READING TEXTS IN JANE AUSTEN

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READING TEXTS IN JANE AUSTEN'S
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AND
PERSUASION

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

I have chosen for this study an analysis of three novels of Jane Austen. They are *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* for they contain interesting changes in their main characters as they learn to read written texts.

Austen devotes a chapter in *Pride and Prejudice* to Elizabeth Bennet's reading of Fitzwilliam Darcy's letter (34). This reading demonstrates, as leisurely as possible, moral and intellectual awakening of Elizabeth vis-a-vis the most important written text in the novel. It is interesting to point out here that the epiphany, if we may borrow the term from James Joyce, is caused by a written text within a written text in the novel. We see a character reading a text, as the reader of the novel has been doing for many pages, with very important consequences. My aim here is to study Jane Austen's management of the reading processes of her characters and the light they shed on the reader's interpretative activity. Austen seems to be inviting her reader into a similar activity in order to gain some insights from the novel and the reading process.

Characters in Austen's novels go through this inward journey in society by reading or interpreting that society and its individuals and we follow this reading process and try to interpret her characters' interpretations so that we can change as they do. Her characters go through a change that can be termed as becoming a mature member of that society; their maturation processes also make them people who understand the problems of that society so that they can become more ethical human beings. Jane Austen seems to make a similar demand on us readers as well, because we read her depiction of her characters' reading others.

Robert Garis sees the form of the novels of Jane Austen as "the comic drama of reason." He claims that, "the happy ending comes about not through the lucky disappearance of accidental impediments, but through a dramatic action in which one of the leading characters learns something important about reality and his own nature" (60). The drama is of course, related to reason, but the epiphany is slow and sometimes painful. Yet, however difficult it is, Austen's heroines come out successful after going thorough a process interpretation. I will try to show how the reading and interpreting processes of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* affect their moral, social, and even intellectual Bildung. My approach will be "hermeneutical" for I would like to
read these novels as *Bildungsromans* and study the intricate reading problems involved in the way the characters interpret, or “trafick,” or negotiate meanings, as the etymology of the Latin-derived word “interpretation” suggests (Ong 134).

It is interesting to note that the “reading” process is seen by quite a lot of different writers of the nineteenth century as a very significant act. Emily Dickinson suggests that when we are faced with God’s words “The Conscience of us all/Can read without its Glasses/On Revelation’s Wall—” (“Belshazzar had a Letter” 125; my emphasis). Dickinson in this poem refers to the Book of Daniel and she “takes this biblical tale and makes it into an allegory for the conscience of us all,’ through which God points out and warns us about our sins” (Mailloux 41). I want to point out here how Jane Austen puts her emphasis on “reading” a tale or a text. The act of reading makes a change in the reader and makes her or him a different person. Reading texts and becoming aware of their contexts require us to be more imaginative and ethical persons, seem to say both Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson.

Steven Mailloux, when he discusses reading and interpreting processes, sees “interpretation” of texts as “acceptable and approximating translation” (40). Reading a text is interpretation. As Mailloux points out, *OED* gives the meaning of “to interpret” as “to expound the meaning of (something abstruse or mysterious); to render (words, writings, an author, etc.) clear or explicit; to elucidate; to explain” (39). Here, all the acts of interpretation involve a linguistic medium, a written text, but we also assume that all objects of interpretation can be called texts (Mailloux 40), because they need to be explained, rendered clear or explicit, or elucidated so that they can be understood by the interpreter. But Dickinson in her poem, like Austen does in her novels, adds another dimension to this reading process: that is the task of interpreting texts can be an ethical act as well.

We will see that Austen’s characters get involved in interpretative activities that require their most significant attention. These activities will be as crucial as Dickinson suggests because they live in a world that has been devoid of an epic and mythic social order. The interpretative task, for Austen and Dickinson, takes on the urgency of a world in which the Bible and its interpretations have lost their meaning. We know that Hermeneutics as a branch of learning starts as the study and interpretation of the Bible, the ur-text in which the Logos is given meaning through patriarchal figures. We see figures like Noah, Moses, and Daniel that interpret the words of God to human beings. These Old Testament figures are followed by the church Fathers, like Saint Jerome who has translated the word of God into the vernacular Latin, and the Jewish interpreters of the Talmud. But in the nineteenth century, which has
witnessed the "death of God," we see the link with God has been severed and the characters in the novels, like their readers, have been left as orphans.

Jane Austen's characters negotiate the meaning for their existence on their own in this two-fold state of orphanhood: they either have lost their parents or have inadequate parents and the social order has been out of joint for them to exist in a meaningful community of Christians. All they have left is a series of inane societal texts and meaningless conversation. Austen's heroines at the beginning of each novel start without being equipped to interpret the mundane social codes. Fathers are either dead, as in Sense and Sensibility, or very ineffectual or distant as in all her other novels; yet the heroines move "towards clear self-recognition," ploughing their way through the social codes and texts, as Lukacs says. The epic age is dead and gone and the alienated individuals in Jane Austen's novels quest for a meaningful existence in modern problematic societies by learning to interpret the texts that are available to them.

After very painful Bildung processes, Jane Austen's characters learn to interpret the world in which they live more imaginatively. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in the much-discussed chapter XIII of his Biographia Literaria, argues that

The IMAGINATION then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space. ... But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (Original emphases I. 202)

It is crucial for Jane Austen's characters to learn how to "read" and interpret life and other texts. Most of her characters lack imagination so absolutely that they abandon themselves to utter clichés. Some have fancies and they think that their petty aspirations for success are more cunning than their ossified friends and
relatives. With the exception of her protagonists, Jane Austen’s characters do not transform, dissolve, diffuse, or dissipate the texts they encounter and therefore they cannot “recreate.” However, as they go through their Bildung and imaginative inner journeys, Austen’s main characters learn to use their vital imaginative powers to read the texts around them.

Jane Yet Austen’s completed novels, from *Northanger Abbey* to *Persuasion*, seem to be fraught with problems of interpretation: that is the heroines and their “friends” are engaged in a social milieu, whose values they try to communicate. In the polite society of the novels, in which much of the conversation is rather inane (yet they provide interesting interpretative problems for the heroine), most of the minor characters exchange formalities of every day pleasantries and therefore need not listen to each other. A good example for this can be found in *Northanger Abbey* in which two “friends,” Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe exchange certain words and Jane Austen’s narrator comments on them ironically as:

> They proceeded to make inquiries and give intelligence as to their families, sisters, and cousins, talking both together, far more ready to give than receive information, and each hearing very little of what the other said” (53).

The only conversation in this society is idle gossip or the news about their very limited milieu, which is usually very badly interpreted, and in many instances causes most of the crucial misunderstandings in the novels. The characters Jane Austen creates do not have the habit, ability, or formation to listen to each other carefully, contextualize their speeches, or read between the lines of what they hear. Catherine Morland as a young woman is to enter this world, in which deviously opportunistic workings of the genteel world are hidden cunningly behind such banalities. She is “ineptly chaperoned by empty-headed Mrs. Allen,” as we see in many sentimental novels, “into the social world” of hard economic negotiations (Brownstein 36). Jane Austen’s heroines are all burdened with being in an “ineptly chaperoned” state,” as in most novels of the eighteenth century, and they have to interpret what they see and read without much help from others.

From the very beginning of the novel genre (and we can very safely mention the name of Daniel Defoe here), novels tend to be the most mimetic of all literary genres, in the Aristotelian sense. They seem to imitate the real lives and ideologies, or the “action,” of their intended audience (Williams 348). But Austen has been seen as an aberration. The critical community has tended to regard her as an author who ignores or disregards “the decisive historical events of her time.” To read Austen as a writer who suppresses political, social, and
economic realities of her age, however, has created problems for the critics who wish to read her novels as *Bildungsromans* and therefore such readings will be avoided here.

George Lukacs, in his pre-Marxist, Hegelian analysis of the novel genre in *The Theory of the Novel*, describes the *Bildungsroman*’s “inner form” as

the process of the problematic individual’s journeying towards himself, the road from dull captivity within a merely present reality—a reality that is heterogeneous in itself and meaningless to the individual—towards clear self-recognition. After such self-recognition has been attained, the ideal thus irradiates the individual’s life as its immanent meaning; but the conflict between what is and what it should be has not been abolished and cannot be abolished in the sphere wherein these events take place—the life sphere of the novel; only a maximum conciliation—the profound and intensive irradiation of a man by his life’s meaning—is attainable.

Lukacs’s definition is useful in terms of its delineation of the individual character’s moral, intellectual, or emotional education through a process that is linked to a journey, whether metaphorical or literal. Lukacs sees this journey, or the quest, for authentic values attained, as “self-recognition”; yet he understands that “the life sphere of the novel” remains unchanged in its lack of authenticity. The problematic individual character that exists in a society that is also problematic is the paradigm Lukacs sees in the *Bildungsroman*; but a description of a society that has not been affected by “the decisive historical events of [Austen’s] time” becomes problematic itself.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen’s novel-writing career coincides with one of the most significant changes in British history, that is the era of the Industrial Revolution. Austen, despite the surface calm of her novels, seems to be involved with the turbulent times she writes about. W.H. Auden, Raymond Williams, and, Edward Said’s discussion of her novels show how much these careful readers see in Austen an awareness of her social and historical contexts.

I think it is W.H. Auden who gives a very apt definition of Jane Austen’s art:

> You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
> Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
An English spinster of the middle class
Describe the amorous effects of “brass,”
Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
The economic basis of society. (Auden 41)

“It is a truth universally acknowledged that Jane Austen chose to ignore the
decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic
wars: the real currents of history?” (Williams 18). In this ironic passage that
alludes to the well-known opening sentence of Pride and Prejudice, Raymond
Williams is one of the first critics who questions the “fact” that “the genteel lady
novelist” writes only about “the cultivated rural gentry” (18). A closer reading
of her novels, according to Williams, unveils that she plots out the complex
“social history of the landed families at that time in England” (18) and
“Reveal[s] ... /The economic basis of society.” This is a brilliant reading by W.
H. Auden and I think we should emulate him in a similar vein as well.

In order to show more clearly what we mean by interpretation of social
and written texts I would like to discuss what Gadamer says about interpretation.
Hans-Georg Gadamer, in Philosophical Hermeneutics, begins his argument with
a two-fold alienation he sees in “our concrete existence: the experience of
alienation of the aesthetic consciousness and the experience of alienation of the
historical consciousness” (4). In the first “experience of alienation,” Gadamer
refers to the Hegelian aesthetics in order to describe our narrowing of
contextualization of art objects, by reducing their contexts to their aesthetic form
alone. Gadamer says that

the aesthetic consciousness ... is always secondary to the
immediate truth-claim that precedes from the work of art itself. To
this extent, when we judge a work of art on the basis of its aesthetic
quality, something that is really much more intimately familiar to us
is alienated. (5)

It is “the immediate truth-claim” of the works of art, which is rendered void
when we ignore that they are created by an artist living in a community and
sharing that community’s belief systems. However, Gadamer’s claim, and
Hegel’s for that matter, ignores the case of an alienated artist who produces the
works of art, in defiance of his or her society, as seen in the works of Romantic
poets and the artists of the following generations. Another very important
problem raised by Gadamer’s argument is the medium in which the artist
creates; it is very difficult, for instance, for language to have an “immediate
truth-claim,” even in the most unified communities, due to its constant
negotiation of meaning between the figures of speech. The questions raised
here, rather than invalidating it, can also be seen as enriching Gadamer's claim by presenting more difficult problems for interpretation.

As the second “experience of alienation,” Gadamer critiques the historical consciousness, with the help of Nietzsche, as something which demands “historical objectivity” and “the extinguishing of the individual” (5-6), as if it is possible at all. Writing an objective history, without the prejudices of its time and of the writer, is a fallacious legacy of the Enlightenment philosophy of the eighteenth century, as Gadamer demonstrates in the works of Prussian historiography. Then, Gadamer starts to demonstrate ways of interpretation as he says,

No one disputes the fact that controlling the prejudices of our own present to such an extent that we do not misunderstand the witnesses of the past is a valid aim, but obviously such control does not completely fulfil the task of understanding the past and its transmissions. (6)

This claim seems to open up the creative use of our prejudices in the task of understanding texts in their context, which should be extended as largely as possible.

After delineating and criticising these two modes of alienation, Gadamer focuses on the “hermeneutical consciousness” which is formulated by Friederich Schleiermacher, a contemporary of Jane Austen, as “the art of understanding,” that is, “the art of avoiding misunderstanding” (7). This is Gadamer call, another way of alienation, which presupposes a distinction between understanding and misunderstanding. To avoid misunderstanding, and for Gadamer it “presupposes a ‘deep common accord,’” there is a need for “a controlled procedure of historical training” (6-7).

Gadamer’s proposal to overcome these alienations is very rich in implications for literary criticism: “Our task ... is to transcend the prejudices that underlie the aesthetic consciousness, the historical consciousness, and the hermeneutical consciousness that has been restricted to a technique for avoiding misunderstandings and to overcome the alienation present in them all” (8). An imaginative use of the prejudices, or “to transcend” them, by turning them upside down so that the interpretative act can fulfil its task towards the future seems to us the lesson of Gadamer. This lesson will obviously become very useful in reading Pride and Prejudice; but as will be seen later Gadamer’s hermeneutics can be beneficially employed for all Jane Austen’s novels.
CHAPTER II. *Northanger Abbey* and a Reading of Gothic Novels

Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* appears to be a lesson to the reader in which the authorial voice steers the act of reading. No one reads the novel in a state of ideal "chastity," that is each reader approaches the novel with all kinds of pre-knowledge of the novel genre, whether it is the romance, or more specifically the Gothic genre. Jane Austen seems to deny her readers the comfort of this knowledge by making her novel ambiguous from the first page on so as to direct them to a more intelligent reading.

It is a common tendency in the twentieth century to regard *Northanger Abbey* as nothing more than a "burlesque [of] such novels as *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by depicting a nice but gullible teenager looking at the actual world through ... Gothic romances" (Ryle 114). This view, which is shared by quite a number of other critics, even after the critical appraisal of Rebecca West, contains a misreading of the novel in more than one way. The first question asked ought to be how a critic can miss the point Jane Austen makes by blurring the boundaries of "the actual world" and the Gothic romances, as seen in the episodes in *Northanger Abbey*? The second question pertains to Gilbert Ryle's contention that "*Northanger Abbey* is the one novel of the six which does not have an abstract ethical theme for its backbone" (113); if this is true, then how else can Jane Austen demonstrate her "abstract ethical theme" other than making her heroine develop her ability to judge the good and the bad by reading "the actual world"? My contention in this chapter is to demonstrate Jane Austen's strategy as she plots the *Bildung* of Catherine Morland to be a woman who can read the texts offered to her, whether in the form of romances or presented as "the actual world." It is undeniable that Austen offers a critique of the Gothic genre as well as the act of reading them uncritically; yet, it would be wrong to presume that she, in any way wishes the heroine or the reader to make the assumption that books and the ordinary, "actual" life are different or hierarchically privileged.

Walter J. Ong, in his summation of the critical legacy of the 1970's in the United States and France, asserts that "our fascination with the psychodynamics of reading can be understood as a stage in the evolution of human consciousness, that is, in the evolution of mankind's way of relating the human interior to the exterior world and to itself" (137). As Ong suggests, this evolution is abated with an analytical distancing of an individual, and this distancing from "his material and those who are speaking to him about it" in a reader "fosters analytic management of knowledge, 'objectivity,' as oral communication alone cannot" (140). Reading is a solitary activity, in contrast with the banalities of the
communities who chitter continuously. Without saying much, in the two novels, chiefly the Allens and the Thorpes in Northanger Abbey, and the Bennets and the officers in Pride and Prejudice could be seen as groups or communities that could never isolate themselves from the crowd. Therefore, reading alone enables Jane Austen's heroines to disengage themselves from their "friends" and thrust them into analytical distance for them to read, misread, and interpret. Also we see that Austen's heroines must relinquish their exclusive preoccupation with the self in their quest for interpretation. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Thorpe talk as if they fail to register anything that is said for they are too self-centred to listen to what the other says.

The most questionable term in Ong's essay is, of course, "objectivity." I have dwelt on this unfortunate legacy of the Enlightenment, that objectivity is possible or desirous, in the introduction in the context of Hans-Georg Gadamer. However, in the nineteenth century when some of the fiercest battles against the philosophy of the Enlightenment took place, a "model for correct understanding" of texts is proposed by George Eliot: its three features are "sincerity, sympathy, and self-reflection" (Collins 153). It is correct to assume that reading a written text isolates the reader into solitude and this, in turn, will enable him or her negotiate the meanings of the text better. Yet, George Eliot's terms "sincerity, sympathy, and self-reflection," if employed well, will be the least objective of tasks, as will be shown below.

Northanger Abbey opens in a surprising manner, with numerous negatives against the usual superlatives that are found in the Gothic novels. Jane Austen's irony against such practices of gushing extremes in her predecessors' or contemporaries' works informs her readers that they are reading a different type of novel: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (37). With this opening sentence, Jane Austen's strategy in the novel crystallises to be towards a heroine who is not going to be the familiar one; but she is unfamiliar to a Gothic novel reader; and this act of presenting unfamiliar themes and motifs will continue all through the novel.

From an uneventful beginning in her family background, sired by a father who is not "in the least addicted to locking up his daughters," and a mother who ironically refuses to die "in bringing [Catherine] into the world, as anybody might expect." (37)

After a very ordinary beginning and a rather mundane and sensible upbringing, we see Catherine's voyage into the outside world in her first trip to Bath, a place then only second in importance to London for a hero or heroine to be initiated
into the polite society of the eighteenth-century novels. On the road, Jane Austen’s negatives continue:

Under these unpromising auspices, the parting took place, and the journey began. It was performed with suitable quietness and uneventful safety. Neither robbers nor tempests befriended them, nor one lucky overturn to introduce them to the hero. Nothing more alarming occurred than a fear on Mrs. Allen’s side, of having once left her clogs behind her at an inn, and that fortunately proved to be groundless. (42)

With her kind, ordinary, and mildly inane companions, the Allens, Catherine endures a journey that lacks any colour, event, or adventure. She is depicted, with the lightest of tones by Jane Austen, as an ordinary provincial young woman who has read quite a few Gothic novels popular at the end of the eighteenth century; then the reader expects her to experience some of the extraordinary events described in romances.

It has become common since the publication of Don Quixote for the main character of the novels to read the popular literature of the time literally and uncritically for comic effect. Jane Austen’s strategy in Northanger Abbey seems similar. Both the reader’s and Catherine’s reading lists consist of such popular novels and their readings remain at the very best literal. With great gusto and scathing irony, though, Jane Austen flattens this common reading process by forming a new type of novel, for which she is surely indebted to Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson, and tries to seek a new type of reader. She sets up a paradigm for the reader to interpret what he or she reads in parallel with her heroine’s Bildung that is her learning process for overcoming her prejudices and learning how to read and interpret the texts available to her.

Catherine and the Allens settle in Bath and do the conventional rounds; and in their first socially unsuccessful evening in the Upper Rooms Catherine faces a minor disappointment for “not” one young man “started with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called divinity by anybody” (46). Austen’s refusal to endow the novel with all the usual entrapments of the Gothic genre should not hide the fact that this is still a narrative journey in which her (anti-) heroine will experience a sort of Bildung. It is on this locus we will begin our quest, or reading, in order to interpret Jane Austen’s endeavour to establish her own genre and readers.

Jane Austen’s critical use of irony against the Gothic genre and against the expectations of a generation of readers who have read them seems to direct her novel towards that fraught term the “realistic novel” with ordinary events and
characters. Jane Austen’s depiction of the strange uneventfulness of the beginning of the novel, “consistent with the common feelings of common life, than with the refined susceptibilities, the tender emotions” (42) marks her pledge towards the realistic novel. Walter Scott has noticed this in his criticism (of *Emma*): Her novels “belong to a class of fictions which has arisen almost in our times, and which draws the characters and incidents introduced more immediately from the current of ordinary life than was permitted by the rules of the novel” (12). George Levine calls this a “second full start” of Realism “in the English novel (after Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding)” (35). Levine’s argument in his book seeks to establish the co-dependence of realism and imagination in nineteenth-century novels; the same argument must be made for the mutual existence of Augustan classicism and romantic imagination in Jane Austen’s novels for we see the same ideas in her near contemporary William Wordsworth as

> the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know, that one being is elevated above another, in proportion as he possesses this capability. (872)

Jane Austen seems to echo these words of Wordsworth with her praise of “common feelings of common life” as the suitable subject matter and the method of writing novels.

Jane Austen depicts Catherine ironically as a “strange and unaccountable character” due to her lack of “a bad heart” and “a bad temper” in order to make her ordinary; yet this attempt does not in any way ground her in “reality”; she is an ordinary character only in contrast with the texts in which heroines are burdened with such traits.

The novel, while rejecting the conventionally overemphasised emotions, characters, and events, contains its own narrative tensions that create in the reader certain expectations. After Catherine’s first meeting with her future lover Henry Tilney, she and the reader expect to meet him again: “With more than usual eagerness did Catherine hasten to the Pump-room the next day, secure within herself of seeing Mr. Tilney there before the morning were over, and ready to meet him with a smile: --but no smile was demanded—Mr. Tilney did not appear” (52). Catherine’s disappointment is not, of course, excessive and Austen hints at it with the gentle use of the passive voice in “no smile was demanded.” Further on we see Austen delicately pointing out this minor heartbreak by mocking Catherine for she forgets her pangs by meeting a new friend, an absolute necessity in the world of the novel for no one can survive
without acquaintances in that unfriendly and claustrophobic city of Bath as depicted in the novel.

In the book, Catherine Morland’s heart is made to yearn for two things: on an unconscious level without verbalising it, she wants to be loved by Henry Tilney, and on a conscious level she wants to experience the adventures of a Gothic novel, especially the life in an old building with certain aristocratic and ecclesiastic links. This duality of purpose is interesting, because they can be both read as the awakening sexual urges in Catherine. Jale Parla (after Gaston Bachelard and others) argues that the usual dark dungeons and castles represent the heroines of the Gothic novels themselves who fear the unknown as they leave their traditional roles in Medieval romances; and one of the most dangerous things for women in both Gothic and “straight” novels is sexual abuse for they are unprotected outside the house (80). For a woman trapped in her house, the Gothic novel naturally provides a vicarious adventure story where she meets the extraordinary lands and characters without putting herself physically in perilous situations.

Catherine endangers and nearly loses the friendship of the Tilney siblings due to her passion for such buildings. When John Thorpe, the idiotic brother of her friend Isabella proposes to take a road trip which includes a visit to Blaize Castle, her resolution to wait for Miss Tilney’s call wavers; an old castle, which she erroneously believes it to be, with its “towers and long galleries” promises to her an instant transportation into the world of Gothic novels (101).

In the same vein, yet richer in implications for the development of the novel (and the reader has been expecting to hear about it for the last sixteen chapters), we hear the name of the Tilneys house:

Northanger Abbey! --These were thrilling words, and wound up Catherine’s feelings to the highest point of extasy. Her grateful and gratified heart could hardly restrain its expressions within the language of tolerable calmness. To receive so flattering an invitation! To have her company so warmly solicited!” (148).

The gushing of Catherine is to be with Henry’s family; she seems to commit the act of misreading the invitation as the final step before marrying Henry; yet, the reader is given enough hints that it is the sinister father whose interest in her stems from his misreading of John Thorpe’s story about her wealth. The narrator makes both of her feelings more explicit:

Her passion for ancient edifices was next in degree to her passion for Henry Tilney—and castles and abbies made usually the
charm of those reveries, which his image did not fill. To see and explore either the ramparts and keep of the one, or the cloister of the other, had been for many weeks a darling wish, though to be more than the visitor of an hour, had seemed too nearly impossible for desire. And yet, this was to happen. With all the chances against her of house, hall, place, park, court, and cottage, Northanger turned up to be an abbey, and she was to be its inhabitant. Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun. (149-50).

Catherine’s feelings for Henry and his house intermingle for the first time; her “passion,” “darling wish,” “desire,” and “hope” for Henry and real Gothic buildings seem to be one, despite the narrator’s prioritization of Henry’s place in her heart.

If we observe the way Catherine reads the popular novels available to her at that time, and the fact that they constitute the comedic backbone of the text, we may come to an understanding of the learning process of the heroine. Walter Ong’s discussion of “reading and readers” argues that since reading a written (and printed) text the reader is devoid of the author and the original context, he or she must “produce the equivalent of both” (133). As the author “imagines” his or her readers (and they become as fictional as the text produced by the author), the audience must “naturalise,” or “relate” the text “to a present known form of communication,” in order to commence the interpretative act (134).

In Northanger Abbey, the reading of the Gothic novels is discussed in five different instances. Naturally, Catherine and Isabella Thorpe read them; more surprisingly Henry Tilney, Catherine’s intended, and John Thorpe, Isabella’s brother, read them as well.

John is probably the most singularly nasty and stupid character in the novel; his stupidity is made manifest as he speaks in catalogues of clichés and seem to conform to these clichés devoutly; obviously Jane Austen does not intend him to think critically or question anything for a moment. His way of reading of novels becomes apparent in the dialogue between him and Catherine:

“Udolpho! Oh, Lord! not I; I never read novels; I have something else to do.”

Catherine, humbled and ashamed, was going to apologise for her question, but he prevented her by saying, “Novels are all so full of
nonsense and stuff; there has not been a tolerably decent one come out since *Tom Jones*, except the Monk; I read that t’other day; but as for all the others, they are the stupidest things in creation.”

“I think you must like *Udolpho*, if you were to read it; it is so very interesting.”

“Not I, faith! No, if I read any, it shall be Mrs. Radcliff’s; her novels are amusing enough; they are worth reading; some fun and nature in them.”

“*Udolpho* was written by Mrs. Radcliff,” said Catherine, with some hesitation, from the fear of mortifying him. (69)

In her apology for novels, Jane Austen calls the act of belittling her genre, like John Thorpe is doing now, as the “common cant” (58). Furthermore, John is depicted as a typical English philistine (if I may use the Arnoldian term anachronistically) who obviously has not read anything but only repeats other people’s clichés about popular literature, literally, without a thought. He is a worthless character for Catherine; this is not only because Jane Austen makes him an undutiful and unaffectionate son and brother and a mercenary who clearly misreads Catherine’s position in the Allens’ household (he thinks that Catherine will inherit their money), but also because he cannot read a novel in its entirety and make a single critical judgment about it. John Thorpe’s moral weakness is paralleled with his inability to read novels or the texts around him critically. He is a man in search of a fortune by marrying a rich woman in the marriage-marketplace of Bath, and this leaves very little time and energy for him to study literature. Catherine does not come out of this exchange unscathed either; her youthful timidity at this point of the novel makes her only an enthusiast for the “horrid” in the fiction she reads. Other than using “horrid,” lovingly or unthinkingly, the Thorpes and Catherine do not seem to have any other critical terminology. For Catherine it will be a learning process to acquire a richer and more accurate vocabulary with the help of Henry Tilney, as we will see soon. Catherine’s talent to learn is matchless in the novel. From the very beginning of the novel, she chats with Eleanor Tilney and Austen’s narrator tells us that,
simplicity and truth, and without personal conceit, might be something uncommon. (72).

Catherine the awkward young woman from the backwaters talks with a slightly more sophisticated woman of her age by using all the available clichés of her era. The narrator, however, seems to value her clichés more than the clichés of others because they are uttered with “simplicity and truth”. Catherine then is judged favourably for giving “new meaning to available clichés” (Brownstein 41).

In comparison to John Thorpe, Henry Tilney’s response to the Gothic genre is quite different as can be gathered in the scene at Beechen Cliff. The conversation about books between the Tilney siblings and Catherine is startled by the latter’s casual remark that she never looks at the river “without thinking of the south of France” (121). In answer to the question whether she has been abroad, Catherine confesses “Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about. It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through, in the Mysteries of Udolpho. But you never read novels, I dare say?” (121). This is an interesting response by Catherine who can transport herself to the South in her imagination by simply reading such novels. To the last question, Henry answers,

The person, be it a gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid. I have read all Mrs. Radcliff’s works, and most of them with great pleasure. The Mysteries of Udolpho when I had once begun it, I could not lay down again; --I remember finishing it in two days—my hair standing on end the whole time. (121)

Henry’s words reflect an unconventional attitude in a very conventional gentleman; the expected was John Thorpe’s response: a man who imitates and parrots his peer group’s cliches unthinkingly. However, Henry, without defying the conventions of his class, period, and milieu, can be an original, an imaginative man; that is, he has the power of intellect or rather power of imagination that helps him to interpret what he observes. Henry does not limit himself with mere conventionalities, and this could be discerned in our first meeting with him when he displays his knowledge of feminine finery; he even awakens Mrs. Allen’s curiosity by talking knowledgeably about muslin. His honesty makes him quite at ease with his reading novels and taking pleasure in their hair-raising aspects. We notice his intellectual powers when he questions Catherine’s inquiry “But now really do you not think Udolpho the nicest book in the world?” with his response: “The nicest, --by which I suppose you mean the neatest. That must depend upon the binding” (122). This is perhaps the first
intellectually stimulating challenge Catherine has ever had; that she has to use words, not in a haphazard way but appropriately, must be a shock for her. Being a perfect lady, Miss Tilney softens the blow, though:

Henry ... you are very impertinent. Miss Morland, he is treating you exactly as he does his sister. He is for ever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you. The word "nicest," as you used it, did not suit him; and you had better change it as soon as you can, or we shall be overpowered with Johnson and Blair all the rest of the way. (122)

However, even the delicately worded mock-chiding directed towards Henry is not without its intellectual force; it shows that Miss Tilney is on semi-equal footing with her brother, and Catherine still has to learn a lot. On the other hand, it exposes Henry's pedantry, which is criticised here. Jane Austen seems to be directing our attention to the limitations of intellectual vigour and mastery of language, which themselves cannot be the agents of moral imagination; George Eliot's "sincerity" as one of the prerequisites of interpretation comes into play here. Catherine's outburst to this is "I am sure, I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should I not call it so?" (122). Henry, without realising his sister's criticism, goes on to point out the meaninglessness of the word "nicest"; yet we seem to side with Catherine who wins it through her sincerity, without forgetting that this character must go through the learning process while keeping her sincerity.

As Catherine and the Tilneys approach Northanger Abbey, we read a strange passage in which Henry creates a mock-Gothic romance for Catherine. He plays this game when he realises that Catherine's chief interest in his home is largely due to the fact that it was built upon a medieval abbey; his purpose is partly a rational gentleman's desire to endow a silly, yet desirable, woman with reasonable qualities, for he wants to marry her, and partly to excite her with a narrative he has confessed earlier that he finds hair-raising. In his tale, Henry mimes freely the actual layout of the house with imaginary, nonexistent characters, objects, and stories. He succeeds in frightening Catherine, but she has such enormous faith in sympathetic human nature that she is sure the Tilneys will protect her of the horrors in Henry's tale. The Abbey, as they approach it, is rather a disappointment, because General Tilney has spent a fortune to renovate and to modernise it. Jane Austen brings back her negatives and undercuts Catherine's cherished desire to enter a run-down, dilapidated building. Yet, for the careful reader, there are hints that the real horror does not reside only in Gothic novels or in ruined abbeys, but in the character of the ordinary and beastful father figure, the General.
All the novels Catherine has read, together with Henry's fiction of what she will encounter at the Abbey, make her mind conspire to induce nightmarish flights of fancy during her first night in her bedroom. Since all the fanciful novels depend on objects of daily life even for their most eerie effects, Catherine's mind turns the objects of her bedroom into props for the drama she has wished for all her young adult life. Jane Austen in her room unashamedly produces "a high, old-fashioned black cabinet" (173) with old laundry lists to be mistaken for the manuscript of Matilda (166) and extinguishes the light so that Catherine must go to bed shivering with curiosity and fright.

The next morning, of course, things are explained "rationally." Catherine, who feels "humbled to dust" (177), begins a self-reflective process; she looks at the room and its contents in day-light and evaluates them more clearly and literally; the most important point here is that she chides herself for transfiguring them simply as would a not-so-well-accomplished author. It begins to dawn on her that mere literal imitation of what she reads in the novels would bring only blushes to her face.

The fertile mind of Catherine, which is imbued with sincerity and sympathy for the Tilneys, seizes next on their dead mother and the circumstances of her death; and again in the fashion of the Gothic novels, as her next quest she focuses her suspicion on the General for his wife's untimely death. For this purpose she even visits the late lady-of-the-manor's room secretly, without any result naturally. When she is caught at the door, Henry's severe and pompous reproof to her fancied murder story, "Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained... Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" (199), while shaming her reflects badly on him as well; this is one of the very rare instances when he resorts to clichés. Later, Jane Austen will show the irony of the situation; it will be a very unchristian offence when the General throws her out of the house all alone because of her lack of fortune and Henry will not be able to do anything about it.

Catherine's sincere and sympathetic reading of romances, however admirable it has been, does not give her a self-reflective power that will enable her to transcend her reading. Jane Austen shows her new self with the words:

The visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done. ... The liberty that her imagination had dared to take the character of his father, could he ever forgive it? (201)
Only through this sort of self-criticism and reflecting over her thought processes, Catherine can achieve adulthood. Yet Jane Austen’s irony continues; ever since their arrival at Northanger Abbey, even starting in Bath, she has been building a sinister figure of a father in the General. Since the Gothic novels do not any more provide a direct, corresponding model for the mysteries of “real life,” Catherine must learn to read the ordinary life depicted in the novel. And she learns to do so by experiencing the humiliation of being turned out of the house without a companion due to the maliciousness of the General. She marries Henry at the end; yet after waiting quite a while, as stipulated by the General and her parents who wish to see the maturing process of both Henry and Catherine.

Jane Austen’s ingenious strategy in *Northanger Abbey* is that of making the reading process of the Gothic novels a paradigm for reading the real life depicted in the novel. All along the book, Catherine is shown in various degrees of silliness, depending on the reader of her words. Ironically, she does prove to be correct in her reading of the Gothic novels. She is created to be more acute in her response to the unexplainable evil in these novels and she is more perceptive to the evil we see in the General. The General’s evil comes out right after the pompous speech of Henry that at that time and age, one must read novels imaginatively, meaning not to take them literally. But at the end, it shows that it is Catherine that has the most interesting intuition and insight, and it is the Abbey that could have injured a young woman, despite the modernisation the General has provided.

Catherine’s learning process in *Northanger Abbey* is thoroughly grounded in her acquisition of interpretative abilities. She learns to interpret social and economic realities depicted the novel imaginatively and learn to be a more ethical character by employing her imagination.
CHAPTER III. Reading Elizabeth Bennet Reading Darcy’s Letter.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen creates again a claustrophobic world of suffocation that surrounds her heroine Elizabeth. This intelligent woman, who has the verve of Emma Woodhouse, inhabits a household that is nearly approximated to a madhouse by Austen. The Bennet household is overcrowded, with a stupid and selfish mother and five daughters who have only one drawing room to share among them. Each girl shows different weaknesses: Jane, the eldest, is the passive, “sensible silent” sister, who can be likened to Jane Fairfax in *Emma* (Gilbert and Gubar 157); Mary is the terrible pedant, who seems to be created as the best embodiment of “a little learning is a dang’rous thing” (Pope II. 215); Lydia and Kitty are too silly and egotistical. The father, being the supreme egotist, shuts himself off in his spacious study, isolating himself from the inanities of his female companions whose stupidity and lack of education are partly his own fault. He only allows Elizabeth to visit him there occasionally for selfish reasons, because she is the most intelligent companion he can ever have. Elizabeth, from the very beginning of the novel, is shown as a witty, strong-willed, and imaginative woman, who is stifled in this household. This is the milieu in which she must struggle to achieve her *Bildung*.

From the very beginning, we know this novel is about the problematic of a small land-owning family with five daughters, trying to establish a secure future for the daughters who will be unable to inherit the land. At that period in England, women are given a very rudimentary and haphazard education; then it follows that the Bennets must concentrate on how to arrange suitable marriages for their daughters. The novel on this level can be read as a comedy of manners about the game of finding suitable (for suitable, we must read well-off) husbands. The ironic opening statement of the book, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (51), with its pseudo-philosophical tone, sums up both the comic and bizarre nature of this social problem; for it is the mind of Mrs. Bennet which entertains this notion and she sets out to realize it by getting Bingley, the new comer to the community, to marry one of her daughters. On one level, she is absolutely right: her husband is getting old and when he dies the daughters will be dispossessed; on another level, she is shown to be a pathetic mother and a ruthless woman, for she sends her eldest Jane to the house rented by the Bingleys on foot, in the rain, so that she will get ill and be incapacitated there for a while, with the hope that an understanding between her and Bingley will develop. Mrs. Bennet is a silly but shrewd woman; she interprets the legal and economical system quite well, but she fails to read the human texts, i.e. her
daughters and the suitable men for them. Her incredibly unethical attitude towards Jane shows that she is incapable of an interpretation which will lead to an ethical understanding of the world around her, as Austen demands from her characters, and by analogy from us.

Jane Austen establishes the parameters of the novel in between two polarities: on the one hand it is a comedy of manners and on the other it is an ethical critique of the social realities of the time the book is written. When the heroine Elizabeth and hero Darcy meet, we see the sparks of pride and prejudice fly.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, repeats the argument he has formulated in his previous book *Truth and Method* as “It is not so much our judgements as it is our prejudices that constitute our being” (9). As we have seen in Chapter I, it is exceedingly important for Gadamer to centralise the place of “prejudice” in our interpretative activities vis-a-vis texts, because its centrality brings about a very relevant and interesting reading of *Pride and Prejudice*. Briefly, Gadamer values our prejudices for they secure a link between us and the outside world. Instead of belittling them, Gadamer suggests that we turn our prejudices upside down after an initial reaction to them, and by doing so we, as readers, start to interpret the world as a text.

As the name of the novel suggests very strongly, *Pride and Prejudice* is about the personal pride and prejudices of its main characters, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy; but Jane Austen makes neither character endowed with only one of these traits; both Elizabeth and Darcy show various kinds of pride and prejudice in varying degrees as the novel progresses. In the book, we read about the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy as it starts in enmity and moves forward with the complications involving the love story of Bingley, the best friend of Darcy, and Jane Bennet, the elder sister of Elizabeth, and the narratives dealing with George Wickham.

All these developments in the novel come to an impasse, from the perspective of Elizabeth, when the Bingley-Jane affair flounders, due to the meddling of his sisters, as Elizabeth thinks, and Wickham tells Elizabeth about the wickedness of Darcy in refusing him a living promised by Darcy’s father. At the lowest point for the fortunes of Jane and Wickham, and therefore of Elizabeth who is a sympathetic heroine, Elizabeth goes to visit the Collins family and meets Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam. Up to that point, Elizabeth has encountered Darcy quite a few times, or there are a number of versions of Darcy available to Elizabeth before she reads his letter, on which she can base her interpretations, as Gerald Bruns states (120-121).
One of the most obvious observations a reader can make in a novel is that the characters are just characters: they only exist on the pages of the book as texts. The novel genre, from its very beginning tries very hard to make the reader disregard this fact by creating a world with very strong *vraisemblance* to the experiential world of its readers. In other words, the novelist tries very hard to establish, by the conventions of his or her genre, that the text of the novel establishes almost one to one correspondence to the world outside itself. The illusion of realism the novelist wishes to create has been deconstructed to be false. In the various narratives of the book, by the conventions of realistic fiction, we are led to believe that these are real-like events that may exist outside the world of fiction. This common fallacy hinders our interpretation of the book in a fruitful way; yet Jane Austen constantly points out that the texts must be interpreted as texts and not as real events. Therefore, we must read and contextualize the texts that have been encoded in her narratives.

The first text of Darcy Elizabeth encounters is his voice at their first meeting; he is rude and haughty and his words overheard by Elizabeth wound her: “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men” (59 original emphasis). This is the voice of a man who spurns a wallflower at a provincial dance. His pride, in its worst sense, and pomposity can be glimpsed in his elaborate sentence. This also shows his prejudice for he has just seen Elizabeth as a text and badly interprets her as a “young lady who [is] slighted by other men.” Darcy’s pride, as a male, as an important, rich, and a desirable man, blinds him to have a sympathetic understanding towards a “slighted” woman and makes him oblivious to the fact that his words can be hurtful, if overheard. However, he has the capacity to overturn his initial prejudice, as Gadamer recommends, as he sees more of Elizabeth.

Then, as they keep meeting at Netherfields, she sees an interesting, intelligent Darcy who seems to be strangely attracted to her, despite his original slight. Here, we see the ability of our protagonists to turn over their prejudices towards each other. Both can read one another as highly intelligent persons who stand above the other characters in the novel. The small and provincial community of the novel operates on rumours; Elizabeth hears everyone saying something about Darcy, who is the most prominent, best-looking, and most unusual man of the community, for he is in possession of very large estates and income. The most important source of narrative about Darcy is, of course, Wickham who creates a portrait that is of a “craven and disreputable” man (Bruns 121). Another portrait of Darcy emerges through his friendship with Bingley who happens to be a tolerably good person. In each of these narratives
about Darcy Elizabeth sees a different man (or text) which she begins to interpret.

From Colonel Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth learns another version of Darcy. This is his involvement in her sister’s misfortune that makes her more miserable. Bingley’s abandonment of Jane has been due to Darcy’s design. Fitzwilliam’s hurting words about Jane (without knowing who she is) that, “there were some very strong objections against the lady” (218), make Elizabeth think the worst of Darcy: “he was the cause, his pride and caprice were the cause, of all that Jane had suffered, and continued to suffer” (219, original emphasis). The pride of Darcy is seen at its very worst, for Elizabeth blames it with the repetition of “cause.” Although she never acknowledges, or even knows about it, Elizabeth as the most intelligent character in the novel, is naturally attracted to the most handsome, the richest, and the most intelligent male character, that is Darcy.

The blow Elizabeth receives when she finds out that Darcy is prime mover of her sister’s unhappiness makes her whip herself up to despise him. She refuses an invitation to Rosings and re-reads all the letters Jane has sent her in Kent, “as if intending to exasperate herself as much as possible against Mr. Darcy” (220). Her reinterpretation of these texts works as spur to her prejudicial dislike of Darcy: The letters of Jane contained no actual complaint, nor was there any revival of past occurrences, or any communication of present suffering. But in all, and in almost every line of each, there was a want of that cheerfulness which had been used to characterise her style, and which, proceeding from the serenity of a mind at ease with itself, and kindly disposed towards every one, had been scarcely ever clouded. (220)

While Elizabeth works up her ire towards Darcy in re-reading Jane’s letters, we see her engaged in an interesting reinterpretation process. She studies these letters stylistically and compares and contrasts them with the other texts of Jane. On the one hand there is the actual sister she knows at home and on the other hand the other texts that have been written in the usual style of Jane’s prose. These texts are supposed to correspond with one another.

At this very point of the novel, Jane Austen makes Darcy propose to Elizabeth. It is a very strange proposal in more than one reason: Firstly, we do not read the actual words of Darcy; Austen’s narrator, in free indirect speech reports them. After reading Darcy’s most unusual preamble “In vain, I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you” (221), the reader expects to be
able to read the proposal of Darcy in his own words, in full. Secondly, Darcy has never spoken in such clipped sentences; both his agitated manner as he sits down and gets up, and these words show how nervous he is. This abrupt statement of the proposal shows presumably the truth, that Darcy “ardently” loves and admires Elizabeth. If this is the truth, why does it have no effect on her? There seems to be a number of ways for answering this question. Initially, Elizabeth even feels sympathy for the man: “In spite of her deeply rooted dislike, she could not be insensible to the compliment of such a man’s affection, and though her intentions did not vary for an instant, she was at first sorry for the pain he was to receive” (221). But Darcy goes on and his “subsequent language” makes her very angry indeed.

Elizabeth is also a good reader of body language; as she tries to formulate her rejection, she notices that “his countenance expressed real security” as he spoke of his “apprehension and anxiety” (221). This is in contrast with Darcy’s initial misreading; as Elizabeth colours, doubts, and remains silent after the strange, unexpected proposal, Darcy considers this mistakenly as “sufficient encouragement” (221).

Our prejudices, as well as those of Elizabeth, are awakened that this is a truly proud man. This impression gets stronger as the narrator reports that he has been saying foolish things like “his sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination” (221). At this point, Elizabeth stops listening and tries to formulate an answer, while observing his pride. Naturally, after passionately citing her reasons about Darcy’s pride making Jane, Bingley, and Wickham unhappy, she flatly refuses him. This shows clearly that Darcy has not been successful in creating a language that can persuade Elizabeth to love him.

According to Gerald Bruns, the failure of Darcy is due to “the inadequacy of plain speaking as an agency of being understood or as an agency of social understanding” (118). Darcy has spoken what he thinks is the truth; yet it fails to have the desired effect on Elizabeth. Bruns claims, “his words are forced to operate independently of any situation that could give them meaning, or at all events give them the meaning he intends them to have” (118-119). Darcy cannot create the context of a marriage proposal because, as Elizabeth has noticed, he is too sure of himself, of his station, and in general of his pride. Furthermore, in a very self-assured way, he believes that if he puts into words what he feels, he will win her over. In the male-dominated society of the time, where aristocratic men control the use of language, he thinks he can produce a string of words that can correspond to his sincere feelings and will have the desired effect on the inferior female. Darcy, due to his strong position in
society, may claim to abhor “disguise” (224); however, “society depends upon
disguise” and for each member of this society “it is always necessary for the
truth to disguise itself—as the truth!” (Bruns 119).

The next day, he writes and delivers his letter and we see her reading it.
But at first she perceives the envelope, the pages of the letter, and even the
handwriting as reified objects. Jane Austen seems to render Elizabeth’s
“wonder” and “curiosity” by showing her making sense of these. Then she reads
the text itself. Since the reader has already read Darcy’s attempt, even in
indirect report, to woo Elizabeth, we must wonder what he can say that is new.
Our reading of the letter precedes hers, or we read the letter before we read
Elizabeth’s interpretation of it.

The letter, whose tone is coldly formal and rational, qualities usually
ascribed to male rhetoric, contains certain confessions of Darcy, enlightens the
reader on few matters, which have not yet been revealed, and touches only upon
the issues Elizabeth has raised in her rejection. On the matter of making Jane
and Bingley unhappy, Darcy claims ignorance; his mea culpa is that he has
misinterpreted Jane’s demeanour; but concedes to Elizabeth’s judgment that her
sister must love Bingley. This is a very significant point in our discussion of
Darcy’s claim that truths can be delivered without a disguise. Here, we see
Jane’s truth that she sincerely loves Bingley proves inadequate “as an agency of
being understood or as an agency of social understanding” (Gadamer 9).

Elizabeth describes her sister as a woman who is ""all loveliness and goodness
as she is! Her understanding excellent, her mind improved, and all her manners
captivating” (219). This woman’s “demeanour” is, however, “misinterpreted”
by Darcy who has caused Bingley to abandon her. In Darcy’s letter we read
about Jane’s demeanour,

Her look and manners were open, cheerful and engaging as
ever, but without any symptom of peculiar regard, and I remained
convinced from the evening’s scrutiny, that though she received
[Bingley’s] attentions with pleasure, she did not invite them by any
participation of sentiment. ... [T]he serenity of your sister’s
countenance and air was such, as might have given the most acute
observer, a conviction that, however amiable her temper, her heart
was not likely to be easily touched. (228).

Jane, by the conventions that restrict her expressions of love towards Bingley,
has failed to convey her truth as truth, with very dire consequences for herself.

The interesting thing noticeable in the letter is the repetitious pleas of
Darcy to be understood as sincere. After being rejected by Elizabeth, he seems
to have understood the importance of the rhetorical strategy with which he tries
to disguise the truth as truth. This seems to be produced to batter against
Elizabeth’s wall of prejudice has and invites her to a more sympathetic reading
of his version of the stories. The first thing Darcy demands of Elizabeth is her
“justice” (227). It is a very apt word to use, because Elizabeth’s outburst of
passionate anger, when she has received the proposal, is that Darcy has acted
very unjustly towards Jane and Wickham.

Then we read the narrative about Wickham, which Darcy calls “a faithful
narrative” (232), and there is a plea to Elizabeth that she should not “reject [it] as
false” (232) for he can “summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity”
(229) or he “can appeal more particularly to the testimony of Colonel
Fitzwilliam”(232). Then he gives a catalogue of the evildoings of Wickham.

The letter is then read and re-read by Elizabeth. We witness a woman
who is so imbued with prejudice that she will be incapable of understanding.
However, we remember Gadamer’s words that it is her prejudice that keeps her
open to the letter and the written words of Darcy; that it is not her objective,
impersonal, and disinterested faculties that will bring about the meaning Darcy
has tried to produce, but her bias against him. Elizabeth’s reading of the letter is
not a simple event; Jane Austen turns it into a ceremony; at first she stops
reading without reaching the end by saying “This must be the grossest
falsehood” (233). But she picks up the letter again and resumes her reading.
Naturally, she is very excited and her feelings are in an upheaval and she seems
to be reading with great difficulty; we see that she reads “with an eagerness
which hardly left her power of comprehension, and from impatience of knowing
what the next sentence might bring, was incapable of attending to the sense of
the one before her eyes” (233). Jane Austen devotes so many lines to describe
Elizabeth’s minutest fluctuations of feeling as she reads along that we slow
down our reading her responses to the text we have already read. As Elizabeth
slows down, we seem to pause and ponder about the words that describe her
reasoning, anger, and the general reversal of her prejudices. Darcy’s first denial
of any knowledge of Jane’s feelings makes “her too angry to have any wish of
doing of him justice”; again with prejudice, she declares that “his style was not
penitent, but haughty. It was all pride and insolence” (233). This is true, of
course, but she has not started to interpret these haughtily penned lines yet; she
has not allowed her sincerity, sympathy, and self-reflection to play their part in
reversing her prejudices, as George Eliot demands for an imaginative and
ethically sound interpretation, or has not grounded the letter in its proper
contexts.
When Elizabeth gathers her courage and commands “herself so far as to examine the meaning of every sentence,” her reading seems to change. She follows the “faithful narrative of Wickham” by Darcy with that of Wickham and starts to find the incongruities of the two versions, slowly and without any jumps. Then she starts to remember, re-live, and re-evaluate the stories in their contexts, in their relation to the letter. Elizabeth’s powers of contextualization can be seen in these words:

She perfectly remembered every thing that had passed in conversation between Wickham and herself, in their first evening ... Many of his expressions were still fresh in her memory. She was now struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it escaped her before. ... She remembered that he had boasted of having no fear of seeing Mr. Darcy—that Mr. Darcy might leave the country ... yet he had avoided the Netherfields ball the very next week. She remembered also, that till the Netherfields family had quitted the country, he had told his story to no one but herself; but after their removal, it had been every where discussed; that he had then no reserves, no scruples in sinking Mr. Darcy’s character, though he assured her that respect for the father, would always prevent his exposing the son. (235)

Like a detective, Elizabeth puts all the various accounts of the story, the characters of Wickham and Darcy, and the actions of both men in their context. Her imaginative powers re-create the scenes and recall all the details by transporting herself into those events and persons. And this sympathetic involvement makes her self-reflective. Darcy’s words in his letter enable her to go through these stages, as his words in the marriage proposal could not. As she re-enacts the events in their proper contexts, she grows “absolutely ashamed of herself—Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd” (236). These feelings propel her to be more creatively interpretative in her relation to Darcy’s text particularly and to all other texts that surround her.

In reading Northanger Abbey, we have come across a collision between two genres of fiction: that is the Gothic novel and the realistic novel. Here, the interpretive problem is the collision between the sexes. On the one hand we have Elizabeth Bennet, a woman who has been raised by a very inane mother who has shown only her vulgar and mean streak and her single-minded determination to marry off her daughters well at any cost. Elizabeth’s father Mr. Bennet, despite his intelligence, wit, and strange preference for Elizabeth (for she is the only intelligent woman in the house) is definitely very inadequate both
as a father and male model for his daughters. He is a man who keeps away from feminine company by shutting himself in his study. The smallness of their house for such a family is mentioned quite a few times and yet, Mr. Bennet occupies one room to himself while the rest of the family of women stay in one cramped room. With his male egotism, this paterfamilias represents an aloof patriarch for the women in the novel; yet he is actually quite impotent. He can communicate neither with the daughters he has failed to educate nor with the silly woman he has married willingly. Neither does he have any power over his family's destiny for his estate is entailed on the male line to Mr. Collins. He knows that after his death, his daughters may be destitute if they do not find suitable husbands. Therefore he decides to be the cynic in the neighbourhood. He is the incompetent father figure for Elizabeth and she cannot learn male codes of behaviour from him. On the other hand we have Fitzwilliam Darcy without a suitable mother figure. Of course, he may refer to his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh who is almost as vulgar as Mrs. Bennet but she fails to give Darcy an intelligent lesson in deciphering female codes. These two figures then have no one to rely on but their own intelligence in order to decode the enigmas of male and female codes of love and courtship.

There is another significant act of contextualization that needs to be done by the reader, though. It is the social and economic contexts that are the sources of objection for Darcy's union with Elizabeth and Bingley's union with Jane. Colonel Fitzwilliam's words about the woman Bingley has been associated with reveal what Darcy thinks about Elizabeth's family; he says that there have been "some very strong objections against the lady" (218). As an intelligent reader, Elizabeth is aware, in her own mind, of the strong objections about her family as well; after defending Jane's good qualities and her beloved father's good standing in the social world as a land owner, she thinks of her mother and her "confidence [gives] way a little" (219). Darcy then openly shows his objection to her family in his proposal: It is, as Austen's narrator says, "his sense of inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgement had always opposed to inclination" that make the marriage between them almost impossible. Darcy's assumption here is that Elizabeth must see the "truth" about her family and their mismatch as clearly as he does. Yet his sense of decorum and his reasoning are faulty, for these truths wound her and they are, being rather arbitrary, "very unlikely to recommend his suit" (221).

In the letter, however, his objections to her family are more explicit. "The causes" for his disapproval, briefly, are the following: "The situation of your mother's family, though objectionable, was nothing in comparison of that total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself, by your three younger sisters, and occasionally, even by your father" (228). The
"situation" of Mrs. Bennet's family is the first interesting point made in the letter that meets with no disapproval with Elizabeth. The problem is explained by Raymond Williams as Mrs. Bennet's father who was an attorney and her brother being in trade (20) seem to be the standard objections of a land owning aristocrat. Austen examines Darcy's social snobbery later as he learns to accept the uncle in trade, in Pemberley and then London, for basically he is a sensible and intelligent man.

When her uncle and aunt meet Darcy at Pemberley Elizabeth is at first apprehensive that he will be rude to them. She remembers clearly his earlier disapproval of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner. But Darcy behaves with the appropriate decorum and is very civil to them. Elizabeth feels very "pleased" and triumphant for "he should know she had some relations for whom there was no need to blush" (276). This is a very important step in Darcy's Bildung, because he learns to turn his prejudices about people and social class upside down empirically, that is after meeting with them and after knowing and reading them a little.

Another point which must be examined more closely is the problem of Mrs. Bennet's and her younger daughters' behaviour in society. Their total lack of propriety and decorum, coupled with their ridiculous vulgarity, make them very objectionable. It is quite obvious that they are drawn in this way partly for comic effect. Yet Jane Austen's irony couples these characters with Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the maternal aunt of Darcy. Lady Catherine is also a caricature of an aristocratic woman, created for comic effect; and she seems to work as counterfoil for Mrs. Bennet. Rosings, the country house of Lady Catherine, is a beautiful place where the material wealth of its proprietor is displayed, but it fails in its splendour when compared with the Darcy estate Pemberley. Of course, Pemberley is larger with a magnificent park, but the most essential quality that makes it superior to any other place comes from the serene atmosphere that has been created there. It is the ultimate Tory residence, or the acceptable face of conservatism where everything radiates a sense of beauty that has been created by long and responsible ownership of land, in its most benign sense. The lady of Rosings is a vulgar woman who has no sense of propriety. When she rebukes Elizabeth for not playing the piano like a London educated woman, we see how petty, ridiculous, and banal she can be: "Miss Bennet would not play at all amiss, ... though her taste is not equal to Anne's. Anne would have been a delightful performer, had her health allowed her to learn" (209). Jane Austen never points out this parallel between Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet explicitly. The reader is invited to see that, despite her aristocratic blood, fortune, and upbringing, Lady Catherine can be as vulgar as a daughter of a "mere" attorney. The alleged social and economic snobbery of Jane Austen
can be refuted with these examples, which seem to put more emphasis on intelligent and imaginative interpretation of the world and its texts than on upbringing and culture. Raymond Williams points out that the world created by Jane Austen does not merely depict and prioritize the "settled 'traditional' world" but "much of the of the interest and many of the sources of the action in [her] novels lie in the changes of fortune—the facts of general change and of a certain mobility—which were affecting the landed families at that time" (19).

We can see that these changes are reflected in the novel in the Bildung process of Darcy. He starts befriending Bingley who has inherited a fortune made in trade, and tries to establish him as part of the landowning gentry. Later, we see him befriend Mr. Gardiner who is in trade. Darcy's education is not wholly dependent on his learning process in imaginative interpretation of Elizabeth, but her world as well.

If we go back to Elizabeth's reading of the letter, she goes back to the house and finds out that Darcy and Fitzwilliam have called on her to take their leave and Elizabeth's reaction, to the fact that she has missed them, is given with the following words: "Elizabeth could but just affect concern in missing [Fitzwilliam]; she really rejoiced at it. ... She could think only of her letter" (238). By substituting Darcy into "her letter," Elizabeth declares her love to him as well. It is the reading process of his letter with all her sincerity, sympathy, and self-reflection that completes Elizabeth's Bildung.

Gadamer's words in criticising the hermeneutical consciousness are an apt description of Elizabeth's reading:

Misunderstanding and strangeness are not the first factors, so that avoiding misunderstanding can be regarded as the specific task of hermeneutics. Just the reverse is the case. Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, thus broadening and enrichment of our own experience of the world. (15)

In his reaction against the Romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher, Gadamer's definition of the hermeneutical act is not to avoid prejudices and misunderstandings, but with the help of them, and by reversing them, to approach a better understanding of the world. Elizabeth's prejudices make her move into the alien territory of Darcy's mind and after dwelling there for a while she can transform herself, reverse her prejudices, and imaginatively recreate herself in order to find happiness and an ethical life.
""Persuasion,"" is a word," explains Harold Bloom in The Western Canon, "derived from the Latin for ‘advising’ or ‘urging,’ for recommending that it is good to perform or not perform a particular action” (253). In Persuasion, Jane Austen seems to be studying the implications of the various acts of persuasion as ethical actions that have a futurity: the book contains quite a number of persuasive acts, attempted by the characters for the good of others. Yet for the act of persuasion to have a benign aspect, the persuader ought to be in a position to read or interpret the texts available to him or her and use his or her persuasiveness ethically. In this chapter, as in the others, my argument is that Jane Austen seems to see a vital connection between the act of reading texts in their widest possible context and ethical behaviour. It is also necessary to reiterate that learning to read and understand texts is the most important aspect of the Bildung process. Here we are faced with a double Bildung, as in Pride and Prejudice, of the heroine Anne Elliot and her lover Frederick Wentworth. This double Bildung process is not actually limited to them either because there are quite a number of other persuasions going on in the novel.

Anne Elliot’s learning of imaginary interpretation, or learning to read, in Persuasion, Jane Austen’s last novel, is very complex and subtle, for she is the most complicated of the entire author’s characters. She is in the class of heroines who seem to be “angelically quiet,” passive, and “submissive,” as Gilbert and Gubar argue, like Fanny Price, Jane Fairfax, Catherine Morland, and Jane Bennet (175). These submissive characters in Austen are never merely submissive; there is always a subversive element in each.

Harold Bloom argues that Anne Elliot is “a strong but subdued outrider, … [her] character [is] not colourful and vivacious,” and as Austen says, “past her bloom” (57). Bloom also repeats Jane Austen’s assertion that Anne is “almost too good for me” (254). It then becomes understandable why Bloom compares Anne with the figures of Margaret, the old Cumberland beggar, and Michael in William Wordsworth’s poetry: these silent and submissive figures, like Anne Elliot, are saddened with their memory of what they have hoped for and what they have failed to achieve. Anne Elliot, according to Bloom,

is the last of Austen’s heroines of what I think we must call the Protestant will, but in her the will is modified, perhaps perfected, by
its descendant, the Romantic sympathetic imagination, of which Wordsworth ... was the prophet. (256)

Bloom’s argument is interesting because what he calls as the “Protestant will” is a secular and pragmatic version of the will which manifests itself in the inward, solitary reaching out for an ethical system that is devoid of Christian trappings. However, Bloom argues against Edward Said, that

Marxist criticism inevitably views the Protestant will, even in its literary manifestations, as a mercantile matter, and it has become fashionable to talk about the socioeconomic realities that Jane Austen excludes. ... But all achieved literary works are founded upon exclusion, and no one has demonstrated that increased consciousness of the relation between culture and imperialism is of the slightest benefit whatsoever in learning to read Mansfield Park. Persuasion ends with a tribute to the British navy.... But once again Austen’s is a great art founded upon exclusions, and the sordid realities of British sea power are no more relevant to Persuasion than West Indian bondage is to Mansfield Park. (257)

Bloom’s argument brings forth an interesting debate between Deconstructionist criticism and Marxist cultural criticism that may be resolved by a hermeneutical reading. There is an irrefutable point in Bloom’s argument that all literature is “founded upon exclusion.” Yet, it is also the task of the reader to contextualize, as widely as possible, what has been excluded. Such seemingly mundane or non-literary matters like the “West-Indian bondage” or “the sordid realities of British sea power” are the contexts in which these two novels stand. By creating a metaphor like the Protestant will, Bloom chooses to offer a Romantic reading of the novel yet refuses to go further and denies the larger implications of his figure. This is especially strange for Persuasion, for in the novel Virginia Woolf sees Jane Austen “beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she [has] supposed” (282). In this larger world with its richer implications for contextualization we read and try to interpret it as Jane Austen directs us.

Wolfgang Iser, in his “The Reading Process: a Phenomenological Approach,” argues that “in considering a literary work, one must take into account not only the actual text but also, in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” (212). This is a very useful approach to our task in this study; but Iser makes a strong point in emphasising the literariness of texts and excludes what he calls non-literary texts, like “women’s magazines and the brasher forms of detective story” (220). He needs this distinction for his phenomenological analysis, starting with Roman Ingarden’s “intentional
sentence correlatives” (214). This approach creates more problems for us than any help it may provide. First of all, how can we make the distinction between literary and non-literary texts? Since we have defined all the objects of interpretation as texts (Mailloux 40), we may disregard this distinction.

Since the books we are studying here are part of the “Western Canon,” we may safely assume that they are “literary,” at least to Harold Bloom. Yet Jane Austen creates characters, figures, and written texts in her novels that are not meant to be read as “literary texts”; but those are the only available texts for her characters to interpret. We read the figures of Jane Austen’s literary texts reading non-literary texts and both of sorts of texts contain “unwritten” parts or “exclusions.” Iser’s argument uses an assessment by Virginia Woolf on Jane Austen where she states that

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. ... Our attention is half upon the present moment, half upon the future. Here, indeed, in this unfinished and in the main inferior story, are all the elements of Jane Austen’s greatness. (213).

Both Iser and Virginia Woolf’s assessments are interesting yet they ignore the fact that the characters in Jane Austen’s novels are also stimulated by what is not there and present the reader with a paradigm of reading.

The novel opens, interestingly with a book read by a reader: it is Anne’s father Sir Walter Elliot, Baronet reading and re-reading the Baronetage. The Elliots of Kellynch-hall in Somersetshire, with the exception of Anne, spend their time reading this mundane reference book over and over again and fuel their vanity, self-importance, and almost monomaniacal self-focus; of course, they are totally incapable of interpreting what they read in The Baronetage or contextualize it. This reference book seems to be a remnant of the feudal system in England, which tabulates the history of minor British aristocracy in the kingdom. It is like the Doomsday Book and serves here the purpose of giving Sir Walter a sense of authority. Jane Austen’s irony is that Sir Walter’s title is at the bottom of the aristocratic ladder and the baronetage is a post-Renaissance, and not a feudal, invention that was established to raise money for the monarchy; that is these titles were sold to the highest bidder in various kings’ struggle against the Parliament. Persuasion is an anomaly, in a sense, in Jane Austen’s oeuvre, for it plots out the economic contexts of the novel more explicitly than any of her previous books. From the first chapter on, we see how the vain patriarch, Sir Walter, is persuaded to leave Kellynch-hall, because the
only way he can repay his accumulated debts is, by renting out his ancestral acres. He has amassed these debts by spending more than he can afford on his household and himself so that he can live like a "true" aristocrat, because he has always imagined himself to be one. Naturally, he has no imagination, and what he interprets to be the aristocratic way of life needs money from very non-aristocratic sources.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, when enormous fortunes are made by the industrial-capitalist middle classes on one hand and by naval officers in the Napoleonic wars on the other, the Elliots and other aristocratic landowning families, who are pushed outside the new economic system, have very few options: either they live within their diminishing means, or they marry into new fortunes. Jane Austen's first narrative impetus is to make the Elliots leave their ancestral house and to try to survive in the outside world. Of course, they choose a place which is still very genteel, yet cheaper, and move to Bath, a city despised by Jane Austen for its shallowness and claustrophobia-inducing atmosphere, as we have glimpsed at in *Northanger Abbey*.

The novel's first persuasive act is performed by Sir Walter's agent Mr. Shepherd: he clearly reads their financial difficulties as well as the Baronet's vanity and so he formulates an approach through which Sir Walter can be persuaded to do the wise thing and rent out his house. Shepherd knows how difficult it is to rent the Hall because it needs a very rich tenant who should also satisfy the snobbery of Sir Walter. Shepherd broaches the subject at first with diplomatic care:

> The present juncture is much in our favour. This peace will be returning all our rich Navy Officers ashore. They will be all wanting a home. Could not be a better time, Sir Walter, for having a choice of tenants, very responsible tenants. Many a noble fortune has been made during the war. If a rich admiral were to come our way, Sir Walter--. (47)

Here, we see a man, within his limitations, both in his role in the book and in his intellectual capacity, who can identify a problem and put it in its economic and social context. The reader is invited to do the same with much more complex issues, for we also see how Anne fails to read her father at this instant. Shepherd, tentatively brings forth the name of Admiral Croft, who wishes to rent the house, and sees that Sir Walter is still wavering about the decision; saying that: "the [naval] profession has its utility, but I should be sorry to see any friend of mine belonging to it" (49). This is a very funny response because it comes from a man who has no friends and who is purposefully trying to misinterpret a
financial arrangement and read it as a social one. Anne’s reading of the scene shows how much she has to learn:

The navy, I think, who have done so much for us, have at least an equal claim with any other set of men, for all the comforts and all the privileges, which any home can give. Sailors work hard enough for their comforts, we must all allow. (49)

This unsolicited and untimely statement from Anne nearly upsets the delicate balance Shepherd is trying to establish; but it also shows how bad Anne’s reading is. She tries to be selfless, showing democratic, and even Protestant feelings towards the navy that are morally correct but will only have a negative impact on Sir Walter, who is supremely egotistical and snobbish. Also she is covertly patronising and arrogant in her choice of words like “Sailors,” and “we must all allow.” Instead of persuading her father with tact, which comes from reading the situation between Shepherd and Sir Walter well, she lectures at her father. This incident at the very beginning of the novel shows that she has a lot of learning to do. Here we see an exclusion made by Jane Austen, as argued by Harold Bloom: the agent states vaguely “many a noble fortune is made during the war” by the officers of the navy, but omits to explain how they have been made. No one in the novel wonders about it, yet there is a feeling that these fortunes have been made by less than wholly acceptable ways for modern sensibilities. It is not an invitation to tangent off to a study of the practices of the British navy, as Edward Said says, but to an understanding of how such crucial socio-economic changes affect the fortunes of Anne and Frederick.

The novel’s main plot involves a failed love affair between Anne and Frederick Wentworth, due to the influence of good-hearted, yet misreading Lady Russell who could not possibly envisage a marriage between them because of their lack of money, eight years previous to the action of the novel. As in Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, Sir Walter’s property is entailed to a male relative, and his daughters will be dispossessed when he dies. It is only good sense, Lady Russell has thought, that Anne, her favourite, should marry a man who will be able to support her, and Frederick at that time has had no means to do so. We can see that the persuasion of Anne not to marry Frederick has been done with good intentions; yet it has produced a profound sadness Harold Bloom sees both in Anne and in the novel itself (254). This sadness is similar to the one felt by Virginia Woolf. She supports her claim by pointing out that Jane Austen creates a character that, despite her own unhappiness, “has a special sympathy for the happiness and unhappiness of others” (282). Woolf also notices the predominance of autumnal images in the book; they seem to be
connected with Anne’s appearance and spirit, which have lost their early “bloom” (57), due to, Anne thinks, her decision not to marry Frederick.

Jane Austen makes a conscious decision for contriving to bring Frederick back to Kellynch-hall as the brother-in-law of Admiral Croft. Such coincidences in the book are numerous: The tenant of Kellynch-hall turns out to be Frederick’s sister and her husband, so that he can come and stay there. Frederick also happens to be the captain of Anne’s brother-in-law, Charles Musgrove’s dead brother, so that he is eagerly sought after by the Musgroves for news of their dead son while Anne is staying with them. All these coincidences are plot contrivances, yet they are essential to bring Anne and Frederick together so that they will realise their potential to be better human beings from the others.

When the two lovers meet again after eight years, we see the persuasion of all the people involved in their small community for the suitability of their marriage, and more importantly, the persuasion of the major players in the mating game for the acceptance of their mutual love. In the scenes leading to the denouement, both parties shed away their mistrust and persuade each other of the true love that exists between them; this is accomplished by reading the actions of each other and interpreting them carefully and imaginatively.

Anne begins her imaginative reading of her past in a Wordsworthian vein, as Bloom suggests, when she hears about Frederick’s return. She, at first, remembers how they have fallen in love and what sort of person he has been:

Captain Wentworth had no fortune. ... [H]e was confident that he should soon be rich; --full of life and ardour, he knew that he should soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to every thing he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still. (56).

All his ambitions, self-confidence, and singularity of purpose recommend her to Anne. As Jane Austen’s narrator says: “Such confidence, powerful in its warmth, and bewitching in the wit which often expressed it must have been enough for Anne” (56). Anne’s earlier self intuited that they “have been enough.” But it is Anne who recalls and interprets these intuitions eight years later and finds them persuasive as we gather from the expression “must have been enough.”

For Lady Russell, however, these have not been enough; as an upper class, conservative woman who has sympathy but no interpretative ability, she has found that Frederick’s relative poverty, “sanguine temper,” “fearlessness of mind,” and worst of all, his “wit” work against him. Lady Russell, as a very
insular woman, has shown very little understanding of what is happening in Europe at the time and has failed to contextualize Frederick's appetite and ambitions. Anne looks back at her decision and the factors that have shaped it with regret and re-examines them. Her conclusion is that "[h]er attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth; and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (57). Anne's and, later we find out, Frederick's most significant problems are how to interpret each other's feelings and persuade each other that they are worthy of love and affection. Anne verbalises her problem just before their first meeting as: "How were his sentiments to be read?" (85).

The first sign she receives is less than flattering, for he is heard to say that since she has "so altered he should not have known" her again (85). Of course, this is a great blow to her; Anne is the daughter of Sir Walter, and however different she may be from her father and sisters, she has been brought up in an exceedingly vain household. She presumes, at first, that her looks gone, she would have no influence on him as a woman. Secondly, she remembers again,

She has used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity. (my emphasis 86)

These are the words of a mature woman recalling and evaluating her past deeds imaginatively. It is time for her to read Frederick imaginatively.

Jane Austen makes it quite clear that Anne still loves Frederick and feels great pain that it is over between them. Her imaginative reading of their shared past and her decision to reject him haunt her. But there is a third party in her mind; she must reckon the role Lady Russell has played in her present sadness.

During Anne's stay at the cottage of her sister Mary Musgrove near Uppercross, Frederick starts to frequent their society and Charles Musgrove's unmarried sisters are both stricken by him. Henrietta soon re-directs her interest to the man who is interested in her, but Louisa flirts with Frederick openly. Anne feels a temporary relief because she remembers the past and decides "as far as she might dare to judge from memory and experience, that Captain Wentworth was not in love with either" (105); but she is intelligent enough to know that love can grow between them if they remain together long enough. This shows that Anne can read him with her "memory and experience" and his attitude to these women is different from the one he has shown her previously.
During an outing with the Musgrove sisters and Frederick, we see Anne desperately trying to block out their conversation by reciting poetical quotations in her mind about the beauty of nature in autumn, as noticed by Virginia Woolf, and how nature gives solace to the suffering soul.

Her pleasure in the walk must arise from ...the view of the last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn ... that season which has drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling. (original emphasis 107-8)

At this very significant point, we see Jane Austen being equivocal about her eighteenth-century predecessors and her contemporary poets, who argue that it is language that creates nature. She seems to make Anne assert that it is nature that brings her pleasure while the individual in nature needs the poetic language that describes it, in order to see nature. Nature here becomes a text to be read, if we follow the second argument, and this is the closest Jane Austen comes to the Romantic poets, as Bloom and Woolf have argued, and it underlines her implicit argument that reading and interpreting the world as a text is of primary importance for an ethical life. The pain of listening to the conversation of Frederick and the Musgrove sisters is twofold: it pains Anne to hear them to be so lively, while she herself is sad, and she wants to be solitary like the Wordsworthian character in nature. Anne then overhears a conversation between Frederick and Louisa about herself. Jane Austen makes Anne overhear quite a lot of vital information about herself more than once, for the author seems to make Anne hear and contemplate what she has heard, in solitude. At this instant, it is about Anne’s past life while he has been away: Frederick finds out from Louisa that Charles has proposed to Anne and has been rejected. His interest in a man in her life gives Anne some faint hope, but Lady Russell’s presence mars the scene. Louisa says that her parents have thought, “Charles might not be learned bookish enough to please Lady Russell, and therefore, she persuaded Anne to refuse him” (111). We know for a fact that it was Anne who has rejected him, partly due to her comparison of Charles with Frederick; so Lady Russell is innocent of this meddling. But it enhances greatly in Frederick’s mind the notion that Lady Russell is an ogre and Anne is nothing but a puppet in her hands.

When Anne misreads Louisa’s attachment to Frederick and his potential feelings for her, Jane Austen makes it quite clear that Anne still loves Frederick. But there will be two more men who appear to be interested in Anne. The first one is Captain Benwick, whom Anne meets in Lyme Regis, when she visits the
town with the Musgroves and Frederick. The town of Lyme in the novel has more than one function; there, Anne realises the charms of the Navy life, when she meets the Harvilles and Benwick. From them, she hears about life on a ship and how the wives share their husbands’ life there, which is something very unusual for the middle and upper classes at the time. She has been attracted by the stories she has heard from Mrs. Croft, but they have been told in a setting familiar to her. Here, for the first time in her life, she is faced with a life-style that is very different from hers and it pleases her. Jane Austen’s strategy in the novel seems to make a Tory radical of Anne; her house and family members which are so engrossed with their title and looks, create a nightmarish world for her so that she can only escape it if she can complete her Bildung. The Navy and its associated values seem to be a safe haven for her. She even goes as far as finding the tenancy of the Crofts at Kellynch-hall more suitable than the residency of her own family there. She thinks that “however sorry and ashamed for the necessity of the removal, she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-hall had passed into better hands than its owners” (141). This does not mean that she has become a revolutionary, though; but she wishes to move out of the family circle with her individualistic Tory feelings and ideas intact.

Her conservative tendencies show in her meeting with Captain Benwick as well. This young man, who grieves for his recently dead fiancée, is shown to be staying at the Harvilles and seems to be an intellectual without a soul mate. When Anne meets him they become intellectual companions immediately and start talking about poetry. Benwick seems to read only Sir Walter Scott and Lord Byron and these poets have captured his imagination completely for they express his sorrow well. Yet, Anne acts as a corrective to Benwick’s reading of Romantic poetry, in a rather nursery governess-like manner:

She ventured to hope he did not always read poetry; and say, that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly.

His looks shewing him not pained, but pleased with this allusion to his situation, she was emboldened to go on; and feeling in herself the right of seniority of mind, she ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study; and on being requested to particularize, mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse
and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances. (121-22)

This is a very hefty reading list; Anne, herself, uses irony directed against herself to deflate her Johnsonian rhetoric and reading list by saying “like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination” (122). Of course, she does not mean that she does not read any of these books, obviously she must have read them, but her reading list is drawn to prevent Benwick from losing himself in poetry so that he can ease the pain for the loss of his fiancee. What Anne is saying is that, like a physician who cannot heal herself, all her reading has failed to ease the pain of having lost Frederick.

Since the course of true love never runs smooth, another impediment in the way of the Anne-Frederick courtship comes into the picture in Bath in the shape of Mr. Elliott, the heir apparent to Sir Walter. Elliott, after a nasty encounter with Anne’s family, for he has rudely refused their earlier invitation to visit the family and the Hall he will inherit eventually, meets them again in Bath. The first impression he gives is wonderful; everyone likes him because he is handsome, rich (a legacy of his lowborn but wealthy first wife), and very pleasant.

Elliott’s main function in the book seems to be the touchstone for the interpretative abilities of the principal characters. At the beginning he is perceived universally at Kellynch to be a very rude person. Then, Anne meets him accidentally in Lyme and her initial impression is that he is “undoubtedly a gentleman, and ha[s] an air of good sense” (127).

When he starts courting his cousins in Bath, Anne tries to understand his motives;

Anne listened, but without quite understanding it. Allowances, large allowances, she knew, must be made for the ideas of those who spoke. She heard it under embellishment. All that sounded extravagant or irrational in the progress of the reconciliation might have no origin but in the language of relators. Still, however, she had the sensation of there being something more than immediately appeared, in Mr. Elliott’s wishing, after an interval of so many years, to be well received by them. In a worldly view, he had nothing to gain by being on terms with Sir Walter, nothing to risk by a state of variance. In all probability he was already the richer of the two, and Kellynch estate would, as surely be his hereafter as the title. A sensible man! And he had looked like a very sensible man, why should it be an open object to him? She could only offer one solution; it was perhaps, for Elizabeth’s sake. (original emphasis 153-54)
Anne’s interpretative abilities work at their best here. She contextualizes his actions in order to understand the man and his motives. Of course, those who have praised him are her father and sister, therefore their reports are quite worthless; since the man has nothing to gain economically from the family, it rules out that motive as well; then Anne concludes mistakenly that the man is after her elder sister. This is a misreading because she ignores the social context of the city of Bath. As we have seen in Northanger Abbey’s Bath, it is imperative to have good company there. Anne is given a further clue to interpret him later, when her dull and boring distant cousins the dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter the Honourable Miss Carteret appear in the city. The Elliots, the father and Elizabeth, go into paroxysms of pleasure to call and fawn on these people who have such a mouthful of titles, however obtuse they are. Anne finds them quite boring and starts to question the people whose sense she trusts. Elliot’s response is quite explicit: the Dalrymples are good company, he says

[it] requires only birth, education and manners, and with regard to education is not very nice. Birth and good manners are essential; but a little learning is by no means a dangerous thing in good company, on the contrary, it will do very well. ... Will it not be wiser to accept the society of these good ladies ... and enjoy all the advantages of the connexion as far as possible? You may depend upon it, that they will move in the first set in Bath this winter, and as rank is rank, your being to be related to them will have its use in fixing your family (our family let me say) in that degree of consideration which we must all wish for. (162-63)

Jane Austen reveals to the reader what sort of a man Elliot is; that he is as bad a social snob as Sir Walter, that he is an out and out self-seeking opportunist; and his words here show quite explicitly why he seeks and cultivates his cousins’ company for a good time in Bath. But Anne fails to read this and accepts his words without agreeing with them. Her clue should have been his reversal of Pope’s quotation, as ours is, that a little learning is a dangerous thing, especially when it is sacrificed for “good” but shallow company. We will learn later in the book that Elliot has no interest in Elizabeth and is interested in them for “good company,” as well as other, more sinister and selfish reasons.

Lady Russell’s interpretation of Elliot is quite different from that of others as well. She allies initially with the Elliots, as her decorum and good sense dictates, in condemning Elliot’s rude refusal to be associated with them early in the book. But, since Sir Walter, Elizabeth, and Mary are always fickle in their likes and dislikes and unthinkingly accept the superficial polish of
anyone if it suits them without thinking about it, she remains faithful to her original dislike, even after the Elliots change their mind about their cousin. Yet Jane Austen’s irony plays a trick on Lady Russel to reveal us her inconsistency. Earlier in the book Mary hints that Captain Benwick might call on Anne as a suitor and asserts that Lady Russell will not like him. Lady Russell’s response is that she is “determined not to judge him before” she meets him (147). A few minutes later, when Mary gushingly admires Mr. Elliot, she reverses her stand and judges Mr. Elliot with the words: “He is a man ... whom I have no wish to see. His declining to be on cordial terms with the head of his family has left a very strong impression in his disfavour with me (147). Anne will later recall all these inconsistencies and will have a more complete picture of Lady Russell who will in time reverse her judgement of the man and state that “I only mean that if Mr. Elliot should some time hence pay his addresses to you, ... I think there would be every possibility of your being very happy together. A most suitable connection everyone must consider it—but I think it might be a very happy one” (171). When Anne questions their suitability, she becomes ruthless in her persuasion and brings forth her sense of her family, Kellynch-hall, and her dead mother. These show how strong-willed the woman is and how badly she misreads Elliot. For her, persuasion is not for the benefit of Anne but a test of her will; and it is not done intelligently and imaginatively for she never suspects Elliot, unlike Anne.

Anne’s interpretation of Elliot is that he is “rational, discreet, polished—but ... not open. There [is] never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others” (173). This is a very Romantic reading of the man; Anne continues with her suspicions about Elliot and says that he is “too generally agreeable. Various were the tempers in her father’s house, he pleased them all. He endured too well” (173). We will see that his being “too generally agreeable” is not due to his interest in Elizabeth, as Anne thinks or due to his interest in Anne, as Lady Russell thinks, nor is it not even purely for social snobbery, as the readers are led to believe. The truth of the matter is revealed by Anne’s friend Mrs. Smith:

Mr. Elliot is a man without heart or conscience; a designing, wary, cold-blooded being, which thinks only of him; or any treachery that could be perpetrated without risk of his general character. He has no feelings for others. Those whom he has been the chief cause of leading into ruin, he can neglect and desert without the smallest compunction. ... Oh! he is black at heart, hollow and black! (206)

This correct, decorous man is exposed even in writing, when a letter he has written to the late Mr. Smith is produced. Yet, Anne has already interpreted the
incongruous way he has been pleasant; she has the ability to penetrate Elliot’s “exterior polish and seeming discretion in order to get at the real man beneath” (J. Hardy 119). Furthermore, it is revealed that his main interest in the Elliots has been caused by his desire to stop the future marriage of Sir Walter, so that he can inherit his title and estates.

As Anne proves herself to be a better hand, than most of her companions, in imaginative reading of texts, we come to the denouement of the novel where all the various strands are tied together and the novel ends happily. She has improved her interpretive skills and we see her getting better at reading. The most significant point at which the events are untangled for our hero and heroine is the news of Louisa Musgrove and James Benwick’s engagement. At one stroke two impediments for the protagonists are removed: Frederick learns that Anne had nothing but intellectual curiosity for Benwick and Anne finds out that Frederick feels nothing for Louisa. From this moment on they can start to realise how much they love one another and that the other might respond to this. Jane Austen turns this ceremony into a prolonged and agonising ritual because of its vital importance in their Bildung process. She slowly and carefully makes each protagonist read the other, with difficulty, but with great imaginative power, amidst all the interference from the relatives and friends who crowd their everyday life.

Anne and Frederick have been separated for eight and a half years due to a series of misinterpretations. Out of necessity, she has become very careful making sure that her actions and words are not wrongly interpreted. When they meet again at the inn in Bath, they have a private conversation, which starts the process of mutual understanding; after a few banal exchanges she exclaims:

“I am not yet so much changed,” cried Anne, and stopped, fearing she hardly knew what misconstruction. After waiting a few moments he said—and if it were the result of immediate feeling—“it is a period indeed! Eight years and half is a period!” Whether he would have proceeded farther was left to Anne’s imagination to ponder over in a calmer hour. (229-230)

Anne’s fear of “misconstructions” is understandable; they have lost a “period” for wrongly interpreted motives, character, and intentions. Now she wants to ensure that their misunderstandings be reversed so that they can be happy. She is on the verge of seeing once again that he loves her and she does not wish to give an impression that his love is not reciprocated.

It is with great haste and among a great deal of hustle and bustle that Frederick writes a love letter to Anne in the public rooms of an inn. The scene is
brilliant: Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Musgrove talk in loud whispers about the harms of long engagements. Hearing these, Anne feels that the topic could have an application to the long period of understanding and misunderstanding between her and Frederick. He takes note of the subject as well. Then comes a conversation between Mr. Harville and Anne; they argue, again in half whispers, about the constancy of men and women in love. Frederick, while writing a letter to Harville, jots down one to Anne, declaring his love and demanding a response. The way he declares his ardent and passionate love is as good as Darcy's letter and his truth is conveyed to Anne clearly and profoundly. This is a very significant point because we have known from the very beginning of the novel that Anne still loves Frederick but she has never been sure about his love for her. According to Wayne C. Booth, the “major movement” of the novel is “toward her final discovery” which is fulfilled by this letter (251). Anne's interpretation of the letter itself is less interesting than Elizabeth's interpretation of Darcy's letter; yet the letter works in a miraculous way to make her giddy with happiness.

Jane Austen rounds off her novel with great relish: she unites her most mature and intelligent protagonists with a verve, unseen in her other books, and charts their process in learning to read imaginatively so well that the reader is awed by the level of understanding achieved by her characters. Anne's education is complete by the time she moves out of the social milieu in which she has grown up. Instead she has chosen to adopt the naval families as her new milieu for they seem to be more intelligent, warmer, and morally elevated than the petty families in the Baronetage.
CONCLUSION:

"Understanding," according to K. K. Collins, "is just that: standing under, a support in words of another’s claim in words" (16). We come face to face with the words of others and try to penetrate their linguistic media with words. Jane Austen presents her characters as they try to understand the world in which they live, by reading and interpreting the texts available to them. According to Collins they are made to read and interpret these texts, or in other words, or her novel characters are made to treat them as linguistic media. In these texts, as I have tried to show, Jane Austen constructs meanings on more than one level; on one level, the incurably shallow characters of the novels remain on the surface, and due to their interest (moral stupidity) or shortcomings (intellectual stupidity) fail to go beyond the surface.

On another level, we see the existence of certain realities that lie under the surface (and this claim is made at the risk of facing the Deconstructionist wrath which will simply call this “belief” in realities and meanings that lie under the surface simply a metaphysical fallacy, following the Wildean aphorism “All art is at once surface and symbol” (17)). Gerald Bruns calls the act questioning of “this subsurface reality” as “the concern ... with what is hidden and with the task of bringing it into the open” or in other words “the task of interpretation: the so-called hermeneutical task” (112). Bruns adds that, “what is called hermeneutics occupies this middle ground between what is hidden and what is open and transparent to all” (112). Jane Austen, according to Bruns, deals with this middle ground and makes her major characters to read the middle ground imaginatively so they can attain a moral intelligence. Therefore, Jane Austen’s moral assuredness is more imaginative than the ordinary, garden-variety morality of the eighteenth century; it is something, which is achieved with great care and subtlety in negotiating meanings of the texts and with an imaginative re-interpretation of these texts. Of course, if we read Alexander Pope or Samuel Johnson, the greatest eighteenth-century poets, we see the same imaginative process is demanded of us for what is poetry but an invitation to an imaginative reading of poetic figures constructed by the poet. This is something John Keats finds in Shakespeare in the nineteenth century, and by implication, wishes to see in all the poets, the quality he terms as “Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Gittings 261, original emphasis). However strange it may appear at first to any reader of Jane Austen, a reader who is imbued with a firm belief in facts and reason page after page, it is still in the nature of imaginative reasoning and imaginative interpretation to be able to
stand in the middle ground of “uncertainties, Mysteries and doubts” and negotiate the meaning of the text without reaching “after fact and reason.” For Jane Austen, as well as Pope and Johnson, “reason” has stood supreme; yet thoughts are, as Wordsworth says in his “Preface,” the “representatives of our past feelings” (871).

In *Sense and Sensibility*, seemingly the most anti-Romantic of her novels due to the antithetical (or “semi-opposing nouns” as Roger Gard jokingly mentions (70)) title, Marianne and Elinor and all the people around them struggle to survive as they misinterpret each other’s actions and speeches. Elinor Dashwood, who at first appears to represent the concept of “sense” in the novel, hopes to see in her younger sister Marianne, the embodiment of early Romantic “sensibility,” a change that will lead the latter to “settle her opinions on the reasonable basis of common sense and observation; and then they may be more easy to define and to justify than they now are, by anybody but herself” (86). This sisterly rebuke of unreasonable, anti-social, sensible behaviour, however, does not make Elinor a simple mouthpiece for the ideas of the Age of Reason or of a student of Alexander Pope and Doctor Johnson. Both sisters experience various degrees of cruelty in their society in the novel, which are exhibited by the ruthless lies, selfishness, and pettiness; and they suffer together, though in different ways, so they learn to interpret what they come across.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, both Marianne and Elinor suffer and form and reform their interpretative abilities because of the social and economic realities observed in the book that interprets the social history of England at that time. In Raymond Williams’s words:

> The Dashwoods are a settled landowning family, increasing their income by marriages, and enlarging the settlements of their daughters. They are also enclosing Norland Common, and buying up neighbouring farms; the necessary cashing of stocks for enclosure and engrossing effect the rate of family’s immediate improvement. (20)

The novel is imbued in this fashion with the most important socio-economic and political changes in England after the French Revolution.

Marilyn Butler, in her *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, argues that Austen divides her characters in terms of Tory anti-Jacobinism and Romantic, self-centred Whiggery. This is done in order to ground Austen's work in the political divisions she observes in England at that time. Elinor and Marianne, Butler argues, are represented “in terms of rival value systems” (184). This dichotomy is then generalised to all of Austen novels: The “Jacobin” characters,
which are desperate for social and economic security in the world of the novels, seek to disturb the old fashioned poise of the “anti-Jacobin” characters. This vague and critically unphilosophical approach encompasses the Thorpes in *Northanger Abbey*, Willoughby and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*, Frank Churchill in *Emma*, the Crawfords in *Mansfield Park*, Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*.

Butler’s argument seems to ignore some of the most basic tenets of pro-Jacobin writers of English literature: William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who in their youth supported the French Revolution, have delineated some of the most important issues discussed by Butler. If we allow for Butler’s division of society, which has its foundation in social and economic theories, we are to meet certain “romantic” characters mentioned above in the novels and all the heroines of Austen must, according to Butler, end up in the Tory, anti-Jacobin camp. This political division of the fictional characters into two presents a major problem though: If we look at the intellectual climate of Austen’s time we observe that it is the Jacobins who seem to favour imaginative engagement with the world.

Butler’s simplistic dichotomy, according to Claudia M. Johnson, stems from her reading of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which has provided “conservative novelists with their paradigms, character types, and catchwords” (4). In Butler’s view, Austen is a conservative novelist because she favours the anti-Jacobin camp over the progressive political ideology.

Marianne, for Butler, is a woman of sensibility and therefore, she is “independent from the dominant mores of her society” (Johnson 50). She rebels against the patriarchal, land-based order and criticises it. But “the destiny assigned to romantic heroines is betrayal—and this at the hands of ‘respectable’ country gentleman,” says Johnson (50).

It is a curious plot that Jane Austen seems to have constructed: Marianne, according to Butler, is a romantic woman is betrayed by a landowning Willoughby who has formed a previous attachment and marries a very rich woman. Because she could not control her feelings and impulses, she seems to have deserved what she got. Butler’s misogynist reading contrasts interestingly with Elinor’s story; she is a paradigm for sense and modesty, yet she is also betrayed by a member of landed society Edward Ferrars who has formed a previous attachment with another woman “out of the idleness endemic to landed gentlemen” (Johnson 57). This woman Lucy Steele is in her turn betrayed because Edward Ferrars marries Elinor. Lucy is one of the most pro-Jacobin characters, for it is she who tries to undermine the established order of landed
classes and also the patriarchal order. She does so by being a calculating person but we reserve our judgement because we are also aware that she acts in such manner in order to survive. As we see in these examples, it is the landed gentlemen, starting with John Dashwood, stepbrother to the sisters, who undermine the patriarchal family and order of the Tory England because the time has changed and the landed Tory gentry must do something to keep up the patriarchal society that is socially and politically beneficial for them.

Marianne and Elinor start from very different modes of behaviour but Austen makes them arrive at similar grounds, after very painful Bildung processes so they can learn to interpret the world in which they live more imaginatively. Imagination or the image-making process is an activity of the mind, which works on the data or objects and changes or “recreates” them, as Coleridge states (I 202). This activity is closely connected with the reading process, as I have been arguing, and only through imagination a character in Jane Austen novels can become an ethical being. Coleridge’s secondary imagination is the faculty that is in the process of development in Jane Austen’s major characters for them to be able to interpret the texts around them in the novels whether these are presented to them in the shape of conversation, events, or the world in general.

It is true that Butler’s argument is correct in that the parvenu characters do adopt superficial and shallow terminology of the Sensibility Movement and they pretend to be affiliated to the Romantic Movement. Yet this brings about a two-fold problem: On the one hand, these supposedly Romantic characters do not have an iota of the imaginative powers which will elevate them from the cash-nexus, if we use Carlyle’s words. They try to take part in the cash-nexus and for their selfish reasons have suppressed or misused their imaginative powers, as I have shown in Northanger Abbey’s Isabella and John Thrope. These two characters struggle for the social and economic status denied to them by the aristocratic landowning class together with the newly risen commercial bourgeoisie. So they become bland, superficial, and egotistical parvenus who try to grab a place for themselves by being greedy. On the other hand, anti-Jacobin characters—and all the heroines of Jane Austen always end up in this category after a short hesitation in the other camp—do not pass through a Coleredian transformation. Jane Austen’s main characters, however, go thorough an imaginative education that is similar to the passage cited from Coleridge, or a Bildung from a passive perception of the things to an imaginative activity that will diffuse, dissolve, and dissipate all that is learned through “fancy.”

In Emma, Emma Woodhouse’s magnificent and energetic ability to misunderstand and misinterpret everything around her is called both by herself
and by those around her as her “imagination”; surely this is nothing but “fancy” as Coleridge describes it. Emma’s fancies for creating a happy small world in her genteel neighbourhood at Highbury begins when she stops to read books and to educate herself as understood by a remark of Mr. Knightley:

But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (65-66)

As in Knightley’s words, instead of reading her texts (and they need not be books) diligently, with “industry and patience,” Emma is to fancy silly matchmaking projects that will misfire because she fails to “understand” or interpret human beings, their emotions and attachments, and their words.

One of the funniest matchmaking episodes in the novel involves Frank Churchill and Emma herself. She fancies that Churchill is in love with her, as she sat drawing or working, forming a thousand amusing schemes for the progress and the close of their attachment, fancying interesting dialogues, and inventing elegant letters; the conclusion of every imaginary declaration on his side was that she refused him. (268)

This scene, invented by Emma, is, of course, without any foundation; she misunderstands completely that Churchill is in love with another and his words addressed to her have been to point out that affair (J. Hardy 94). It is still fascinating to see her fertile fancy working and creating scenes out of nothing; yet these are clichés that can hardly be called the product of Coleridge’s “secondary imagination.”

Knightley’s reaction to what passes between Jane Fairfax and Churchill is very different: Mr. Knightley, as the narrator points out, began to suspect [Churchill] of some double-dealing in his pursuit of Emma. That Emma was his object of appeared indisputable. Every thing declared it; his own attentions, his father’s hints, his mother-in-law’s guarded silence; it was all in unison; words, conduct, discretion, and indiscretion, told the same story. But while so many were devoting him to Emma, ... Mr. Knightley began to suspect him of some inclination to trifle with Jane Fairfax. ... [B]ut there were symptoms of intelligence between them ... symptoms of admiration on his side, which, having once observed, he could not persuade himself to think entirely void of meaning, however he
might wish to scape any of Emma's errors of imagination. ... [H]e had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place. (340)

Knightley's interpretation of what he observes is an imaginative activity, as Jane Austen makes him utter a line from William Cowper's poem a few lines below: "Myself creating what I saw." He creates something, an interpretation, which no one has yet observed; all the "stories" told about Churchill differ from his conclusion. His "meaning" is derived from the steady, industrious contextualizing of one look Churchill has given to Jane, which a supposed admirer of Emma must not do.

Knightley also compares his imaginative interpretation of the scene with that of Emma's usually mistaken, yet charming, blunders of interpretation; it is, therefore, necessary for Emma to learn how to employ her imagination like Cowper and Knightley and how to interpret people and events, the texts available to her.

Emma, in her learning process, exists in, and goes beyond, a community that has spoilt her. Her father's foolish arguments and the neighbourhood's inane activities create a milieu for her that is both stifling and comfortable. Without a thought, she securely lives in this milieu, which has been provided by a life of genteel and dull landowning conservatism. The Woodhouses have little land but Emma is expected to inherit thirty thousand pounds "from other sources," as Jane Austen rather vaguely states. Yet, this vagueness does not stop the author delineating a complex economic and social structure in the book.

Establishing that this is "no single settled society" Raymond Williams's argument that this society is

an active complicated sharply speculative process: of inherited and newly enclosing and engrossing estates; of fortunes from trade and colonial and military profit being converted into houses and property and social position; of settled and speculative marriages into estates and incomes" (21).

This sweeping statement makes sense when we test it in relation to each novel; but to ignore it, in order to make an argument for Jane Austen's "conservatism" is too simplistic. As we see in Emma, Frank Churchill plays the game like most of the characters in Jane Austen's oeuvre, to gain an upper hand in the settled and speculative marriage market. He does so more ruthlessly because he cannot
afford to use his imagination in the patriarchal order that values family values and continuity as well as the "marriage market" that is necessary to sustain itself.

In *Mansfield Park*, the young heroine Fanny is a more subdued character than the exuberantly fanciful Emma is. Tony Tanner calls her "timid, silent, unassertive, shrinking," and "almost totally passive" (137). It is the only novel, Tanner argues, in which the heroine does not seem to go through a learning process, a Bildung, even though the book starts with Fanny as a child, as in most Bildungsromans. Tanner's argument looks at the Bildungsroman concept rather narrowly. In order to see the Bildungs process, we must see the journey of Fanny from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park as a quest of the problematic individual in her relatively poor biological family. Fanny's journey in life (and in Mansfield Park), after being adopted by the Bertrams, is conducted among the usual domestic setting of a Jane Austen novel. It is exceedingly claustrophobic (despite the spaciousness and formal beauty of the estate), and it is peopled by morally stupid (like Lady Bertram and her daughters) and vicious (like Mrs. Morris) characters. Fanny, the timid child, grows up in this household to become a moral force by leaving home, then growing up in Mansfield Park, and then visiting Portsmouth once again to assess what she has learned and accomplished. Tanner's other argument, which has more validity, is that it is Edmund Bertram, Fanny's cousin, who goes through an education before his ordination as a priest guided by the all-seeing, imaginatively understanding, and morally sound Fanny. However, Tanner puts too much emphasis on Jane Austen's creation of the Mansfield Park as the locus of rural-Tory-dixhuitiémme moral and reasonable behaviour where its guardians (the Bertrams) fail to keep it as an oasis in the world dominated by London commercialism and its accompanying loosening of morals.

Raymond Williams argues that:

Thus it would be easy to take Sir Thomas Bertram ... as an example of the old settled landed gentry to be contrasted with the new "London" ways of the Crawfords (this is a common reading), were it not for the fact that Bertram is explicitly presented as what Goldsmith would have called "a great West Indian": a colonial proprietor in the sugar island of Antigua. The Crawfords may have London ways, but the income to support them is landed property in Norfolk, and an uncle who is an admiral has brought them up. (19)

The problem of reading with which we come face to face here is quite significant: In the novels, we come across these characters who seem to disrupt the established order and they all seem to share these "new 'London' ways." According to this interpretation then, London becomes synonymous with the economic values of the colonialist, industrial-capitalistic locus. However, as
Williams argues, the Crawfords do not partake in the capitalistic bourgeois economy; and as in *Mansfield Park*, they are even more innocent of these “sins,” when compared with Sir Bertram. Yet they struggle actively, desperately, and even avariciously to disrupt the moral and economic order of the seemingly genteel rural status quo, as I will discuss below.

Edward Said, in his seminal book *Culture and Imperialism*, argues that we fail to read the ethical aspects of *Mansfield Park* fully because we lack the geographic understanding of the novel. He says that “[a]fter Lukacs and Proust, we have become so accustomed to thinking of the novel’s plot and structure as constituted mainly by temporality [historical in Lukacs and inner in Proust] that we have overlooked the function of space, geography, and location” (101). Said then expands this thesis further by foregrounding the economic basis of the Bertram household, that is the Antigua sugar plantations and the slave trade that sustains it. Said’s crucial question at this point is: “How are we to assess Austen’s few references to Antigua, and what are we to make of them interpretatively?” (106). This interpretative problem is essential, in a way, to our discussion as well. If we are to chart out Fanny’s Bildung, or her learning the ability to interpret the texts available to her, we must see how she interprets the problem of British imperialism and its inhumane practices, which result in the aesthetic and moral perfection of *Mansfield Park*. Said’s solution to this problem is that Austen is aware of the fact that “no matter how isolated and insulated the English place (e.g. *Mansfield Park*), it requires overseas sustenance” (107). We too must understand the social, political, and economic dynamics of the novel in order to interpret it, or to put it in more comprehensive contexts.

Fanny then becomes the moral guardian of *Mansfield Park*. Yet there is something more than moral soundness in Fanny; it can be termed as an imaginative interpretation of what she hears and sees. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche tries archly to give a definition of morality as merely an interpretation of certain phenomena—more precisely, a misinterpretation. Moral judgments, like religious ones, belong to a stage of ignorance at which the very concept of the real and the distinction between what is real and imaginary, are still lacking; thus “truths,” at this stage, designates all sorts of things which we today call “imaginings.” Moral judgments are therefore never to be taken literally. (49)

If we take Nietzsche’s words at face value, he points out the nature of moral judgements, whatever he thinks about them. As always, the philosopher follows the poet in formulating his ideas. Jane Austen’s Fanny makes moral judgements that are new, fresh and contain futurity for they re-evaluate the
judgements of previous generations imaginatively for the future. Jane Austen’s strategy for *Mansfield Park* and all her novels seem to make her characters learn to read the “truths” imaginatively and she seems to be inviting us to go through the same process.

Reading novels seems to be an engagement with their forms; Lukacs expounds this activity and its implications as follows:

in all other genres ...[the] affirmation of a dissonance precedes the act of form giving, whereas in the novel it is the form itself. That is why the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in the creative process of the novel is different from what it is in other kinds of literature. There, ethic is a purely formal pre-condition which, by its depth, allows the form-determined essence to be attained and, by its breath, renders possible a totality which is likewise determined by the form and which, by its all-embracing nature, establishes a balance between the constituent elements ... In the novel, on the other hand, ethic—the ethical intention—is visible in the creation of every detail and hence is, in its most concrete content, an effective structural element of the work itself. (72)

Lukacs’s argument is that reading and interpreting a novel signifies an analysis of all its details for they contain the ethical concerns of the author in every detail. The novel genre, by its nature a creation for and by the bourgeois-capitalist system, contains a “dissonance” and the reader of the novel is constantly invited to read the details as an ethical act.

In the world of *Mansfield Park* one of the most important interlopers is Mary Crawford (Tanner 146). Her defiance of the norms of a “conservative” society is literal and she fails to understand them. She is a beautiful, well-educated, talented, and very amusing woman in quest of excitement and, of course, a brilliant marriage. While in conversation with Edmund, Mary makes a stale, and much rehearsed, pun about her uncle the admiral; we then read the following conversation, which takes place the next day between Fanny and Edmund:

“Well, Fanny, and how do you like Miss Crawford now?” said Edmund the next day, after thinking some time on the subject himself. “... very much. I like to hear her talk. She entertains me; and she is so extremely pretty, that I have great pleasure in looking at her” (47).
Here, the cousins look at the same figure or the same text and try to interpret her. According to the narrator, Edmund’s question has been formulated by “thinking some time on the subject.” Fanny’s first response is rather timid and guarded and only describes Mary and gives the new acquaintance’s effect on her rather superficially. Then, with more self-interest, for he is falling in love with Mary, Edmund asks Fanny’s interpretation of the things Mary has said. Fanny’s answer is quite to the point, “Oh! yes, she ought not to have spoken of her uncle as she did. ... An uncle with whom she has been living so many years, and who, whatever his faults may be, is so fond of her brother, treating him ... quite like a son” (47-8). With the use of ethical “ought not to” imperative, we are given the ethical norms of Fanny; but she sees and interprets the words of Mary differently from Edmund. His reaction to these words is expressed by the words “very wrong” and “very indecorous” (48); Fanny corrects him by using the expression “And very ungrateful, I think” (48). Fanny’s moral outlook is not literally or dogmatically rigid; she listens carefully to what people say and then judges the texts as finely as she can. Her argument in plotting out Mary’s moral failings, or we may call it the latter’s inability to interpret, is refined further. Edmund argues at first that “it is natural and amiable that Miss Crawford should acquit her aunt entirely” of the blame of her conduct; and then he does not “censure [Mary’s] opinions; but there certainly is impropriety in making them public” (original emphasis 48). Fanny’s response to this, after “a little consideration,” is brilliant: “Do you think ... that this impropriety is a reflection itself upon Mrs. Crawford, as her niece has been entirely brought up by her?” (48). Naturally, Fanny’s position here is less then totally unselfish, for she is in the process of falling in love with Edmund and she does not respond to the object of her interpretation, that is Mary Crawford and her words, quite impartially. It is quite clear, however, that Fanny can contextualize the behaviour and speech of Mary better than Edmund who “has proved himself throughout [the novel] to be a bad listener” of people, including Fanny (J. Hardy 73).

Barbara Hardy in her acclaimed study on Jane Austen, she examines the flow of Austen’s weaving of the storytellers and the listeners and makes this comment about Fanny: “She learns to use fact and idea for the purpose of self-understanding and a sense of the world. Her versions of experience have certainty, form, and life. ... Fanny learns the lessons of imagination by listening” (92). It is necessary to point out that this learning process is self-taught and it is gained by Fanny’s potential for moral imagination. However, Fanny teaches Edmund how to interpret the worldly, commercial-minded people. He learns about Fanny’s love for him and his calling in the church demands a rigorous understanding of texts, religious or otherwise.
The Thorpes in *Northanger Abbey*, Willoughby and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*, Frank Churchill in *Emma*, the Crawfords in *Mansfield Park*, Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mrs. Clay and Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion* are desperate figures who try to survive in a socio-economic system that is changing much faster than an individual can cope with. They seem ruthless, vicious, and thoughtless about others’ well being because the new system leaves very little ground for them to exist with the trappings they have been accustomed to or expected to achieve. Even a character like Sir Bertram, who is the representative of the established patriarchal order, is shown to be in struggle to keep his fortune and income intact by his business trip to Antigua. They all need to ignore the old systems of belief and the old moral codes because these systems of thought are becoming obsolete very fast in their life and they have to survive and adapt to the new by any means. They are not unethical because they are evil or stupid but they need the new amoral system for their survival. We see Jane Austen’s mastery as she delineates the negative aspects of these characters. She is not criticising them because they are rebelling against the old order, but they lack the imaginative ability to create a new moral and ethical order within the changing world, as her protagonists try to do.

In this study, I have tried to trace through three novels of Jane Austen how the reading and interpretation of texts by her characters are delineated. This study is only the beginning of a vast array of interpretative problems that can be found in the works of Jane Austen and Hermeneutic literary criticism will be busy with such tasks.

Different critics have commented on Jane Austen but I have found very little that has been said about problems of reading in her novels. *Northanger Abbey* has always been regarded as a secondary work and with the exception of the Feminist critics no one has paid any attention to Catherine Morland’s reading abilities and how they change as she reads the Gothic novels.

Studying the hermeneutical process of Hans-Georg Gadamer, in order to demonstrate Elizabeth Bennet’s Bildung in *Pride and Prejudice*, has proved to be fruitful as well. It enabled me to see the power of language in changing characters in all Jane Austen’s novels as they overcome their prejudices and reaching the sublimity of new selves with their imaginative powers.

In *Persuasion*, reading texts again plays a very important part; and furthermore, we see Jane Austen responding imaginatively to the Romantic poets of her age. In this novel we witness Jane Austen trying to balance the poetic geniuses of her age with the more balanced moral critics of the previous era. Her success stems from her fusing the unfettered imagination of the Romantics with the orderly moral philosophies of the eighteenth century in this
novel. Jane Austen seems to suggest certain ways to survive in the moral and socio-economic chaos of the present age by inventing new ethical values that require a reassessment of the age we live in without forgetting the old.
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