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# Englishes

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**GINES APPLEFORD**

**CULTURE AND IDEOLOGY  
IN JANE AUSTEN'S ENGLAND**

### Introduction

The cultural characteristics of a community or national group are expressed through the manifestations of its culture: through its language, for example, and through the literature produced in a given historical era. Language contributes to fixing aspects of a cultural group through the written word. Different epochs have different language expressions, different languages have different interpretations, different cultures offer different manifestations of 'common sense'. Novels written in a particular historical period are written within the context of that historical era, and use the language that is characteristic of that era.

This essay discusses the novels of Jane Austen in relation to the culture and historical period of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in England and takes into consideration one important facet of the English culture of that era: the Church of England.

### Austen and the Church

Since the publication of Austen's first novel (*Sense and Sensibility*) in 1811 there has been an ongoing debate as to Austen's real position with regard to religion and the Church. She was often accused of lacking religion and was heavily criticized for her predominantly negative portrayal of members of the clergy. The foolishness of Mr. Collins in *'Pride and Prejudice'*, or the vanity and haughtiness of Mr. Elton in *'Emma'* are typical examples of these negative portrayals of the English clergy of her time. In *Mansfield Park* Miss Crawford's views on clergymen are perhaps the most scathing.

A clergyman has nothing to do but to be slovenly and selfish – read the newspaper, watch the weather, and quarrel with his wife. His Curate does all the work, and the business of his own life is to dine (*Mansfield Park*, Ch. 11).

More specifically, Dr. Grant in *'Mansfield Park'* is described by his niece Mary Crawford as 'an indolent selfish Bon vivant, who must have his palate consulted in everything, who will not stir a finger for the convenience of any one ... (*Mansfield Park*, CII. 11).' However, parallel to these harshly negative portrayals of the clergy in *'Mansfield Park'* (one of the later novels) are

Austen's detailed discussions on what a clergyman should be. This would lead us to believe that Austen's critical portrayals of the clergy in her novels, counter-balanced by her thoughts on what the clergyman should be are the reflections of a religious person criticising individuals in the church of whom she disapproves. For example, in the Church that Austen believes in, the clergyman should be 'constantly resident' in his parish. Sir Thomas Bertram, referring to Edmund, maintains that a clergyman:



Jane Austen

'... knows that human nature needs more lessons than a weekly sermon can convey, and that if he does not live among his parishioners and prove himself by constant attention their well-wisher and friend, he does very little either for their good or his own (Mansfield Park: Ch 12)'.

A large portion of the narrative in Austen is what Bakhtin describes as *free indirect style* (1981) where the words and thoughts of the characters are reported by the narrator in a way that the reader is left in doubt as to whether the words are those of the narrator or of the protagonist. With this *free indirect* prose style that she chose for her novels, Austen was able to enhance and express her gift for parody and irony. For Burrows (1997: 178), in Austen's novels 'interpretative commentary is usually associated with disjunctions, often ironical in cast, between dialogue and narrative.' Through Emma's train of thought, for example, we are shown the patronising pretentiousness of Mr. Elton (what the church should not be) after his marriage to the wealthy Augusta.

'He had gone away deeply offended - he came back engaged to another - and to another as superior, of course, as under such circumstances what is gained always is to what is lost. He came back gay and self-satisfied, eager and busy, caring nothing for Miss Woodhouse, and defying Miss Smith.'

'... ; he had not thrown himself away – he had gained a woman of £10,000 or thereabouts; ...'

'He had caught both substance and shadow-both fortune and affection, and was just the happy man he ought to be; talking only of himself and his own concerns-expecting to be congratulated-ready to be laughed at-and, with cordial, fearless smiles, now addressing all the young ladies of the place, to whom, a few weeks ago, he would have been more cautiously gallant.'

'During his present stay, Emma had barely seen him, but just enough to feel that the first meeting was over, and to give her the impression of his not being improved by the mixture of pique and pretension now spread over his air.'

(Emma: Ch 22)

### Austen and the 'Ideal Reader'

After Austen's death, criticism of her supposedly negative attitude to the Church had become so common that, in 1818 her brother Henry was to state in her defence that she was devoutly religious and that her beliefs were in line with the Established Church in England (Austen, H. 1818). According to Kelly (1997: 167), Jane Austen wrote her works from 'a particular religious-political position, that of a woman involved in and supporting an open coalition of gentry and upper middle classes based on values and teachings of the historic English national church. In doing so she created what could be called the Anglican Romance'.

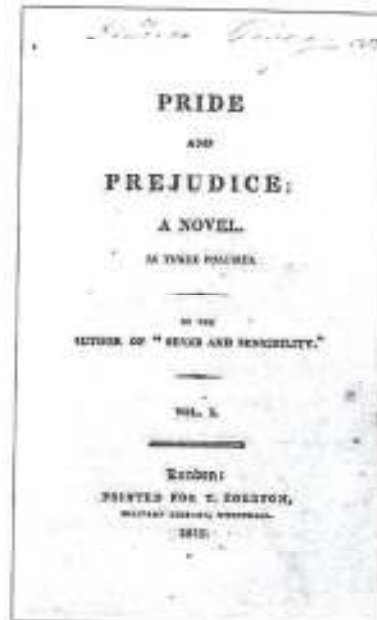
In this sense, Austen's novels may be said to have been directed toward an 'ideal reader'' (Kress, 1985), or, more specifically with regard to Austen's era and environment, to members of the open coalition of gentry and upper middle classes who, amongst other things, adhered, at least in word, to the values



Jane Austen profile

and teachings of the Church of England.

Doody (1997), however, takes the position that this may have been an accommodated decision taken with the aim of being successfully published. For Doody (1997), Austen had had to bring her works into line with current fashion. She had had to undergo a kind of 'authorial revolution'. In order to be published 'Jane Austen had to change, in short, from a 1790s writer to a 'Regency' writer', characterized by a 'combination of the traditional 'love story' with the idea of a charming and tastefully pert woman who is a *little* likely to question the *status quo*, but not too much (Doody, 1997:87).' Moreover, according to Doody, 'The challenge that Austen offered contemporary fiction arose from the challenge she herself faced – how to sustain some of her own deeper interests by submitting to the restrictions of the domestic and moral courtship novel as the only available form (ibid: 96).'



First edition of "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen

### Austen, the 'Ideal reader', and the Clergy

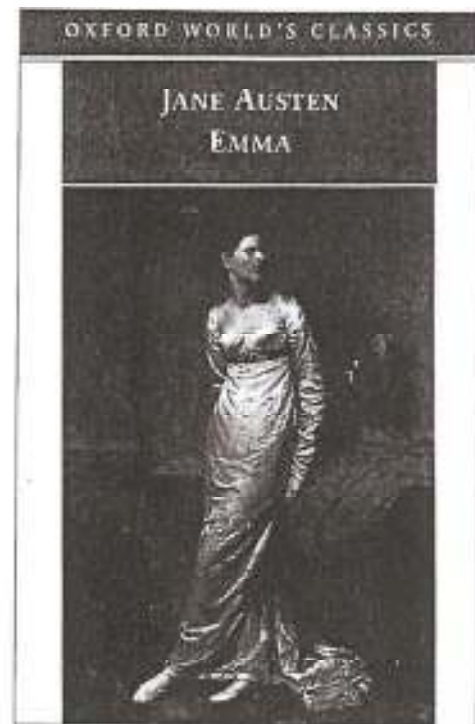
For Kress (1985: 36), the 'ideal reader' is the reader who shares (a priori) the same or similar cultural values (the same 'common sense' values) as the writer of the text. The theories underlying this type of critical linguistics analysis are based on the idea that it is the text that constructs the reader. The reader interprets the text in relation to his/her own cultural stance and the constructor of the text and the reader of the text may already have some presuppositions in common (ibid, 1985). According to Kress's theory (1985) linguistic processes can act to create and reinforce socio-cultural practices. According to Kress (1985: 36), therefore, linguistic and social processes are closely intertwined and there is a vital interrelation between culture and language.

If Jane Austen was writing her novels for an 'ideal reader', that is, the reader belonging to the same or a similar social class to herself with the same or similar social and 'common sense' values, some of the theories of the

critical linguistics school of thought may be applied to her writing, focusing, in particular, on the restricted social settings, the restricted choice of protagonists and the narrative style. According to Kelly, for example, 'by keeping to a relatively narrow range of character types Austen both concentrates her social satire and emphasises moral discernment and ethical interaction in daily life and in local rural society. Such interaction was seen as the main arena of religious practice and such a social space was the typical stronghold of the Church of England (Kelly, 1997: 161).'

Kelly's theory that 'Austen's novels can be read as representing the protagonist's destiny according to the Anglican view of the human condition' (Kelly, 1997: 165), may seem difficult to reconcile with some of her parodies of the English clergy. Some of Austen's most negative characters are connected with the clergy. One of the principal objects of the comedy and irony in her works is the clergyman, often portrayed as a parasite (Wickam) or a buffoon (Mr. Collins). She is capable of treating the clergyman protagonists in her novels with unsparing satire. She was merciless in her satirical humour aimed at certain members of the clergy and had a gift for showing her disapproval through the dialogue of the protagonists in her novels.

One facet of Austen's prose style has been described as double register. A style in which the author's voice criticises indirectly, a style where there is no ever-present narrator taking a position or commenting on the characters, but, a narrative voice that limits itself to connecting the points of view of the different protagonists and reports the conversations and various positions without judging or giving a definite interpretation of facts (De Zordo, 2002: 11). One example of this is the supercilious, newly wedded Mr. Elton's slight against Harriet in 'Emma' shortly after his return home with his bride Augusta.



"Emma" by Jane Austen



Mr. Elton:

'Miss Smith – oh! – I had not observed – You are extremely obliging – and if I were not an old married man. – But my dancing days are over, Mrs Weston. You will excuse me. Anything else I should be most happy to do, at your command – but my dancing days are over.'

.....

This was Mr Elton! The amiable, obliging, gentle Mr Elton. – She looked around for a moment; he had joined Mr Knightly at a little distance, and was arranging himself for settled conversation, while smiles of high glee passed between him and his wife.'

(Emma: Ch 38)

Austen had close contact with the clergy. Her father and two of her brothers were clergymen and we can deduce that Austen must have come into contact with all kinds of clergymen and their wives. Often, as in the case of Mr. Collins (*Pride and Prejudice*) her judgement is scathing. The figure of Mr. Collins is one of Austen's most unsparing representations of the clergyman in her work. For example, in the following dialogue between Mr. Bennet and Mr. Collins through her portrayal of Mr. Collins Austen presents us with one of her most cutting examples of satire and comedy with regard to the Church and its ministers. Elizabeth Bennet is in the background and participates as witness to the conversation (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 14).

Mr. Collins:

' [ ...]; and you may imagine that I am happy on every occasion to offer those little delicate compliments which are always acceptable to ladies.

[ ...] These are the kind of little things which please her ladyship, and it is a sort of attention which I conceive myself particularly bound to pay.'

Mr. Bennet:

'You judge very properly,' said Mr Bennet, 'and it is happy for you that you possess the talent of flattering with delicacy.

May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?'

The language of this conversation has the formality of the English used by the middle-upper classes of two hundred years ago. It is stiff, formal, and very cautious. For example, the use of the relational modal verb 'may' (Halliday: 1994, 357), in 'you may imagine ...', creates tentativeness in the conversation. It is used in a way that prevents an openness in the exchange between two people whose relationship is not close - nothing in the conversation is direct, or categorical. Bennet disapproves of Mr. Collins and he expresses this disapproval by distancing himself through the use of language, and chiefly through use of the modal verb 'may' ('May I ask whether these pleasing attentions proceed from the impulse of the moment, or are the result of previous study?'). For Stubbs modal verbs can create what he describes as vagueness and this vagueness has a purpose in communication (1996, 202): '... vagueness and indirection have many uses. Politeness is one obvious reason for deviating from superficially clear or rational behaviour.' The linguistic use of 'may' is one way of signalling vagueness to maintain politeness, or in order to maintain a middle class distance as Mr. Bennet does in his conversations with his distant cousin Mr. Collins. Bennet keeps Collins as distant as possible and one way he does this is through 'polite' language - linguistically speaking via the modal verb 'may'.

For example, in the dialogue above we are shown the small-mindedness and stupidity of Mr. Collins (what the Church should not be) through the exchange between Mr. Bennet and Mr. Collins. There is implied criticism, in Austen's irony: a criticism not openly stated, but, conveyed through her dialogue. And the 'common sense' underlying the dialogue is also implied. The reader of the novel is Austen's 'ideal reader', the reader who already shares similar ideas and beliefs with Austen (Bennet and Elizabeth). Austen presumes that she is addressing her story to the 'ideal reader': the 'ideal reader' in the sense that this reader can be assumed to agree with the author (through Mr Bennet and Elizabeth) that Mr. Collins is 'absurd.'



"Mansfield Park" by Jane Austen

Collins:

'They arise chiefly from what is passing at the time, and though I sometimes amuse myself with suggesting and arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions, I always wish to give the most unstudied an air as possible.'

Bennet:

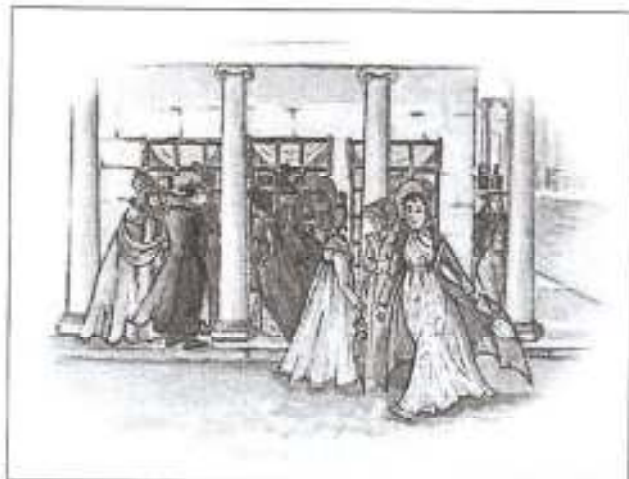
'Mr. Bennet's expectations were fully answered. His cousin was as absurd as he had hoped, and he listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most resolute composure of countenance, and except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his pleasure.'

(Pride and Prejudice: Ch. 14)

## Conclusion

Although Austen directed her writing to the 'ideal reader' it may also be supposed that some of her readers were disturbed by her harsh representations of the clergy. The kind of negative representation of the clergy in Austen's novels was to scandalise some of her readers, especially members of the Church. This kind of questioning on the part of her readers later caused her brother Henry (a member of the clergy) to explain her point of view and to make a point of confirming her deep faith.

It is likely that, from the religious point of view, her examples of the clergy were meant to be an implied criticism of the negative elements in the church and what, in her opinion, the church should not be. Thus, her parodies regarding the clergy implicitly illustrate what she believed the church and religious culture should be, to the extent that many of Austen's representations of



Jane Austen in Bath

the clergy were so critical that they would later provide negative examples of the clergy that would be used by ecclesiastical reformists in their arguments for reform. According to Kelly (1997), in 1837 John Henry Newman<sup>4</sup>, an advocate for spiritual and ecclesiastical reform of the Church of England was to state that Austen's clergy were 'vile creatures'. Later still, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century religious reformers such as J.A. Patten were saying 'we never regret that the days of Jane Austen are gone beyond recall and that her type of clergyman no longer controls the religious life of rural England (Patten, 1931: 315)'.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gramsci, A. (1971) – *Common sense*: '... a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life ...'
- <sup>2</sup> Kress, G (1985), *Linguistic Processes in Sociocultural Practice*, Deakin University Press, Melbourne.
- <sup>3</sup> Gramsci, A. (1971) – *Common sense*: '... a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life ...'
- <sup>4</sup> Newman cited in Southam, B.C., ed. (1968) *Jane Austen: The critical heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.



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