

The Influence of Jane Austen's Works on Societal Attitudes Regarding Women and Marriage, Education, and Slavery from the Early Nineteenth to Twentieth Centuries

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Abstract

People question whether fiction actually has the ability to exert influence on its readers, and as such, fiction's influencing effect on its readers is the main subject of interest in this study. Jane Austen, who was a female author writing in the 1810s, will be used as the foundation of this project. Did her three novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey* exert influence on the attitudes of middle-and upper-class individuals in American and British society regarding the topics: women and marriage, education, and slavery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? By compiling newspaper articles and books dating from the 1810s to the 1910s, my hypothesis, that these books did exert influence on their readers, but only when it was beneficial for the reader, can be tested. This hypothesis anticipates that the reader was in control of how much he/she was influenced by the novels in question. From this study, the general fields of history and English Literature will be shown to be intricately linked, which may result in individuals realizing the need to place a greater emphasis on the interconnectedness of the two fields. In addition, the limits of fiction's ability to influence may assuage fears about fiction's ability to corrupt, brainwash, or influence any individual absolutely. A close examination of many sources from the period of interest shows that the main topic of influence that these three Jane Austen novels had was on education, specifically on English education. Indeed, fiction does seem to have some power of influence over its readers, but that influence is not all-engrossing.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that the written word has great power over the ideals, attitudes and decisions of people in society. Yet, while this is a well investigated aspect for non-fiction, the influence that an author may have through fiction has been less thoroughly examined. The author's indirect suggestion of ideas, how characters are portrayed, and the overarching themes of fiction books alter readers' attitudes towards certain ideas. This influence is supported by Friend's (2010) study where she concludes that literature influences people's attitudes toward "real people, events and situations," despite the nineteenth century belief that fiction was mere entertainment. This current study will focus on Jane Austen and the influence of three of her works. There is research to attest to her influence on modern ideals, but the influence that her books had on individuals in American and British society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains scant. Specifically, this study aims to demonstrate how Jane

Austen's three novels-- *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey*-- influenced middle-and upper-class attitudes in American and British society regarding women and marriage, education, and slavery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The following literature will be used to better understand this influence.

Literature Review

Suloway's (2016) book investigates the many controversial ideas that Jane Austen promoted through her novels. Particularly, Suloway points out the fact that Austen was indirectly highlighting the double standard between men and women when it came to education (2016). Austen, through her heroines, often showed the result of educational neglect when it came to females. In addition, *Mansfield Park* points out the inhumanity of slavery, showing Austen to be a woman who was not afraid to espouse her ideas regarding controversial topics

(Suloway, 2016). This book provides a foundation regarding the many disputed topics of Austen's time that she indirectly comments on, but it generally fails to document the reaction of the society at large.

Pollack-Pelzner's (2013) article looks at the comparison between Jane Austen's works and those of Shakespeare. Jane Austen, especially in *Mansfield Park*, writes of scenes reminiscent of a Shakespearean

work, and often has her characters respect Shakespeare. The fact that individuals were comparing Austen to Shakespeare and other renowned authors speaks to the influence that her novels had on individuals' thoughts regarding education. Austen wrote her novels in an innovative style, which became a staple of education (Pollack-Pelzner, 2013). However, while this article goes into *Mansfield Park*, it omits the other books that this study is interested in.

Kitsi-Matako's (2013) article specifically focuses on *Mansfield Park* and Jane Austen's calling out of individuals' hypocrisy regarding slavery. While it was almost taboo for women to comment on such issues as slavery, Austen defiantly lays bare the inhumanity of English white men in how they treat black slaves (Kitsi-Matako, 2013). On a negative note, this article focuses solely on *Mansfield Park*, and so, cannot fully answer this study's research question.

White (2006) specifically focuses on black and white slavery in Austen's *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. As stated earlier, *Mansfield Park* did draw its readers' attention to their moral hypocrisy, and this was met with resistance, in the form of conscious omission of the novel from important literature reviews that were featured in magazines (White, 2006). Prominent members in American and British society who read the book did not wish for it to be successful, because of the morally right, but financially disastrous, lesson of the novel. Even the publisher of *Mansfield Park*, John Murray, dropped Jane Austen after the first edition of the book, because her book was too politically divisive. In the end, he was afraid that her novel would show its readers the immorality of slavery, which would hurt many of his acquaintances financially, so he decided to no longer publish her book (White, 2006). However, although this novel does show how Austen's books influenced individuals' attitudes regarding slavery, it does not go into the other topics of women and marriage or education.

Brewer's (2015) article is an in-depth study into the fact that quotes from Jane Austen's novels were used repeatedly in the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, which gentlemen started compiling in 1884. This emphasizes the fact that Jane Austen's works influenced the editors of the dictionary in such a way that they decided to use quotes from her works hundreds of times. In effect, the men who compiled the Oxford English Dictionary thought that quotes from Jane Austen's books were worth adding to the dictionary, which would become an educational tool for people in multiple societies for many generations. Therefore, this article shows that Jane Austen was able to influence society's view of

education through her work, by having her novels quoted in one of the most prestigious dictionaries (Brewer, 2015). However, Brewer's article does not attest to the influence on the views of women and marriage or slavery that Austen's works may have had on society.

Mazzeno (2011) outlines Jane Austen's reception in the centuries after she published her works and comes to the conclusion that Austen was most effective at influencing individuals' attitudes towards education. Her influence on the structure of the novel and English education really started to flourish in the 1890s, and she was praised by famous novelists, such as Sir Walter Scott and Sir Walter Raleigh for her extraordinary style of writing (Mazzeno, 2011). Although this book deals with Austen's influence on education, it does not deal with the other topics in-depth, which can be seen as a limitation.

Todd's (2005) book assembles many early responses to Jane Austen's work, representing a general feeling among middle-and-upper-class individuals of American and British society towards Austen's novels. Particularly, responses to *Pride and Prejudice* showed that many men in society used the novel to support existing beliefs about woman and marriage, while other parts were skimmed over when it was not convenient for them (Todd, 2006). The middle-and upper-class individuals seemed to embrace the idea of the benefits of female education that Austen advocated through her novels. In addition, Todd also points out that Austen was compared to Shakespeare in the *Quarterly Review*, and this can be taken to show that many individuals believed that Austen's novels needed to be a part of new educational curriculum that focused on literature (2006). The influence of Jane Austen's novels on attitudes relating to education are explored in the novel, but the other topics that are of interest in this study are skimmed over.

Mooneyham White's (1998) book, which is a compilation of essays written by different individuals, goes into how *Northanger Abbey* influenced individuals' beliefs that if the only education that females received was through reading novels, misunderstanding and disaster would ensue. In addition, another essay argues that *Pride and Prejudice* was Austen's most popular novel, because it advocated widely accepted ideas about women and marriage (Mooneyham White, 1998). Although this gathering of essays goes into general ways Austen's novels influenced individuals' attitudes relating to education and women and marriage, it does not

comment much on the issue of slavery in Austen's works.

Harman's (2011) book goes into the initial reactions to Austen's novels. Notably, when Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* was first published, upper middle-class individuals looked at it as groundbreaking because of the new style of writing. However, unlike the conclusions that other sources have reached, Harman asserts that *Mansfield Park* was the novel that readers were most influenced by, because it espoused an idealized lesson in morality (2011). In addition, *Northanger Abbey* was the book that changed upper middle-class views of female education and writing (Harman, 2011). However, because this book has such a wide scope, insightful details are lacking.

Bautz's (2007) compilation of private letters and diary entries illuminate how the readers of Jane Austen's books in the mid to late nineteenth century reacted to her works. Specifically, there are various instances of fathers writing to their daughters about paying close attention to the lessons that could be found in Jane Austen's works, such as the lesson that women were especially suited for marriage (Bautz, 2007). By having marriage for women be encouraged by Austen, men took Austen's novels to encourage the idea that women were to be submissive to men, which reinforced male superiority. By using primary sources, this article effectively counters the argument that was popular in the nineteenth century that fiction was mere entertainment. Bautz's article covers almost all of the aspects of this study, and because it does the largest examination of primary sources out of the sources looked at for this literature review, it is the most helpful and pertinent, although the time frame covered is narrow in scope (2007).

There is not much research that brings together Jane Austen's influence on middle-and-upper-class individuals' attitudes in American and British society concerning subjects such as women and marriage, education, and slavery in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The current study hypothesizes that Jane Austen's three works: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey* did influence societal attitudes in the 1810s to the 1910s, but the way in which these attitudes were influenced by these works was different for each topic. As a counterargument to this hypothesis, Davis (1987) maintains that fiction novels influence readers to the point where they blur fact and reality, whether the reader wants to be influenced or not. According to Davis (1987), fiction has a brainwashing influence on its readers. Instead of believing that the readers are ultimately in charge of the influencing power that

fiction has, this theory asserts that fiction has an overpowering ability to influence that trumps the reader's ability to resist. Without the proper view of how literature influenced individuals' attitudes in the past, people today may misconstrue this relationship between fiction and its influence on its readers, causing people to be fearful of reading fiction due to the hazard of being unintentionally or absolutely influenced. The current study's intent is to show that history and English/literature are closely connected, and that Jane Austen's influence was not all-encompassing. Her readers decided if it was beneficial or not for them to be influenced by her works.

Method

Design: This study had a qualitative design, consisting of archival research. Specifically, this study required the close analysis of primary sources such as newspaper articles and non-fiction books, as well as letters. Going through primary and secondary sources, some written in the nineteenth century, and some in the early twentieth century, I was able to look intentionally for mentions of how the three Austen novels under examination influenced attitudes of middle-and upper-class individuals regarding the topics of interest.

Materials: In order to obtain meaningful results, many primary source documents were consulted. The databases JSTOR and Reader's Guide Retrospective:1890-1932 were accessed as much as possible to help in this. For even more sources, books in the CSU Stanislaus library's 'Jane Austen' section were utilized, in addition to primary sources and articles which were obtained through CSU+. Many of the primary source documents utilized in this study are newspaper articles from *Littell's Living Age* and *Harper's Weekly Magazine*, as well as books that were written in the nineteenth and early twentieth century about Jane Austen's novels (See Appendix A).

Procedure: Utilizing the aforementioned resources, I, as the sole participant, found as many primary sources that time permitted that mention Jane Austen and her three specific novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*. Then, I noted the manner in which the specific topics in the novels, women and marriage, education, and slavery, were dealt with, what attitude target individuals had towards these topics, and how those attitudes were influenced by Jane Austen's works. In short, in order to measure the influence that these Jane Austen works had on individuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I looked at how often these specific works of hers were mentioned, what manner they were referred to in, and if there was any indication that the author of the sources had undergone a change

in attitude that was caused by those specific Austen novels.

Results

I expected the results to show that Jane Austen's three novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey* did influence middle-and-upper-class individuals' attitudes toward women and marriage, education and slavery in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, I expected to find that individuals' attitudes were influenced only when it was beneficial for them. Furthermore, I expected to find that individuals resisted the novels' influence when they believed that their money, well-being, or reputation to be at risk.

After analyzing about fifteen primary sources from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, my hypothesis was proven correct (see Appendix A and Appendix B). Jane Austen's novels: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*, had the most significant effect on upper-middle class individuals' attitude towards education, and her novels made many individuals think about education, particularly English education, in a groundbreaking new way. Her influence on individuals' attitudes toward women and marriage was also clear, but not nearly as significant as her influence on people's attitudes toward education. Analyzing these primary sources did unearth the surprising fact that not one of them mentioned slavery, even when mentioning *Mansfield Park* (see Figure 1 in Appendix B).

These findings supported my hypothesis because it was beneficial for upper middle-class individuals to be influenced by Austen's new way of writing the English novel, and her new approach to education as a whole, because it encouraged society's intellectual growth and achievement. In addition, the finding that Austen also influenced individuals' attitudes about women and marriage through her novels also makes sense within the proposed hypothesis, because the idea that women were best made for marriage kept society stable by keeping a foundational ideal alive, and it also reaffirmed men's dominance in society. Even the fact that there was no mention of slavery in the fifteen primary sources

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analyzed supports my original thesis. It was not advantageous for individuals to adopt the idea promoted by Austen in her novels that slavery was/is immoral because many individuals still made a handsome profit from Caribbean slave labor. If they had allowed themselves to be influenced by Austen's novels promoting the idea that slavery was/is corrupt, their luxurious lifestyle would have become impossible to maintain.

Discussion

From this study, additional knowledge has been gained regarding specific vital aspects of life and history. Regarding education, these results can help people better understand another component of why the studying of novels became common, and why education was transformed around the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, historians will be able to use this study to comprehend another aspect of public opinion towards slavery. Also, these results can help individuals better appreciate the fact that marriage in modern times is not an automatic obligation for women as it was back in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This study once again proves that the written word is powerful, but that it does not have an all-encompassing ability to influence. Additionally, because there is not a conclusive study on Jane Austen's influence on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' members of the middle and upper-classes, these results give important insight into a significant era in history. In addition, this research brings together both fields of history and English/literature, which has rarely been done in the past. Individuals, scholars, and universities can see a need to place more emphasis on the interrelatedness of history and English/literature, and this could ultimately result in curriculum changes.

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Appendix B

Women and Marriage	Slavery	Education
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<p>Evidence</p> <p>This idea was expressly discussed in eight of the fifteen articles that were analyzed.</p>	<p>Evidence</p> <p>There was no direct mention in any of the analyzed documents—only references to the moral of the novel.</p>	<p>Evidence</p> <p>From the fifteen documents analyzed, eleven showed direct influence regarding this topic from Austen’s novels.</p>
<p>Quotes/Phrases</p> <p>Austen’s heroines believe marriage to be their duty and “have too strong a judgment and too strong a sense of humor for their emotions to sweep them off their feet.” (“Jane Austen,” 1898).</p>	<p>Quotes/Phrases</p> <p>“serious moral of the whole work” of <i>Mansfield Park</i> is discussed (Warre-Cornish, 1914).</p> <p><i>Mansfield Park</i> has a “growing tendency to moral on the time, a tendency that points...to didacticism” (Burton, 1909).</p>	<p>Quotes/Phrases</p> <p>“On her was bestowed, though in a humble form, the gift which has been bestowed on Homer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Scott, and a few others...” (Dawson, 1905).</p> <p>“...she achieved with greater perfection...than almost any other English writer with whom we are acquainted. Never was a definite literary field so clearly marked out and so perfectly mastered as by Miss Austen” (Littell, 1870).</p>