Austen's work truthfully reflects her own social context in detail and this is one of the reasons why so many general readers attribute her novels with a sense of realism and truthfulness.

According to Williams, "Austen chose to ignore decisive historical events of her time" (113). But when this apparent fact is overlooked one can read in Austen's novels a perspective on the life of the rural gentry as she does provide a limited view on social history and society of the rural gentry. The perspective is limited because Austen puts her characters in walled gardens, ballrooms, country houses and assemblies. She hardly portrays her characters moving outside their own protected environment. And here Williams sets out the markers: "It is rather personal *conduct*: a testing and discovery of the standards which govern human behavior in certain real situations" (113) that preoccupy

Austen in her novels. Even though Austen appears to be realistic in her novels, she shows a very narrow focus: her characters belong to a particular class – the landed gentry – and therefore the novels do not provide a general view of Britain's society as a whole.

Williams continues that Austen's world can be "patronized as a rural backwater" and when this social background is denoted as the traditional setting, then it is possible to classify Austen's novels as fiction about "purely personal relationships" (113). An important point that Williams raises is that history has many currents, and that Austen does not include the historical current in her novels, she incorporates "the social history of the landed families at that time in England" (113). He states that this social historical current was in fact among the most important currents of history. As Austen herself was a member of this social current, she was able to show its intricacies through her novels from within, describing the indoor world of the landed gentry in great detail.

David Selwyn argues that Austen hardly portrays her highest level of society at work even though "estates don't run themselves" (144). He continues that Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* is described by his housekeeper as "the best landlord, and the best master" (Selwyn 144). However, this is the only detail the reader will get on the landowner's activity. Selwyn reminds readers to bear in mind "the number of people who are dependent on the landowner for their own livelihoods brings a degree of social and moral, as well as economic obligations" (144). Whereas Austen portrays Darcy practically as a man of leisure, in reality a large landowner would be more occupied with running his estate than with travelling about with his friends.

Although Austen includes various professions executed by the gentry of her times in her novels, they are never portrayed working. The clergymen (Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*); naval officers (captain Wentworth, captain Benwick and Captain Harville in *Persuasion*); army officers (William Price in *Mansfield Park* and Colonel Fitzwilliam in

Pride and Prejudice) and lawyers (Mr. Phillips in *Pride and Prejudice*) are only portrayed when they are unengaged: they appear to belong to the leisure classes. Occasionally, the stewards, shopkeepers, housemaids, farmers appear in Austen's novels but they are only casually referred to.

The two following two chapters are close readings of two of Austen's novels: *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*. These close readings will focus on the extent to which Austen's novels are realistic and as such reference social and political changes of her time.

3 British Colonies and Britain's Wars in *Mansfield Park*

Mansfield Park, published in 1814, was written in the years 1796-1797, when Austen was in her early twenties. But due to a lack of enthusiasm from her publisher, she was forced to revise her novel and it was published more than a decade later. The novel begins in 1784, but the chief setting of the novel is about thirty years later around 1814.

Mansfield Park is a novel that could easily supply the reader with details on Britain's socio-economic situation and the British colonies. On the one hand the novel portrays the social sphere of the landed gentry: Mansfield Park is the residence of Sir Thomas Bertram, who is a wealthy baron with a large estate and owns a plantation in the West Indies. On the other hand it narrates how Fanny, the novel's protagonist, is sent to the Bertram family to relieve her parents from the care of one child. Her parents' economical situation compels them to send Fanny off to live with her wealthy relatives. Another socio-economical issue is alluded to when, due to the eldest son's extravagance (22), Sir Thomas Bertram finds himself obliged to dispose of a family living. This event of the aristocrat's son squandering away his family fortune gives an insight into the contemporary view on the wealthy class showing more zeal for being entertained and spend their fortune than to take care of their surrounding community.

Britain's imperial exploitation is alluded to when Sir Bertram sustains losses on his West India Estate (22). No further details as to the cause of these losses are given, but "the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns" (27). These must have been severe losses indeed as these compel the Baron to economize and a year later these circumstances eventually call Sir Bertram to Antigua to attend to his business.

In his book *The Sugar Industry and the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Selwyn Carrington analyzes the state of economy of the British Caribbean islands in the years before the abolition of slave trade in 1807. Profitability dropped due to high mortality rates

of slaves. He found that by the end of the eighteenth century, brutal working conditions on the sugar plantations in the colonies on the islands in the West Indies, of which Antigua was one, were the cause of a shorter life expectancy. Slaves on sugar plantations lived shorter than slaves working on coffee or cotton plantations. Also reproduction of slaves on sugar plantations lagged behind: infertility, miscarriages and the resolve of women not to bring children into this harsh environment led to very low birth rates. "At the end of the eighteenth century there were simply too many infirm or sickly people among the slave population" (Carrington 197). According to Carrington, this led to a loss of slave capital and slavery was proving to be unprofitable. Besides the fact that slavery became unprofitable, soil became exhausted resulting from over-cultivation and better sugar quality was available from other colonial areas (Carrington 115). The references in *Mansfield Park* to the lessened profitability and dropping revenues in the West Indies are believed to be around 1804 to 1810 in the novel and coincide with the aforementioned contemporary facts. Taking these facts into account, it seems likely that Austen was aware of the economical circumstances of the West Indies and incorporated this knowledge into *Mansfield Park*.

The novel also contains a reference to Britain's war with France. Upon his return, the baron mentions a hazardous moment during his journey home. He had been informed of a French privateer roaming the sea (151). In *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Richard Harding states that these privateers were authorized to attack vessels of the enemy during wartime (487). This reference to privateers refers to the Napoleonic Wars, during which Britain and France both authorized privately run ships to attack and raid ships of the adversary. Although the reference in the novel to these privateers is realistic, Austen immediately contrasts this to Mrs. Norris rudely interrupting Sir Bertram's recital when she asks him if he would like some soup (151). It appears that Austen meant to mock people

who preferred to be ignorant of contemporary facts such as Mrs. Norris, by contrasting this wartime experience of Sir Bertram with such a trivial question regarding soup.

Austen references naval professions when she introduces Henry and Mary Crawford; their father is said to be an Admiral (35). No comment is made, however, about his career or victories. He is described as “a man of vicious conduct” (35). Mary comments to Edward that the inferior ranks in the navy were “all very ill used” (51) and the admirals were “bickering and jealous” (51) people. Naval people are not favorably characterized in this novel in contrast to the generally very complementary portrayal of them in *Persuasion*.

Henry Crawford and his sister Mary are young people of fortune (35). Henry has a good estate in Norfolk (35) and Mary possesses twenty thousand pounds (36). They had spent most of their lives in London, thus bringing with them the loose and apprehensible notions of social decorum. Henry flirts with the Baron's daughters while Henry's sister, in search of a rich husband, tries to draw in the Baron's eldest son. Ensuing the intentions of the two Londoners, the family is brought out of their tranquil state and through Henry and Mary's disgraceful conduct the Bertram family slides into social disarray. By introducing the characters of the Crawfords, Austen applies the prejudice which was apparently quite common regarding city people and city life as opposed to country people and country life. According to Williams, people from the country visiting the city brought with them their “rural innocence” (51) while Dauntton states that towns could be feared as a source of moral danger (175). Austen applied such existing contrasting views on rural and urban life in *Mansfield Park* when the Crawfords from London, bring this moral danger to Mansfield Park. Ensuing, the family's downfall becomes complete when Julia, Maria and Tom reside in London; Julia elopes, Maria deceives her husband and runs off with her lover and Tom becomes seriously ill due to excessive drinking.

Although Austen's social scope beyond the walled gardens of her narratives was quite limited, her portrayals of indoor settings are elaborate and detailed. During the family dinners and gatherings with the Bertrams and the Crawfords the common topics like architecture, hunting, or landscaping are discussed. These were fashionable topics of that time. Williams discusses that eighteenth-century landlords went on a Grand Tour and learned new ways of looking at landscape and when they arrived home tried to create such landscapes and prospects as they had seen on the Continent (122).

Austen included references to contemporary day-to-day matters. On few occasions reference is made to what are now historical facts: "there to lounge away as they could with sofa's, and chit-chat, and Quarterly Reviews" (87), "taking up a newspaper" (99), Mr. Rushworth's "zeal after poachers" (97) or Bertram's comment; "a strange business this in America" (100), or when Fanny inquires of her uncle about slave trade (165). Whether the questions Fanny poses refer to pre- or post-abolition of the slave trade is unclear (the slave trade was abolished in Britain in 1807).

These comments concerning social and political issues of the time could have been excellent openings for Austen to vent her own views – or elaborate on critics' views – on slave trade, the war with America, or on the subject of poaching. The fact that she did not make her characters vent distinct views on these topics can be viewed as covert criticism of the social class she is describing, in the form of satire. If Austen had completely neglected the current affairs it could be interpreted as if she agreed with the views of the upper class, whereas by dropping these casual remarks, the reader's attention is drawn to these issues and the reader reflect on them, even when the characters seem uninterested in the matter. For instance, the casual mentioning of poaching in the novel contrasts with the actual impact this restriction had on the poor: poor people were deprived from income and food because they could no longer freely hunt for game as a result of the enclosures of land.

Landowners fenced their property and land that formerly had been accessible to the poor to provide some sustenance for their families was now inaccessible. To enter landowner's property was considered illegal trespassing and poaching was punishable by a sentence to death or deportation to the penal colony of Australia. In *Joseph Andrews* (1742) for instance, Henry Fielding mentions a postillion, "a lad who hath been since transported for robbing a hen-roost" (90). Fielding illustrates in his novel that this postillion is in fact the most humane person in the group of travelers who encounter Joseph, bare-skinned in a ditch. He offers his coat to Joseph after the latter was robbed from his clothes and severely beaten. The unwillingness of Austen's characters to discuss such social problems can be seen as a satirical stab at their willful ignorance similar to the satire inherent in Fielding's transported postillion.

Williams argues that in the history of rural England the campaigns of parliamentary enclosures can be seen as "the destroyer of a traditional and rural community" (97). Open fields and common lands were enclosed and now served to enrich those families that already owned land. A "marginal day-to-day independence of thousands of people" (Williams 107) was drastically reduced by these enclosures. The gap between the haves and have-nots widened even more.

Despite the huge implications the enclosure movement had on British society, Austen does not provide further details in *Mansfield Park* after her characters utter these comments on poaching. The novel does not provide opinions or views regarding topics like poaching. However, Austen's contemporary audience would immediately have associated the reference to poaching with the enclosure movement and the social unrest it produced. Suddenly people, who were caught while trespassing, were sentenced like criminals, despite the fact that it used to be common practice before the enclosure movement was introduced.

In the novel, Austen includes allusions to contemporary events and realistic financial difficulties which render the novel realistic and truthful but *Mansfield Park* also fits the descriptions given on realism by Gray, Schipper and Morris, mentioned in paragraph 2.1. Schipper professes that literature is considered realistic when it narrates every day realities (1); Gray mentions that a particular literary approach is more 'realistic' when it is more 'like reality' (240); Morris states that "realist plots and characters are constructed in accordance with secular empirical rules" (3).

Austen did not just write a romantic novel about lovers meeting but portrayed people in ordinary situations, even when the families she writes about are not common working-class people but belong to the landed gentry. Although actual allusions to Austen's own social historical period are cursory, references that are present in her work coincide with contemporary events and changes that took place. This realism, together with the realistic detailed depiction of upper class' daily lives categorize *Mansfield Park* as a novel that belongs in the realism genre.

4 *Persuasion*: the Rise of a New Affluent Social Class

Persuasion was written in 1815-1816, after the main events and social upheaval that characterized the previous thirty years. The story of *Persuasion* begins in 1806 but the chief remainder of *Persuasion* is set in 1814-1815. This setting coincides with the ending of Britain's war with France. Just as *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* is also set in Austen's own time.

The story narrates the decline of a baronet's fortune due to continually exceeding his income. Like *Mansfield Park*, *Persuasion* shows a family of fortune that is brought down due to an irresponsible lifestyle. The baronet and his family are compelled to move to Bath to cut down their expenses without losing their dignity and maintain the respect of the social spheres in which they move.

Persuasion is linked to the author's contemporary political events. There are many references to a recent armistice in the novel. The novel most likely alludes to the time of peace in Britain that started in 1815: the war with France ceased, with Napoleon's surrender after his defeat at Waterloo and the War of 1812 ended when the Peace of Ghent was ratified. The first reference to peace occurs when Sir Walter's lawyer, Mr. Shepherd states "that this will be turning all of our rich Navy Officers ashore" (20). This is not the only reference to the ending of the wars with France and the United States. Admiral Croft expresses a remark regarding the fact that his brother-in-law is taking his time in choosing a future wife. He should choose one of the two girls he is flirting with "Ay, this comes of the peace. If it were war, now, he would have settled it long ago" (107). Later, when Admiral Croft arrives in Bath, he states "the peace has come too soon" (200). While the end to war is often referred to, its function seems to be to unite two separated lovers, rather than open the door for a critical exploration of the politics and economics of warfare. As such it supports the romance aspect of the plot as much as the novel's realism.

Many of the characters in *Persuasion* hold a position in the navy and the novel comments very favorably on this profession. Sailors are denoted by Mrs. Clay to be very good tenants, “they are so neat and careful” (21). Anne thinks that the navy “has done so much for us” (22). Or “raptures of admiration and delight on the character of the navy – their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness, their uprightness; protesting she was convinced of sailors having more worth and warmth than any other set of men in England” (116). In contrast to these favorable opinions, Austen includes criticism that landed gentry professed on families with new money. Many naval officers became wealthy with confiscated cargo of concurred ships. Sir Elliot feels that “bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honors which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of” (23) is inappropriate. This remark seems to represent the disdain the landed gentry apparently felt towards new rich families who had earned their fortune in battle and considered themselves part of the elite. However, despite his opinion on families with new money, Sir Elliot prefers to let his home to Admiral Croft who is “a rear admiral of the white” and who was “in the Trafalgar action, and has been in the East Indies since... several years” (26). Sir Elliot’s meandering opinion on this new social class seems to be used by Austen as a covert critique on the landed elite’s inconsistency and additionally mocks Sir Elliot’s character.

Despite these generally favorable characterizations of naval officers, the third-person narrator comments on the character of Richard Musgrove, the very “troublesome, hopeless son” who was sent to sea because he “was stupid and unmanageable on shore” (59). He had been a midshipman every captain “wishes to get rid of” (60). Here Austen apparently felt it necessary to add a critical note to render her overall depiction of naval officers more realistic. Adding this negative characterization makes her other character

descriptions seem accurate and truthful, as it would seem unlikely that all naval officers are gallant and kind-hearted.

The fact that there are so many references to the naval profession in *Persuasion* relates to the important role the British navy played during the wars. The navy had been a major instrument in Britain's victory over Napoleon. Battles were mainly fought at sea and much profit was made in conquering and seizing enemy vessels. This is referenced by Austen when the narrator in *Persuasion* comments on the economical position of Captain Fredrick Wentworth "who must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune" (34). But In *Persuasion*, as Tim Fulford argues, the naval officers do not function as vehicles through which to critically explore the economics of war. Rather they embody "chivalric virtues that the romance genre, from Chaucer and Spenser on, had promoted—such as patriotism, self-reliance, courage, paternalism, and, above all, attentiveness to duty," heroes of romance, in other words (162).

As in *Mansfield Park*, a slight remark is made on the matter of enclosures and trespassing: the crime of poaching. Poachers were given harsh punishments during the eighteenth century. Sir Elliot makes a comment, as he remembers a "trespass of one of his neighbors; farmer's man breaking into his orchard – wall torn down – apples stolen – caught in the fact; and afterwards, contrary to my judgment, submitted to an amicable compromise" (27). Here Sir Elliott implies that he feels this trespasser should have been punished more harshly. This crime of trespassing is also alluded to in *Mansfield Park* when a comment is made on Rushworth's "zeal after poachers." The fact that Austen refers to poaching in both of her novels leaves the impression that poaching was widely spread. The fact that this issue remains a minor background detail in a plot peopled with characters concerned with other matters also suggests that not all classes took this issue seriously.

From the comment uttered by Sir Elliot in *Persuasion* it is possible to infer that poaching brought the landed elite some discontent at least. The reference in *Persuasion* is much more outspoken. Whereas it was just a remark without judgment in *Mansfield Park*, in *Persuasion* the remark carries covert criticism. Austen portrays a landed gentleman who is quite put off when the poacher is not punished severely enough in his opinion. However, in the novel, Sir Elliot is characterized as a pompous character, and is the object of satire, suggesting that Austen may have disagreed with the view that poaching was a severe crime that should be punished accordingly.

In *Persuasion* various particular comments are made about Wentworth's career in the navy. Several of the ships he commanded like the *Asp* and the *Laconia* are mentioned and his destinations like the West Indies (76), the Mediterranean (79) and the Western Islands (78) are alluded to. Additionally, Austen mentions the particular naval battle "the action off St. Domingo" (30). These allusions increase the novel's truthful and realistic impression since Britain had been involved in a long war that was mainly fought at sea and these details regarding Wentworth's career run parallel with contemporary common knowledge of Britain's wartime details and its growing empirical power. However, the purpose to portray Captain Wentworth as such a successful naval captain is to establish him as a heroic character worthy to court the favor of the novel's protagonist.

Apart from the sea battle at St Domingo, *Persuasion* contains another reference to the West Indies. Mrs. Smith owns a property in the West Indies. This property had been for many years under a sort of "sequestration for the payment of its own incumbrances, leaving Mrs. Smith in a poor economic situation. However, it might be recoverable by proper measures; and this property, though not large would be enough to make her comparatively rich" (247). This observation in the novel refers to the economic setback of the West Indies at the end of the eighteenth century as analyzed by Carrington. Whereas in *Mansfield Park*

the profitability of the estate drops leaving the Bertrams in financial problems, which are overcome by Sir Bertram when he undertakes to travel to the West Indies, in *Persuasion* the property is owned by Mrs. Smith's deceased husband while Mrs. Smith herself can not take action to recover the estate. Only a man [Captain Wentworth] is able to act on her behalf and restore the estate to its former profitable standards. This inability of Mrs. Smith to restore her property in the West Indies to their former profitability refers to the fact that in British society women were unable to sustain themselves financially and Austen subtly puts forward the economical differences between genders. Although Austen touches upon a very important gender specific economical subject, she uses this subtle reference to show her readers that Captain Wentworth has a chivalrous character and is worthy of Anne Elliot's heart.

Persuasion is a novel of manners and high society, more than *Mansfield Park*. The protagonist is a Baronet's daughter who moves in upper society, hardly socializing with other social classes than the protagonist's own social sphere and the sphere of well to do naval officers. Immoral behavior leads to unhappiness: Anne's self-centered and narrow-minded sister Elizabeth remains single; virtue is rewarded when Anne marries Captain Wentworth.

Although *Persuasion* is a romantic fiction, Austen succeeds in rendering the novel realistic and truthful: *Persuasion* contains references to contemporary events and its setting is realistic. Many characters in the novel have a naval background; that is particularly realistic because Britain had been in constant state of war. The novel is set chiefly after the peace was negotiated with America and after Napoleon's defeat, in 1815 and peace is referenced on various occasions. Ensuing this peace, many naval officers came to shore and this fact is incorporated in the novel. However, not only naval references are present in the novel, also references to poaching and the British colonies are included. These references to

Austen's contemporary British society render this fictional story realistic and truthful to readers.

Conclusion

This thesis explored the extent to which Jane Austen incorporated the contemporary socio-political and economic landscape of Britain into her novels. While Austen's focus on the internal lives of, and the private relationships between, her major characters allow her to create accurate depictions of her own class, she refrains from overtly criticizing this class.

Austen includes known contemporary circumstances, customs and prejudices in such a manner that it convinces the reader of the story's probability and truthfulness. Nonetheless, however truthful and realistic Austen's novels appear, Austen sparsely professes views on historical events or social dilemma's in her novels. In *Mansfield Park* Austen's characters do not discuss the controversies the French Revolutions, the war with France or the United States brought about. In *Persuasion*, although most of the characters are naval officers, Austen refrains from elaborating naval accomplishments or setbacks. Instead Austen gives plain particulars regarding ships' names her characters were assigned to, destinations sailed to and ranks held by the characters. These references enhance the characterizations of the officers, allowing Austen to highlight which of the officers is the right match for which female character. However, beyond sharing these specific details with her reader the novels only superficially register the topic of the wars with France and the United States and there are no complete accounts of Britain's progress in these wars.

No critical remarks can be found in the novels analyzed on the social issues or the worsening circumstances of the lower classes. Besides the matter of poaching, which is superficially referred to in both *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park*, no opinions are uttered on the struggles of the land laborers, the effects of industrialization and the consequences of the enclosure movement.

The novels analyzed only incorporate casual remarks on the topics of the colonies in the West Indies, slavery and the slave trade, even though these topics were increasingly controversial in the early nineteenth century. Austen mentions the economic downfall of colonial plantations in both *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* but there is no comment or discussion about the causes of these setbacks and their potential effects on the social fabric of England.

Austen's realism does not extend beyond the walls of the country houses and the social sphere of the landed gentry and upper class society. Her novels lack a realistic depiction of Britain's society on a wider social scale and the relations between social classes. There is hardly any social interaction in her novels between members of different social classes. Dialogues between her characters, although very detailed, remain limited to concerns of the gentry: they usually refer to propriety, address, emotions, landscaping or etiquette, and above all marriage. Politics, economics or social abuses are only casually referred to and are never discussed in detail.

Williams' statement that "Austen chose to ignore decisive historical events of her time" (113) is not entirely accurate. Austen did not ignore decisive historical events; she chose not to overtly critique her era. Austen's work is fiction. Fiction is the keyword; fiction does not have to be historically accurate, exhaustive, or truthful. Fiction does not have to make a clear critical point about the international socio-political context in which it is written. Austen's plots are romantic and Austen applied references to her contemporary era to idealize or mock fictional characters in her novel; a chivalrous naval hero, who won many battles; a kind-hearted Fanny inquiring slavery; a fickle Sir Elliot who prefers an admiral as his tenant but holds that same new elite in disdain.

Yet, despite being fictional romances of gentry life, Austen's work is implicitly realistic: social historical references appear in her work but she never critically explores

them. Austen's depictions of every day life are minutely detailed and Austen could have incorporated critique on contemporary social and economic issues. As she chose not to do so, important matters of her era remain trivially alluded to, likely echoing the status such matters enjoyed amongst the classes of which she wrote.

Both Schipper and Gray postulate literature becomes more realistic when the reader can relate to the characters and events, when the characters' disappointments and aspirations are narrated and the novel is accurate in its setting. Morris defines literary realism as a narrative developing in terms of natural causation. When applying these definitions, Austen's work can be classified as literature belonging to the genre of realism.

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