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Jane Austen's use of the epistolary method

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JANE AUSTEN'S USE OF THE EPISTOLARY METHOD

BY


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A THESIS
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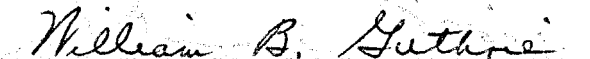
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Early in the history of man, both letter-writing and literary endeavor became a vehicle for his natural need to communicate. A relationship between the purely communicative letter and literature is manifest in the earliest extant examples of our literary heritage, for letters were employed as messages in such early writings as Homer's Iliad, the Bible, and the works of Cicero and Ovid. In addition to its use to convey messages within a literary work, by classical Latin times the letter had grown into an artistic medium in its own right. The art of letter-writing was achieved in great measure by Marcus Tullius Cicero whose influence is noted in the early English letter-writers.¹ From the use of the letter as a means of expression by the cultured and educated grew the need for the didactic letter as a guide to correct letter-writing.

¹
G. F. Singer, The Epistolary Novel (Philadelphia, 1933), p. 13.

Inherent in these early letters, whether informative, rhetorical, or didactic, was the germ for the narrative use,² which is the interest of this paper.

Like the letter itself, letter fiction had a long and varied background. It must suffice here to say that by the end of the seventeenth century in England the letter story was used to relate fictional narratives based on travel, scandal, politics, or love.³ This developmental period of the epistolary novel continued well into the eighteenth century. The figure with whom the movement reached its crescendo was Samuel Richardson (1689-1761), and it is on his contributions that any later study of the epistolary tradition must be firmly based.

One phenomenon in Richardson's youth, his penchant for letter-writing, suggests a basis for his future genius. As a young boy, he penned many love letters for his female friends, becoming their confidant, an experience which was to prove invaluable to him in characterizing his heroines.⁴ He also maintained expansive correspondences of his own, which provided the basis for his ease in

2

Ibid., pp. 20-23.

3

Ibid., p. 61. Examples are: G. P. Marana, Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy (1687), Charles Giddon, Post Boy Rob'd of his Mail (1692-93), Nicholas Breton, Post with a Mad Packet of Letters (1602), and Mrs. Aphra Behn, Love Letters between a Nobleman and his Sister (1684).

4

Albert O. Baugh, A Literary History of England (New York, 1948), p. 952.

handling the epistolary method in his novels. In later life Richardson became a successful printer, in which capacity he was asked by his booksellers to compile a volume of model letters. As the plan for these Familiar Letters evolved, he experimented with the idea of assembling the letters to form a narrative, a method which was becoming popular. Because of their naturalness and credibility, these letters would serve to instruct young people in the ways of the world.⁵ Richardson then conceived the idea of uniting two existing modes: the didactic letter and the narrative letter. Consequently, he interrupted the volume of letters to begin his first novel, Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded.⁶

Because Richardson was proficient and comfortable in writing letters and because the epistolary form was already an established method,⁷ he naturally chose the letter form for Pamela. He was not yet its master, however; this first novel was, in a sense, experimental, and contained many techniques which he later improved. Of the thirty-two letters which constitute the first part of Pamela, for instance, twenty-eight are written by Pamela herself.

⁵ Bliss Perry, A Study of Prose Fiction (Boston, 1902), p. 233.

⁶ William Henry Hudson, A Quiet Corner in a Library (Chicago, 1915), p. 225.

⁷ Helen S. Hughes, "English Epistolary Fiction Before Pamela," Manly Anniversary Studies (Chicago, 1923), pp. 156-169.

Richardson himself realized that this was too much: the sameness of her writing style results in monotony. As the novel progresses, and the epistolary machinery becomes cumbrous, he has Pamela change from letter-writing to recording the events in a journal.⁸ In this attempt at variation there is some relief of the monotony.

In Richardson's second novel, Clarissa, letters are written by four principal characters rather than just one. There are also letters by many of the minor characters. Each character writes in a distinctive style and presents his own point of view; every important event, moreover, is interpreted by more than one character. These letters contrast to give a complete picture of the character of the individual letter-writer as well as to provide variety through the contrast in their styles of writing.⁹ There are, for example, letters by Clarissa, Lovelace, Belford and Miss Howe. Clarissa's elegant letters with their pious undertones are obviously calculated to reform the reader;¹⁰ too many of this type, as in Pamela, would be tedious. In contrast there are Lovelace's exuberant, remorseless epistles, in which he luxuriates in his contemplation of

⁸ Louis Cazamian, "Samuel Richardson," Cambridge History of English Literature (Cambridge, 1913), X, 5.

⁹ Gerard Arthur Barker, "Form and Purpose in the Novels of Samuel Richardson," DA, XXII (1961), 3655.

¹⁰ Singer, p. 75.

sin; his writing style like his personality is lusty and
vital.¹¹ Belford's letters, on the other hand, are didactic
in his attempts to reform Lovelace. They contain perhaps
too much moralizing but give effective descriptions of some
of the poignant scenes, for example, Clarissa's nobility in
the imprisonment scene.¹² Miss Howe's letters contain
inquiries for details from Clarissa and serve an important
function, for Clarissa must satisfy her by communicating
summaries of the events.¹³ The variety and interest of these
letters, which in some way involve the heroine,¹⁴ constitute
a major improvement over Pamela.¹⁵

In his third and last novel, Sir Charles Grandison,¹⁶
though he regresses to some of the same flaws in Pamela,
Richardson continues to improve the epistolary method for
self-analysis and variety.

¹¹ V. S. Pritchett, The Living Novel (New York, 1947),
pp. 23-29.

¹² Ibid., p. 30.

¹³ Ernest A. Baker, History of the English Novel
(London, 1924), IV, 36.

¹⁴ Van Meter Ames, Aesthetics of the Novel (Chicago,
1928), p. 177.

¹⁵ Barker, p. 3655.

¹⁶ F. S. Boas, "Richardson's Novels and their Influence,"
Essays and Studies (Oxford, 1911), II, 59. In Sir Charles
Grandison the heroine writes a number of letters which do
not simulate an actual correspondence; an excessive number
of letters are given by the heroine with no contrasting
letters from others. They are never answered nor expected
to be answered.

Richardson's successful use of the letter as a vehicle for his narrative was to have a far-reaching influence. As many critics have noted, he left little room for further exploration within the epistolary medium, for his letters achieved perfection in revelation of character,¹⁷ in self-analysis and exploration of the psyche,¹⁸ in production of realism,¹⁹ in presentation of dialogue,²⁰ in variation and ease in handling,²¹ in dramatic control of the narrative,²² and in complete objectivity of the author.²³

After Richardson, the epistolary novel was extremely popular both as moralistic and aesthetic literature and remained so until the first part of the nineteenth century.²⁴ During this period hundreds of epistolary novels were written, but few were outstanding, since they were, for the most part, imitative rather than original. Fanny Burney, however, in Evelina (1778) created a novel of

¹⁷ Singer, p. 95.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 97.

²¹ Frank Gees Black, The Epistolary Novel (Eugene, Oregon, 1940), p. 1.

²² Singer, p. 95.

²³ Black, p. 5.

²⁴ Singer, p. 99.

home life that was strikingly original. Like Richardson,
she was an inveterate letter-writer,²⁵ and when she turned
to literature, wrote as naturally in the epistolary mode
as she did in her voluminous diaries and journals.²⁶
She differs from Richardson more in her choice of theme
than in her use of the epistolary method; she was more
interested in the comedy of manners than in exploring
the soul or revitalizing morals.²⁷ Evelina writes her
letters in the refreshingly natural manner of an inex-
perienced young girl introduced into society for the
first time.²⁸ Her letters show an advancement over Rich-
ardson's because they are fewer in number, and the subject
matter is appropriate to a letter.²⁹ Her style, too, is
more ingratiating; it is bright and alive and sparkling
rather than reflective³⁰ or didactic.³¹ Miss Burney does

²⁵ Averyl Edwards, Fanny Burney (London, 1948), pp. 26-27.

²⁶ Bridget G. MacCarthy, The Later Women Novelists (Oxford, 1947), p. 97.

²⁷ Howard Lee German, "Fanny Burney and the Late Eighteenth Century Novel," DA, XVIII (1958), 2127.

²⁸ R. Brimley Johnson, The Women Novelists (London, 1918), p. 15.

²⁹ Harrison Ross Steeves, Before Jane Austen (New York, 1965), p. 217.

³⁰ Austin Dobson, Fanny Burney (London, 1903), p. 72.

³¹ MacCarthy, p. 109.

not maintain the same quality of excellence, however,
in her later novels,³² though her Cecelia was a favorite
of Jane Austen.

It was not only to Fanny Burney, however, but to
Samuel Richardson as well that Jane Austen was to be
indebted. Miss Austen's taste for Richardson was stim-
ulated at an early age, for her novel-reading family
vociferously discussed both his achievements and his
weaknesses.³³ As an admirer of Richardson, she studied
him carefully;³⁴ Sir Charles Grandison became one of her
favorite novels.³⁵ Though she consciously rejected more
from him than she retained in the development of her style,³⁶
there are subtle Richardsonian influences discernible in
her novels.³⁷ Besides the epistolary method to which she
was attracted, she admired Richardson's photographic
reproduction of details in his characterizations; his
acute awareness of the subtlety of human motivation;³⁸

³² Geraldine E. Mitton, Jane Austen and Her Times
(London, 1905), p. 87.

³³ B. C. Southam, Jane Austen's Literary Manuscripts
(London, Oxford University Press), p. 4.

³⁴ Harold Child, "Jane Austen," Cambridge History of
English Literature (Cambridge, 1916), XII, 259.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 265.

³⁶ W. H. Helm, Jane Austen and her Country House Comedy
(London, 1909), p. 50.

³⁷ Child, XII, 265.

³⁸ Baker, VI, 63.

and his interest in improving the epistolary endeavours
of his contemporaries.³⁹

Fanny Burney, as well as Richardson, is said to have
influenced Jane Austen. The extent of her influence is
much debated. We know that Jane Austen read and enjoyed
Miss Burney's domestic novels⁴⁰ but chose to write about
simple country affairs,⁴¹ rather than novels concerned
with sophisticated urban society.⁴² In tone, in sensitivity,
and in characterization, there is some basis for comparison,⁴³
though Miss Austen is by far the greater novelist. As
with Richardson, Miss Burney's skillful use of the epis-
tolary method itself was probably the main reason for⁴⁴
Jane Austen's attraction to the medium.

The influence that the epistolary method of Samuel
Richardson and Fanny Burney had on Jane Austen can be
demonstrated by analyzing her work according to two

³⁹ William Lyon Phelps, The Advance of the English
Novel (New York, 1919), p. 92.

⁴⁰ Wilbur L. Cross, The Development of the English
Novel (New York, 1899), p. 121.

⁴¹ Mitton, p. 87.

⁴² Ibid., p. 95.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴⁴ Helm, pp. 49-50.

divisions: the early experimental works and the completed novels. Her early experiments include: the Juvenilia, or early works, in which she almost exclusively employed the epistolary method; the early works of her mature period in which she continued to experiment with the epistolary style and the first drafts of some of her great novels which were written in the epistolary style but were later revised; the second division includes the six major novels which are not epistolary in method but demonstrate that she retained from her experiments with the form a partiality for using letters within her novels. Because they constitute her major work, this fourth group will be treated in a separate chapter.

Important examples of Jane Austen's early work are A Collection of Letters (c. 1790-1793), Love and Friendship (c. 1790-1793), Leslie Castle (c. 1792), and Lady Susan (1792-1796). A Collection of Letters is a parody of Richardson's Familiar Letters in which sentiment and sententiousness are the chief targets. Even in so unsophisticated a work, Jane Austen displays her own inimitable stamp of genius. Though there are notable

⁴⁵
Black, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁶
Singer, pp. 159-160.

tendencies toward Richardsonian didacticism,⁴⁷ she maintains a light, satiric touch in the novel as a whole. Unlike Richardson's Familiar Letters, which is merely a letter-guide, behind each of Jane Austen's letters is a narrative;⁴⁸ each letter is differentiated by a unique writing style.⁴⁹ The third letter, one of the most famous pieces of her Juvenilia, is conspicuous because there is a more serious tone and because it reveals the genesis of two of her famous characters: Lady Greville, the prototype of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Maria Williams, an early Fanny Price.⁵⁰

In the same manuscript containing A Collection of Letters is another epistolary novel, Love and Friendship, again not a great work, but one which does expose the rudiments of her later genius.⁵¹ For this reason it is often considered as a basis for a study of her novelistic

⁴⁷ Ian Watt, ed., Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1963), p. 54.

⁴⁸ Black, pp. 104-105.

⁴⁹ Southam, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings," Scrutiny (1944), XIII, 67.

⁵¹ Baker, VI, 65.

development.⁵² Here, once more, she turned to the epistolary method, which by 1780 was at the height of its popularity. Though she admired Richardson's handling of the form for minute self-analysis and the study of motivation,⁵³ Miss Austen endeavored to demonstrate its abuse by other authors. The epistolary mode, she believed, is least effective when action is the author's main concern. By writing a story with the emphasis on plot, she proved that the epistolary medium was often clumsy and ridiculous.

Another persistent irritation to Jane Austen was excessive sentimentality.⁵⁴ She satirizes in this novel the typical situations of sentimental fiction in a stereotyped pattern. She includes, for example, scenes with purposeless self-analysis, love-at-first sight, mistaken identity, and unknown parentage.⁵⁵

Besides satire, Love and Friendship has other distinctions which show how well Jane Austen assimilated what was good from Richardson and Burney: the heroine writes

52

Ibid., p. 67.

53

Leavis, p. 70. Not only Richardson, but also Fanny Burney's influence is noted in Love and Friendship. Letter 10, for instance, has a counterpart in a scene in Evelina.

54

Southam, p. 27.

55

Arthur W. Litz, Jane Austen, A Study of her Artistic Development (New York, 1965), p. 19.

all the letters except the first,⁵⁶ but each of them is sufficiently varied; a certain unity pervades the whole;⁵⁷ the letter is used as a comic device,⁵⁸ but it is not obtrusive in the narrative. This may demonstrate that she was adept at using the epistolary technique, but she was learning that it was unsatisfactory except for characterizing individuals or exposing manners and customs.⁵⁹

In some respects the fragmentary Lesley Castle (ten letters about Lady Lesley's marriage to a father of grown daughters) shows advancement over Love and Friendship in Jane Austen's development. In this novel Miss Austen explores more possibilities of the epistolary method. She gives, for instance, both the letter and the reply; having more than one character express his point of view gives the novel variety and interest.⁶⁰ For the first time, the characters expose themselves as much through their style of writing as through the viewpoint they reveal in their letters. There are other tendencies which show development but are not perfected. The letters, for instance, are individually well executed, but there is

⁵⁶ Singer, pp. 159-160.

⁵⁷ Southam, p. 24.

⁵⁸ Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen; Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton, New Jersey, 1952), p. 6.

⁵⁹ Southam, p. 24.

⁶⁰ Singer, pp. 159-160.

no sustaining unity. She attempted to make some of the letters serious and sincere to contrast with the comic tone of others, but she had not yet learned how to achieve this effectively. This groping quality is cited as one of the weaknesses of Lesley Castle, for there is no clearly defined controlling formula; it is not consistent in sustaining the momentum throughout, realistic or satiric.⁶¹

Lady Susan, the next important work in a study of Jane Austen, is thought to be the first novel of her mature period. The controversy over its date of composition centers on the epistolary technique: because it is epistolary in form, it is associated with the date (around 1795) of the epistolary Elinor and Marianne. Certainly, the course of Jane Austen's development from 1793 to 1805 was toward the direct narrative and away from the letter form, so a novel in the epistolary mode would indicate an early work. An internal study also helps to verify this date: it cannot be placed too early in the canon of her work because the hardened attitude of her heroine could hardly have been conceived until the author had matured.⁶² About the conclusion there is more debate. Because the abrupt prose ending appears to be in the style of her later works, a few critics argue that it may have

61
Southam, p. 32.

62
Black, p. 105.

been added later than the original portion.⁶³ Most critics,⁶⁴ however, place the date earlier, around 1795.

Lady Susan is the story of a base woman of the fashionable Regency society; she personifies both the elegance and decadence of the time. The urban setting is much like Richardson or Fanny Burney,⁶⁵ but there is no known source for this intimate portrayal of a thoroughly immoral woman.⁶⁶ There are forty-one letters, besides the prose conclusion, exchanged among four characters who detest one another.

There are several reasons why the epistolary method would appeal to Jane Austen as a vehicle for this novel. She was well aware, at this point in her career, that the epistolary method had many disadvantages, but she also knew its advantages for characterization, irony and objectivity. There is probably no better medium than the letter form for an intimate character study where the emphasis is not on the narrative. In Lady Susan the narrative quality is not stressed; and dialogue, an important ingredient in the narrative form but artificial in letters, is practically

⁶³ Sarah F. Maldon, Jane Austen (Boston, 1889), pp. 26-27.

⁶⁴ Litz, pp. 40-41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶⁶ Southam, pp. 47-48.

67
excluded. The epistolary medium is appropriate to show
great contrast between appearance and reality. Lady Susan
reveals herself in her letters as a different person than
her elegant exterior would indicate. As a novel way of
presenting a multi-dimensional portrait of her heroine, 68
Jane Austen presents in a realistic manner the letters of 69
other characters to reflect varying opinions of her heroine
and to reveal themselves. 70 This interplay among letters
from different characters is a subtle technique and is
successfully handled here. 71 The epistolary form may also
have been chosen because it aids objectivity. It places the
greatest distance between the author and, what must have
been for Jane Austen, a distasteful subject. 72 She did not
want to be omniscient but wished the characters to expose
themselves without authorial commentary. 73

Not only her choice of the epistolary mode but also

67
p. 220. F. Warre Cornish, Jane Austen (New York, 1913),

63
Black, p. 105.

69
Litz, p. 42.

70
Steeves, p. 352.

71
Litz, p. 42.

72
Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen (London,
1963), p. 66.

73
Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh, Personal Aspects of
Jane Austen (London, 1920), p. 99.

the manner in which she employed it gave her the distinction
of using the form better than most of her contemporaries.⁷⁴

She was, for instance, particularly conscious of maintain-
ing realism in the letters both in length and in content.

There is also a great deal of variety in the letters.⁷⁵

By consciously controlling the narrative within the letter
medium she avoided the ridiculous.⁷⁶ Economy of expression

is also a distinction in this form.⁷⁷ Despite the attractions

of the epistolary form, Jane Austen abandoned both Lady
Susan and the epistolary method. There are many possible

reasons for her rejection: a dissatisfaction with the
restraints imposed on the form; a loss of interest in the
story; the inability to bring it to a satisfactory con-

clusion;⁷⁸ the recognition that the epistolary method was
not sustaining the interest;⁷⁹ or the desire to give more

commentary.⁸⁰

⁷⁴
Litz, p. 52.

⁷⁵
Southam, pp. 47-48.

⁷⁶
Mudrick, p. 127.

⁷⁷
Barker, p. 69.

⁷⁸
Southam, p. 46.

⁷⁹
Ibid., p. 80.

⁸⁰
Litz, p. 44.

Lady Susan, despite its effective moments, is not a great work, nor does it display much of Miss Austen's characteristic genius. ⁸¹ There is, for instance, an obtrusive change of tone in the conclusion, and the novel is tiresome in its lack of variety. There is, however, enough skill to warrant a critic's desire that in her later period she might ⁸² have written a complete novel in this mode.

With Lady Susan the first phase of her mature period came to an end. Her next endeavours resulted in her major novels. An examination of the first drafts of these major novels will demonstrate her close connection with the epistolary method. Although Miss Austen gave up Lady Susan because of dissatisfaction with the epistolary method, she ⁸³ still continued to experiment with it in many other small epistolary novels culminating in Elinor and Marianne, her ⁸⁴ most ambitious effort up to this time. She was serious in her attempts to adopt the epistolary mode permanently, but at the same time she was exploring other methods; that is, ⁸⁵ she was not completely satisfied with any one style.

81

Singer, p. 158.

82

Black, p. 105.

83

Southam, pp. 54-55.

84

Black, p. 106.

85

Black, pp. 107-108.

Jane Austen was moving towards her own narrative method in which she would employ the advantages that she had assimilated from her experiments.

Elinor and Marianne was written between 1796 and 1798. Miss Austen was not satisfied with it and did not offer it for publication; instead she read it orally to her family and then put it aside to begin First Impressions (later Pride and Prejudice). Not too much time elapsed before she returned to Elinor and Marianne, revised it to the narrative form, and gave it the new title, Sense and Sensibility. The change of title indicates a new tendency, that of isolating a small segment of character for close study.

There are several explanations for her break with the epistolary method: the form was losing popularity, it was difficult to handle by the author, and it was annoying to

86

Litz, p. 52.

87

Black, p. 106.

88

Child, XII, 259.

89

Barker, p. 74. There were two revisions before publication in 1811.

90

Black, p. 106.

91

Barker, pp. 70-71.

92

Isabel Constance Clarke, Six Portraits (London, 1935), p. 109.

the reader. Jane Austen, moreover, did not like writing letters for heroines, a necessity in the epistolary form.⁹³ She was advised to abandon the method and did so;⁹⁴ the re-writing possibly represents her complete rejection of the mode.⁹⁵

Though there is no extant copy of Elinor and Marianne, there are conjectures about it. It was probably most like Cecelia, her favorite Burney novel.⁹⁶ Her sister Cassandra gave the most illuminating information about it, for she wrote that the narratives in both the original draft and Sense and Sensibility were essentially alike.⁹⁷ There was,⁹⁸ it is assumed, more burlesque in the first draft. The original title bearing the names of the two sisters suggests a contrast as in the later version: Elinor the rational sister, Marianne the emotional one. It is possible that the sisters were separated from each other more in the first

⁹³ Ian Jack, "The Epistolary Element in Jane Austen," English Studies Today, Second Series (1959), p. 185.

⁹⁴ Mitton, p. 185.

⁹⁵ Jack, p. 185.

⁹⁶ Barker, p. 74.

⁹⁷ Southam, pp. 54-55.

⁹⁸ Baugh, p. 1204.

version to facilitate the epistolary machinery. If, on the other hand, each sister had a confidante ⁹⁹ (a requisite of epistolary fiction) this also would have provided the background for a correspondence. ¹⁰⁰ With both sisters away from home, however, as they are in Sense and Sensibility, they must send news home. These letters presumably by Elinor for the most part would leave the novel in essentially the same framework as we have it, though the confidante theory would have allowed for more contrasting views with letters written by Marianne, and by the two girl friends, ¹⁰¹ as well as by Elinor.

It is not possible to explore, to any great extent, details of a non-existent work, so we must turn to the finished product, Sense and Sensibility, for a more accurate ¹⁰² assessment. There are manifest in Sense and Sensibility many vestiges of the original epistolary form. The opening chapters, for example, read much like letters which introduce

99

Southam, pp. 55-56. In chapter eleven of Sense and Sensibility we are given the information that Elinor has a close friend. She may be the one to whom the letters were sent in Elinor and Marianne.

100

Robert Liddell, The Novels of Jane Austen (London, 1963), p. 15.

101

Mary Lascelles, Jane Austen and her Art (Oxford, 1939), pp. 57-58.

102

Barker, p. 74.

both the characters and the story. ¹⁰³ Many of the ineffectual
 conversations also read like letters, ¹⁰⁴ and Marianne's
 impassioned soliloquies are easily visualized as letters. ¹⁰⁵
 Besides the incomplete adaptation from the letter to dialogue
 or indirect discourse, there is other evidence of the origi-
 nal epistolary technique: the characters are shifted about
 in unnatural groups, probably necessary for corresponding,
 but stilted here; there are many abrupt changes in point of
 view and tone; ¹⁰⁶ and the reader has no more insight into
 Willoughby's true character than does Marianne herself,
 for the reader learns simultaneously with her that Willoughby
 has been dishonorable in his attentions to her. ¹⁰⁷ Thus, the
 overall plan of Sense and Sensibility seems contrived. ¹⁰⁸

There are, however, notable instances that the author
 was conscientiously trying to avoid such blunders in adap-
 tation. Jane Austen's greatest effort was to avoid the

¹⁰³ Southam, p. 57.

¹⁰⁴ Elizabeth Jenkins, Jane Austen (London, 1949),
 p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ Lascelles, pp. 57-58.

¹⁰⁶ Litz, p. 72.

¹⁰⁷ Southam, p. 57.

¹⁰⁸ Lascelles, pp. 57-58.

resemblance of Elinor to an epistolary heroine. She managed this to a great extent through Elinor's pledge not to divulge Lucy Steele's confidence. In an epistolary novel Elinor would have been obliged to confide everything in a letter; here the fact that she is resolute in her silence enhances her nobility. ¹⁰⁹ Though there are many references to letters, there are actually very few given in Sense and Sensibility ¹¹⁰ and none from the heroine.

The epistolary origin, then, of Sense and Sensibility ¹¹¹ is held responsible for it being termed the least satisfying ¹¹² and the poorest of Jane Austen's major novels, since it is weak in both construction and in characterization. ¹¹³ It was the first of her novels to be published and was received enthusiastically by the public ¹¹⁴ in spite of its flaws. This provided a smoother reception for her next novel, Pride and Prejudice.

109

Southam, p. 56.

110

Jack, p. 176.

111

Litz, p. 72.

112

Donald R. Fryxell, "The Patterns of Jane Austen's Novels," DA, XX (1952), p. 4110.

113

Child, XII, 263.

114

A. H. Wright, Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure (New York, 1953), p. 86.

First Impressions (later Pride and Prejudice) was begun between October of 1796 and August of 1797 after Elinor and Marianne was completed. It is assumed that it was her first major attempt at straight narrative and that, being satisfied with this form, she returned to Elinor and Marianne and converted it to the narrative structure also. The possibility does exist, however, that this original draft was also epistolary; if so, this novel, not Elinor and Marianne, might represent her complete rejection of the epistolary method. Evidence for this thesis is convincing to many critics. Upon completion of the novel, for instance, her father wrote to the publisher and claimed to be in possession of a manuscript comparable to the popular Evelina by Fanny Burney. This reference might refer to similarity in its length or in the use of the epistolary mode. Secondly, the revisions of 1809 to 1810 and 1811 to 1812 could represent an adaptation from the epistolary method as it did with Elinor and Marianne. Dr. Chapman agrees that some major alteration was undertaken ¹¹⁵ in the revision. A third theory which supports the epistolary origin is that First Impressions written in the narrative rather than the epistolary form would have prevented much of the awkwardness

of Sense and Sensibility, for Miss Austen would most likely have learned from her mistakes. ¹¹⁶ Miss Leavis, another prominent critic of Jane Austen, argues for the epistolary origin of this novel. ¹¹⁷

After completing First Impressions, Jane Austen returned to Elinor and Marianne and began the revision from the epistolary style. At the same time, she began work on Susan (later Northanger Abbey), which was finished in 1793. The fact that she was writing it while converting the epistolary Elinor and Marianne probably accounts for its being a satire on the epistolary novel. ¹¹⁸ It contains many of the motives of the novel-in-letters; for example, an epistolary heroine, a protective hero, the necessary villain, and above all, sentimentality. ¹¹⁹ Burlesque, so prominent here but absent in Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, was probably deleted from their original drafts. There was no complete revision of Northanger Abbey; ¹²⁰ it was sent to her publisher, Crosby, in 1803 but lay gathering dust in his shop. After Miss Austen's death, the novel was reclaimed by her family

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Southam, pp. 58-59.

117

Ibid., p. 144.

118

Jack, p. 174.

119

Henrietta Ten Harmsel, "Jane Austen's Use of Literary Conventions," DA, XXIII (1962), p. 3902.

120

Southam, p. 67.

and published with Persuasion in 1817.¹²¹

Jane Austen's later novels, Mansfield Park (published in 1814), Emma (published in 1815), and Persuasion (published in 1817) went through the press with less entanglement than her former novels.¹²² There is still in these later works a close connection with the epistolary tradition.

Mansfield Park, for example, is the most Richardsonian of all her works in many of the superior characterizations.¹²³

There are arguments, moreover, that this novel had an epistolary origin. Miss Leavis claims that Fanny's exile from Mansfield for the purpose of a correspondence is a typical epistolary device.¹²⁴ There are also flaws in the novel; such as its awkwardness and incomplete conclusion,¹²⁵ which an epistolary origin would help to explain. It does

seem doubtful, however, that Miss Austen would return to a form so obviously abandoned earlier.¹²⁶ Another theory is that Mansfield Park represents a rewriting of Lady Susan,¹²⁷ but the adaptation of so early a work is also implausible.

¹²¹ L. W. Renwick, English Literature (Oxford, 1963), p. 93.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Child, XII, 265.

¹²⁴ Liddell, p. 82.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 65-66.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 64.

¹²⁷ Southam, p. 144.

Emma is the last of Jane Austen's novels to be published during her lifetime and is considered by many to be her most remarkable achievement. ¹²³ It was begun in 1814 and published in 1815. ¹²⁹ There is still the Richardson influence, especially in the use of the contrasting figures (a common motif of the epistolary novel); here the vivacious Emma Woodhouse is viewed beside the reserved Jane Fairfax.

In Persuasion, published posthumously with Northanger Abbey in 1817, ¹³⁰ the epistolary influence demonstrates a counter-trend: in the first draft, the original Chapter X is clumsy and contrived; in a comic scene ¹³¹ the lovers pour out their hearts to one another. ¹³² This, Jane Austen felt, was not satisfactory; she rewrote the chapter with the climax occurring in a letter. The letter here is more natural to ¹³³ the situation and appropriate to the tone of the novel. Miss Austen's pleasure with this revision ¹³⁴ again evidences

¹²³ Martin S. Day, History of English Literature (New York, 1963), p. 481.

¹²⁹ Renwick, p. 93.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Southam, p. 88.

¹³² Lascelles, p. 126.

¹³³ Southam, p. 93.

¹³⁴ Sheila Kaye-Smith, Speaking of Jane Austen (New York, 1944), pp. 153-154.

the appeal of the epistolary form.

From this brief survey tracing Jane Austen's growth away from the epistolary method, the disadvantages rather than the advantages of the novel-in-letters have necessarily been stressed. It was the effectiveness of the letter form that remained attractive to her, however, resulting in the prevalent use of letters in her six major novels. To explore the use and effectiveness of letters in these novels, representative examples in the following four categories will be discussed: revelation of character, realistic exposition of facts, control of emotion, and structural effectiveness.

Revelation of Character

In the six major novels of Jane Austen there are a total of forty letters in various stages of completeness written by the characters themselves. This number does not include the mention of two hundred letters which are not quoted or several hundred discussions of letters. The forty letters may be divided into four categories according to their most important accomplishment in the novel. Of course, each letter serves many functions; this is merely a convenient, and hopefully significant, way to group them.

The first of these categories relates to the most important aspect of Jane Austen's work, the revelation of

character. As a satirist depicting the foibles and vicissitudes of human nature, she shows more interest in character than in plot or structure. ¹³⁶ Almost all of her characters reveal themselves through the use of letters, exhibiting qualities which dominate their personalities and which enable the reader to discern for himself a conception of the character. Each of the letters will be analyzed in the following ways wherever appropriate: first, the letter itself will be closely scrutinized to show how well the author exposes her characters' principal weaknesses through their own words; second, the reactions by other characters to the letter itself or to letter-writing in general will be cited (this will show how one letter can have more than one function, for not only the letter-writer's character is exposed, but other characters reveal much about themselves in their comments on the letter); third, examples of the omniscient author's illuminating commentary about many of the letters or letter-writers will be given; and fourth, critical opinions on Jane Austen's ability to reveal character through these letters will be cited whenever possible. Miss Austen exposes conceit, deceit, and insensibility; she satirizes indolence and vacuity. Both her male and female writers personify these comic weaknesses.

Two of these characteristics, conceit and deceit, are prominently revealed by Jane Austen's male writers: conceit is exhibited in the letters of Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice and John Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility; deceit is notable in Walter Elliot in Persuasion and Frank Churchill in Emma. Mr. Bennet, in Pride and Prejudice, however, is an exception, for he is not dominated by one of these weaknesses; he does, however, reveal other interesting traits in his own letter and in his comments upon the letters of others. Ian Jack points out that although there are fewer men's letters than women's, she did not deliberately avoid writing them ¹³⁷ and exercised in their writing the same attention to the characters' motivation and psyche.

Mr. Collins in Pride and Prejudice, for example, writes four letters in the novel; each is a monument to conceit. This dominant quality is prominently displayed in each of his letters; his conceit is notable to the recipients of his letters as well as to the readers of the novel.

Early in Pride and Prejudice, we are given the first revealing letter from Mr. Collins to his estranged relations. He writes:

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Jack, p. 130.

I flatter myself that my present overtures of good will are highly commendable, and that the circumstances of my being next in the entail of Longbourn estate will be kindly overlooked on your side, and not lead you to reject the offered olive branch.

(p. 23) 138

Such pomposity needs no authorial commentary. The function of this letter is to introduce the fatuous Mr. Collins, a cousin of Mr. Bennet, who exemplifies unmitigated conceit. He explains in this letter that he wishes to "heal the breach" that has existed between his "late honoured father" and Mr. Bennet. He claims, further, that he has for a long time contemplated this action but was reticent, because he feared "it might seem disrespectful" to his father's memory for him "to be on good terms with anyone with whom it had always pleased [the elder Collins] to be at variance." His offer of the proverbial "olive branch" precedes the announcement of his intended visit with the Bennets to make, if possible, some type of restitution for the entailment of the Longbourn estate.

In addition to the initial effect of the letter itself, comments upon it by the members of the Bennet family allow the reader to evaluate these reactions and thus to penetrate the character of each of the Bennets as well as that of Mr. Collins. Mr. Bennet's remarks are characteristically witty

and astute. He claims that "this peace-making gentleman . . . seems to be a most conscientious and polite young man"; he sees "a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter." These ironic observations do not deceive Elizabeth, the most perceptive of his daughters, who feels that "he must be an oddity" and finds "something very pompous in his style." Jane, consistently sanguine and gullible, attempts to understand the letter per se, without searching for ulterior motives; Mary feels impelled to display critical acumen by giving a recondite opinion of the style; Mrs. Bennet, who is incapable of adequately assessing the letter, is delighted to receive the professed overtures of friendship; and the younger girls show no interest in a matter that cannot contribute to their frivolous pursuits. Through the use of this first letter, Mr. Collins and each member of the Bennet family is brought into clearer focus. Whenever a letter is introduced, it demands careful attention both to its contents and to the characters' reaction to it.

In addition to this introductory letter, Mr. Collins, upon leaving Hertfordshire after his short visit, promises further communication. When his letter arrives, the author drily observes that it contains "all the solemnity of gratitude which a twelve month's abode in the family might have prompted."

Jane Austen's artistic achievement in the creation of Mr. Collins is well attested by this letter which coined a

new word in the English language: "a Collins"¹³⁹ is a word referring to bread-and-butter letters, probably the inflated variety.¹⁴⁰

Each of Mr. Collins' subsequent letters further enforces the reader's original estimation that he is a conceited prig. It is noteworthy in this connection that in his third letter, no commentary is even necessary. Before perusing it, Elizabeth notes "what curiosities his letters always were," but makes no further observations. This letter needs no explanation; in its grossness it typifies Mr. Collins' conceit as he superciliously congratulates himself for his narrow escape from a connection with the Bennet family. His criticism is engendered by the elopement of Lydia Bennet with Mr. Wickham, a member of the militia. Mr. Collins attributes to an ignoble upbringing her open defiance in living with Wickham before the marriage. His letter is a study in irony, for if it were written with a view of consolation, it falls far from its intention with

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Cornish, p. 116. He points out that the exact meaning of "a Collins" is somewhat ambiguous. Does it mean any type of bread-and-butter letter or does it refer to one of inflated and gratuitous style? It would seem that the association of his name with the note must connote insincerity.

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Kaye-Smith, p. 155.

such words of comfort as:

. . . your present distress . . . proceed(s) from
a cause which no time can remove.

and

The death of your daughter would have been a
blessing in comparison of this.

and

. . . throw off your unworthy child from your
affection for ever, and leave her to reap the
fruit of her own heinous offence. (p. 124)

Geraldine Mitton claims that this letter is "the best of the
kind that Jane Austen ever drew; Mr. Collins is a creation
whose name might signify a quality of "collinesqueness."
This letter, she claims, represents Collins's character more
concisely than could pages of description or dialogue. ¹⁴¹

One would not do justice to Mr. Collins or his creator
without mentioning his final letter near the end of Pride
and Prejudice written to apprise Mr. Bennet that dire con-
sequences would be the result of a marriage between Elizabeth
and Mr. Darcy. Relevant parts of this letter which is again
characteristic of Mr. Collins's conceit are given with Mr.
Bennet's shrewd but ironic comments to Elizabeth, who feels
both humiliation and despair at the contents. Mr. Bennet,
at this point, is not aware of the reversal that has taken
place in Elizabeth's feelings for Mr. Darcy. There is double

irony here, for Elizabeth is wounded not only by Collins's malice but also by her father's inability to discern Darcy's true character. Mr. Bennet is vastly amused by Collins's "admirable" lies concerning an understanding between Elizabeth and Darcy and finds the whole thing "delightfully absurd." These comments are interjected by Mr. Bennet as he reads; he continues with Collins's account of Lady Catherine's objections to "so disgraceful a match." The letter concludes on a sententious note typical of Mr. Collins: after congratulating them for successfully concealing Lydia's nefarious behavior, he advises the Bennets: "forgive them as a Christian, but never . . . admit them in your sight, or allow their names to be mentioned in your hearing." (p. 156)

These examples of Mr. Collins's letter-writing style corroborate Ian Jack's thesis that the letters of Mr. Collins typify the Austen method of exposing the comic faults of insipid and vapid characters in their letters through the use of clichés, ironic and inane statements and obsequious sentiments.

Another Collins-type character ¹⁴³ is the fatuous John Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility. He, unfortunately for the reader, is not so prolific a writer as Mr. Collins, for

¹⁴² Jack, pp. 182-183.

¹⁴³ Sheila Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen (New York, 1950), pp. 162-163.

we are given only a few sentences from him. He writes to his half-sister Elinor on the occasion of learning that his brother-in-law Edward Ferrars has been involved in a secret engagement with the inferior Lucy Steele:

We know nothing of our unfortunate Edward and can make no inquiries on so prohibited a subject, but conclude him to be still at Oxford.
(p. 609) 144

These few words depict his false sense of values in subordinating filial concern and responsibility to the maintenance of a facade of respectability. Sir John suffers from a surfeit of conceit à la Collins. An interesting difference between them is that in Sense and Sensibility the reader is allowed to witness Sir John's conscience remonstrating with him, whereas in Pride and Prejudice we are led to believe Mr. Collins incapable of human sympathy. According to Miss Sheila Kaye-Smith, Sir John has one redeeming quality: he honestly supports his wife's and mother-in-law's philosophy because he believes in them.
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The relatively weak characterization of John Dashwood is attributed to Jane Austen's imperfect adaptation of the narrative from the epistolary method. His long speeches, uninteresting as dialogue, reflect this origin; and though

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All quotations from Sense and Sensibility are from the Random House edition of The Works of Jane Austen (New York, 1950).

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Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, pp. 162-163.

analogous to well-written letters, they are ineffectual in the narrative framework.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps if Miss Austen had seen fit to strengthen his portrayal through the use of more letters, it is possible that he would have emerged as forceful and memorable as Mr. Collins.

As has been noted, there is some similarity in the style of writing in Mr. Collins' and John Dashwood's letters; these letters expose them as men controlled by indomitable conceit. Although these same characteristics could also be ascribed to Walter Elliot in Persuasion and Frank Churchill in Emma, the more dominant passion exhibited in their letters is deceit.

Walter Elliot is described as writing "the most completely evil letter in Jane Austen."¹⁴⁷ We are given one letter by him, notable for its indiscreetness and youthful exuberance; it shows him to be callous and calculating and stands as a monumental contrast to his obsequious behavior to the Elliots of Kellynych. His language in the letter is abusive; he calls Sir Walter quite a "fool," and claims to hate the name of Elliot. Both Anne and Jane Austen condemn¹⁴⁸ him on the basis of this letter, but credit should be

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Ibid.

147

Jack, p. 184.

148

Note the similarity of tastelessness in Darcy's letter condemning Elizabeth's family. Though it is not as blunt (Darcy composes with care), it is equally injurious.

allowed him for his recognition of Anne's superior qualities and his preference of her to her ignoble sister.

This letter warrants investigation beneath the surface, for though it seems to expose a dissembler, Elliot is actually sacrificed to satisfy the narrative demands, for his incriminating letter is actually more honest in its condemnation of the pompous Elliots than his later deference to them. These later actions are possibly motivated by his love for Anne and his determination to win her for herself rather than for her connections.

Frank Churchill's letters in Emma are even more deceitful than Walter Elliot's. He is a hypocrite who carefully calculates the effect his letter will have on its reader. His strategy has been planned to reveal a devoted son kept by an importunate aunt from performing his filial duty. Unlike Walter Elliot's note which is filled with animadversions, Frank Churchill's euphonious compositions are excessive in praise, deferential in tone and refined in style. If anything good can be said of him, it is that he writes eloquent letters. 149

Before Frank comes to Highbury his "handsome" letter has been on every tongue, ¹⁵⁰ his character judged by its contents.

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David Rhydderch, Jane Austen: Her Life and Art (London, 1932), p. 197.

150

Harriet Smith, however, is too busy with her own problems to think much about Mr. Churchill. Mr. Martin is given only indirect treatment.

From this first letter everyone, except Mr. Knightley, forms "a very favourable idea of the young man." It is significant that Mr. Knightley, not misled by Frank's eloquent phrases, is the only one who properly assesses the hypocritical young man.
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The bulk of these early letters with their feigned concern and surfeit of ego announce Frank's intention of visiting Highbury and the frequent delays and emergencies precipitated by his ailing aunt. Ian Jack notes that Frank's writing style changes in the course of the novel from formal deference before he has met his new stepmother to a friendly and congenial warmth after his visits.¹⁵² His letters are discussed by almost all the characters in Emma, so that we have a multiplicity of reactions similar to those in Pride and Prejudice when the Bennets read Mr. Collins's first note. The reader learns something new or has preconceived ideas enforced through the characters' reactions to them, such as Mr. Woodhouse's forgetfulness, Mr. Knightley's astuteness, Mrs. Cole's preciosity, Mr. Weston's pride, Mrs. Weston's warmth and shallowness, and Emma's imagination.

Besides the reactions to Frank's style of writing, there are again discussions of handwriting. Ian Jack states that

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Jack, p. 181.

152

Ibid., pp. 181-182.

Jane Austen often equates handwriting and style with character.

Mr. Knightley finds Frank's script suspect. It is later learned that Frank was deliberately trying to conceal his

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real motives.

Other early letters from Frank corroborate this deceitful pattern. There is one long letter given, however, which deserves particular analysis, because it clarifies and justifies his past actions. Frank's explanatory letter to Mrs. Weston is essentially divided into three parts which explain the rationale behind his deceitful actions. In the initial section he discloses his reasons for misrepresenting the purpose of his visit to Randalls. It was not prompted by filial duty, he admits, but by the desire to be with Jane Fairfax. His duplicity was necessary to conceal their secret engagement. This he explains to his stepmother:

You must all endeavour to comprehend the exact nature of my situation when I first arrived at Randalls; you must consider me as having a secret which was to be kept at all hazards. This was the fact. My right to place myself in a situation requiring such concealment is another question. (p. 404)¹⁵⁵

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See pages 63-64 on Darcy and Bingley's conversation about spontaneous writing.

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Jack, p. 132.

155

All quotations from Emma are from the Laurel Edition, Mark Schorer, ed. (New York, 1965).

Though he is sensible that he has been remiss in his duties to his father by not coming to Randalls sooner, he does not apologize for his behavior:

My behaviour during the very happy fortnight which I spent with you, did not, I hope, lay me open to reprehension, excepting one point. (p. 405)

This one point, he asserts, is the principal part of the letter:

My behaviour to Miss Woodhouse indicated, I believe, more than it ought. In order to assist a concealment so essential to me, I was led on to make more than an allowable use of the sort of intimacy into which we were immediately thrown. (p. 405)

He claims to regard Emma "with so much brotherly affection" that he would not have trifled with her affections had he thought she were "a young woman likely to be attached."

In the final portion he reaffirms his adoration of his fiancée. He excuses her from all responsibility for the concealment of their engagement and lauds her sensitivity, magnanimity and humility. "I am mad with joy"; he continues, "but when I recollect all the uneasiness I occasioned her, and how little I deserve to be forgiven, I am mad with anger."

Frank continues with his reason for disclosing his secret: he has learned that Jane in desperation is planning to break their engagement and accept employment. Driven into a frenzy by these disclosures, he has spoken to his uncle about his plans, unexpectedly received his blessing, and hastened to Highbury and the reunion with Jane.

His warm and sincere conclusion smoothes the path for complete forgiveness:

A thousand and a thousand thanks for all the kindness you have ever shown me, and ten thousand for the attentions your heart will dictate towards her. If you think me in a way to being happier than I deserve, I am quite of your opinion. (p. 411)

Miss Kaye-Smith feels that it is inconsistent with Frank's character that he writes such a lengthy letter of apology. ¹⁵⁶ It is, however, to be noted that Frank writes many letters within the course of the novel. This one, though longer and in places unnecessarily unctuous, is still typical of him. He has a zest for living and responds to the drama in every situation. Though he has deceived his family and friends at Highbury, he has played the role with characteristic gusto. In his letter, likewise, he luxuriates in diffuse apologies.

Jane Austen's characters, male and female, as noted in the introduction can be classified according to a dominant characteristic displayed in their letters: conceit, deceit, insensibility, indolence, or vacuity. Occasionally, however, Miss Austen writes letters for her more noble characters. As in life, even the heroes and heroines are imperfect, exhibiting these same flaws as the weaker characters do, ¹⁵⁷

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Kaye-Smith, Speaking of Jane Austen, p. 157.

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Fanny Price in Persuasion is close to perfect, but even she lacks a sense of humor. See p. 51 of this paper.

though they become subdued and rechanneled within the novel.

Mr. Bennet, for example, given sympathetic treatment in Pride and Prejudice, is this type of character. Though not the hero, he has great stature, wit, and perspicacity. He may be thought of as a composite of many faults which are, however, constrained by his virtues.

At the end of Pride and Prejudice we are given a short letter by Mr. Bennet. We are not given his letter which requests of Mr. Gardiner an account of the expenses incurred in getting Lydia properly married to the scoundrel Wickham. Mr. Bennet gives us his observations about letters and letter-writers throughout the novel, so it is from both sources that we assess his character. We learn in several places, for instance, that Mr. Bennet is not fond of writing. In the beginning of the novel he jests with Mrs. Bennet, who pleads with him to manage an introduction for their daughters with the bachelor tenant of Netherfield. Mr. Bennet retorts,

I will send a few lines by you to assure him of my hearty consent to his marrying whichever he chooses of the girls, though I must throw in a good word for my little Lizzy. (p. 3)

When Elizabeth leaves for her visit with Charlotte, he tells her to write and "almost promises to answer her letter."

(p. 67) When he leaves for London with his brother-in-law to clear up the scandal concerning Lydia, we are told that he writes a few lines home, but the important communications come from Mr. Gardiner. Mr. Collins's warning letter, already

discussed, further illustrates Mr. Bennet's shrewdness by his comment:

Much as I abominate writing, I would not give up Mr. Collins's correspondence for any consideration. (p. 156)

We are given the one letter that he writes to Mr. Collins:

Dear Sir,

I must trouble you once more for congratulations. Elizabeth will soon be the wife of Mr. Darcy. Console Lady Catherine as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew. He has more to give. Yours sincerely. (p. 165)

This short letter at the end of the novel is the only sample given of his writing style. It serves as an example of the care Jane Austen takes with her letters to individualize the character of the writer. In a few short lines his cunning and perspicacity are displayed. The sharp, cogent statements in his letter, which Cornish calls "short and to the purpose" (p. 121), typify Mr. Bennet. Such conciseness is probably the result of years of frustrating attempts to engage Mrs. Bennet in an intelligent conversation. He takes refuge in silence, but if the occasion requires, as this letter testifies, he offers a characteristically sardonic observation. Representing a composite picture of Mr. Bennet's character, the letter is a culmination of his consistent treatment throughout the novel.

Jane Austen's female characters, as noted in the introduction, are more prolific epistolarians than her male

characters. Their letters, equally individual and unique, also reveal the writers as dominated by a singular characteristic. Exposed by conceit are Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park and Mary Musgrove in Persuasion. Insensibility, by definition meaning both incapable of understanding and devoid of feeling, is attributed to Lydia Bennet in Pride and Prejudice and Lucy Steele in Sense and Sensibility. Deceit is reserved for Isabella Thorpe in Northanger Abbey and Caroline Bingley in Pride and Prejudice. Vacuity is notable in Mrs. Jennings in Sense and Sensibility. Indolence is observed in Lady Bertram in Mansfield Park. Mrs. Weston in Emma, like Mr. Bennet, is the exception, a more sympathetic character. These letters will be analyzed in the same manner as the men's letters: the letters themselves, reactions to them and to letter-writing, the author's observations within the novel, and the critical commentary.

Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park is the most prolific of Jane Austen's letter-writers. She pens five letters in the novel, each notably displaying her egocentricity. Her conceit, like that of Mr. Collins and John Dashwood, is the result of false values; she, however, in spite of her self-love, emerges more likeable than they. Like the Bennets, she reveals much about herself in her comments about letter-writers as well as through her own letters. In a discussion with Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram on male epistolarians, she chastises them for their infrequent and unsatisfying

letters and claims that all men "have but one style." This discourse even without the letters themselves would characterize her as a conceited female with a superficial and frivolous approach to life. Her opinions serve to demonstrate not only her banality and coquetry but also the antithetical character of Fanny Price. Fanny is perplexed by Mary's levity on serious matters, such as Mary's claim that brothers are "strange creatures" who "would not write to each other but upon the most urgent necessity in the world." Her brother Henry, she adds, "has never yet turned the page in a letter." Edmund brings an end to Fanny's distress and Mary's assertions by explaining that Fanny's brother, away at sea, is a worthy correspondent. Later, to test her thesis and satisfy her curiosity, Mary cross-examines Fanny about a letter that Edmund writes home; she is relieved to learn that the letter contains but a few lines to his father rather than a great deal of "chat" to Fanny.

Besides revealing herself in these comments about letter-writers, she exposes her character even more transparently in her letters. Believing an engagement between Henry and Fanny is imminent, Mary writes a short congratulatory note to Fanny. Though premature, this note demonstrates the conceit and command which are notable qualities in both Crawfords. Mary's attitude in this note is once again perplexing and inexplicable to Fanny.

My Dear Fanny, for so I may now call you, to the infinite relief of a tongue that has been stumbling at Miss Price for at least the last six weeks -- I cannot let my brother go without sending you a few lines of general congratulation, and giving my most joyful consent and approval. Go on, my dear Fanny, and without fear; there can be no difficulties worth naming. I choose to suppose that the assurance of my consent will be something; so, you may smile upon him with your sweetest smiles this afternoon, and send him back to me even happier than he goes.

Yours affectionately,
M. C. (p. 237) 153

By sending her approval, Mary feels that the path to matrimony has been cleared for her brother and Fanny. She blindly assumes that her blessing would precipitate an engagement. The situation -- her suave brother captivated by the ingenuous Fanny Price -- is delightful to her. But Mary is indifferent to Fanny as a person; her interest is ever in her own aggrandisement. Henry expects Fanny to answer this note; his insistence causes her acute agitation. She feels that the answer she scribbles in haste and confusion "must appear excessively ill-written, that the language would disgrace a child, for her distress had allowed no arrangement." (p. 240)

After a correspondence is initiated by Mary, Fanny receives letters repeatedly from her with insertions from her brother, but she dislikes the correspondence. The author explains her attitude:

Miss Crawford's style of writing, lively and affectionate, was itself an evil, independent of what she was thus forced into reading from the brother's pen, for Edmund would never rest till she had read the chief of the letter to him, and then she had to listen to his admiration of her language. (p. 292)

Realizing that Edmund is the motivation for Mary's letters, Fanny anticipates one benefit in being away from Edmund and feels there may be no more letters when she leaves for Portsmouth. Her prediction is realized, but Fanny has a change of heart when she is in "exile from good society." ¹⁵⁹ She goes so far as to think of Mary's letters as "written with affection, and some degree of elegance." The author tells us that a letter from Mary though distasteful to Fanny

. . . connected Fanny with the absent, it told her of people and things about whom she had never felt so much curiosity as now, and she would have been glad to have been sure of such a letter every week.

(p. 307)

This first letter to Portsmouth, the author asserts, begins with "the usual plea of increasing engagements." From here it continues in Mary's hand: she admits that her negligent correspondence is a result of Henry's trip to Norfolk, for when at home, he constantly badgers her to write to Fanny and includes, what Mary terms, his own "three or four lines passionées"; she relates that her meeting with Fanny's cousins Julia and Mrs. Rushworth was delightful because of

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Jack, p. 179. Ian Jack claims that this is "shrewd psychology" on the author's part. He believes that Jane Austen wrote Mary's letters only after careful thought and planning.

their discomfort when Fanny's name was mentioned; she mentions further that Mrs. Rushworth will soon "open one of the best houses on Wimpole Street . . . and certainly will then feel -- to use a vulgar phrase -- that she has got her penny worth for her penny." (p. 30) It is common knowledge that Maria Bertram has married Mr. Rushworth because of his position, affluence, and wealth. Mary Crawford is in complete agreement with ambition such as this; "moving the queen of a palace, though the king may appear best in the background" should satisfy one altogether. Continuing with advice for the other sister, she tells Fanny that "Baron Wildenheim's attentions to Julia continue." Characteristically Mary's comments are insufferable though humorous:

A poor honourable is no catch, and I cannot imagine any liking in the case, for, take away his rants, and the poor Baron has nothing. What a difference a vowel makes! -- if his rents were but equal to his rants! (p. 307)

The tactlessness, puns, and French locutions notable in Mary's letters mark a similarity, states Liddell, to Jane Austen's own. ¹⁶⁰ Mary's letters -- chatty, trivial, spirited, and exuberant -- are analogous to telephone conversations; like spontaneous utterances, they seem ¹⁶¹ penned with little deliberation or forethought.

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Liddell, p. 70.

161

Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, p. 166.

In another letter to Portsmouth, Mary rambles on stating that Henry "makes me write, but I do not know what else is to be communicated, except . . ." and she then reiterates what she has stated in the beginning of the letter about Henry's trip to Portsmouth. Mary, convinced of her own worth, writes: "it is impossible to put an hundredth part of my great mind on paper." So preoccupied with her own reflections, she remembers finally in the postscript that her reason for writing is to offer Fanny conveyance back to Mansfield.

The letter that Mary writes to learn more about Thomas Bertram's illness is indeed revealing. It is an example of continuous vacillation from the expected and acceptable to the honest but impolite. By writing a sentence according to propriety and commenting upon it with diabolical flippancy, her disclosures are ironically transparent. After expressing her sorrow and concern, for instance, she says,

Fanny, Fanny, I see you smile, and look cunning, but upon my honour, I never bribed a physician in my life. Poor young man! If he is to die there will be TWO poor young men less in the world. (p. 338)

If Thomas should die, Edmund would be Sir Thomas's heir and would then be a suitable match for Mary. As much as her own vanity allows her, Mary is in love with Edmund but could never allow herself to marry an impoverished younger son. In this letter Jack feels that she "reveals her character in its true colours." These letters that Fanny receives

from her at Portsmouth are valuable; ¹⁶² this one serves to
sever any regard that Fanny may retain for her. ¹⁶³ The crude
attempt at humor is designed to camouflage her ulterior
motive, which she realizes may be exposed in the letter.
She has learned little about Fanny to believe that she
would enjoy these remarks. ¹⁶⁴ Fanny's reaction to Mary's
incriminating letter is consistent with her previous be-
havior. Liddell states in this connection:

There is little evidence that Fanny has
any sense of humour, and she is priggish enough
to find any joke about death in deplorably bad
taste, even if it were not about the possible
death of a near relation of her own. ¹⁶⁵

Mary's last letter in the novel tells Fanny that "a
most scandalous, ill-natured rumour" is being circulated
about Henry. She minimizes his behavior by saying, "Henry
is blameless, and in spite of a moment's étourderie thinks

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Jack, p. 180.

163

Cornish, pp. 114-115.

164

Baker, VI, 104-105, feels that Mary's portrayal is
inconsistent. If her thoughts were as base as this letter
suggests, she would know better than to write in this
manner to one whom she herself calls "so good." He feels
that Mary is sacrificed to provide the moral lesson. She
had "to be convicted of having a vitiated mind; she had to
stagger and disillusion Edmund."

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Liddell, pp. 70-72, feels that without a doubt it
is a mistake to have Mary look to Fanny for news. Her
reason for doing so, she says, is that the Grants are away.
This is an attempt "to justify her blunder, but a blunder
it remains."

of nobody but you, say not a word of it -- hear nothing, surmise nothing, whisper nothing, till I write again. I am sure it will be all hushed up, and nothing proved but Rushworth's folly." (p. 341) Fanny's opinion of Mary Crawford crystalizes because of this letter:

She could not doubt; she dared not indulge a hope of the paragraph being false. Miss Crawford's letter which she had read so often as to make every line her own, was in frightful conformity with it . . . if there was a woman of character in existence, who could treat as a trifle this sin of the first magnitude, who could try to gloss it over, and desire to have it unpunished, she could believe Miss Crawford to be the woman! (p. 344)

Each of Mary's five letters contributes to this final analysis by Fanny Price and the reader. The first short letter, as was noted, is congratulatory, written with her light and effervescent touch; the second, in which she explains her ideas on marrying advantageously, is sent to show Henry that she has dutifully written in his absence. The third rambles on with gossip and only in the post-script does she remember that her purpose for writing is to offer Fanny conveyance to Mansfield. The fourth, on the other hand, is different; marked by curiosity, it is frank and honest, but its bluntness in considering the consequences of Tom Bertram's demise is shocking to Fanny. The last letter excusing Henry's immoral behavior exposes her to Fanny as totally devoid of decency and will serve to sever completely the relationship between them. Each

of these letters is a little gem, sparkling and beautiful at a glance but under examination revealing inherent flaws. Though it is possible to admire surface beauty for ever and never consider what lies beneath, Fanny sees progressively more of Mary's conceit with each letter; this final one destroys the last fragment of illusion.

Another letter marked by conceit is Mary Musgrove's long letter in Persuasion. Ian Jack calls it "a querulous composition of which every sentence proclaims her petulant selfishness." ¹⁶⁶ Though she is revealed as a selfish, vapid character wallowing in self-pity and ennui, she sees herself as superior to the other characters. The letter to her sister Anne is a manifesto of conceit. "I make no apology for my silence, because I know how little people think of letters in such a place as Bath"; so runs the opening remark, and the letter continues with the same tone of hauteur. She claims that there has been "little to write about"; the Musgroves have not entertained, and "I do not reckon the Hayters as anybody." She even manages to reproach her sister for enjoying good weather in Bath. About Anne's friendship with Mr. Elliot she characteristically remarks:

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Jack, p. 179.

I am glad you find Mr. Elliot so agreeable, and wish I could be acquainted with him too; but I have my usual luck, I am always out of the way when anything desirable is going on; always the last of my family to be noticed. (p. 140) ¹⁶⁷

The end of her letter attacks the thoughtlessness of her neighbors:

I have this moment heard that the Crofts are going to Bath almost immediately; . . . they have not had the civility to give me any notice, or to offer to take anything. I do not think they improve at all as neighbors. We see nothing of them, and this is really an instance of gross inattention. (p. 140)

The postscript contains another conceited remark:

. . . there is a bad sore throat very much about. I dare say I shall catch it; and my sore throats, you know, are always worse than anybody's. (p. 140)

"So," says the author, "ended the first part, which had been afterwards put into an envelop containing nearly as much more." The second part opens with her reasons for continuing the first letter:

I kept my letter open, that I might send you word how Louisa bore the journey, and now am extremely glad I did, having a great deal to add. In the first place, I had a note from Mrs. Croft yesterday, offering to convey anything to you; a very kind, friendly note indeed, addressed to me, just as it ought . . . Our neighbourhood cannot spare such a pleasant family. (p. 141)

In this sequel to the first letter she makes no apology for

her earlier unfounded deprecation of the Crofts. Her vanity is easily propitiated; her pride demands deference from parvenues. The body of the letter contains news which she maliciously enjoys communicating: the announcement of Louisa Musgrove's engagement to Captain Benwick. She concludes,

. . . and this is the end, you see, of Captain Benwick's being supposed to be an admirer of yours. How Charles could take such a thing into his head was always incomprehensible to me. I hope he will be more agreeable now. (p. 141)

It is surprising that so long a letter is written by Mary who we are told "never wrote to Bath herself; all the task of keeping up a slow and unsatisfactory correspondence with Elizabeth fell on Anne." (p. 92) Anne's even temper and pliable disposition have always been abused by her family. Mary feels it is her due to be catered to and pampered, and Anne is the only Elliot who is willing to do so to keep harmony in the family. Her vindictiveness towards Anne results in part from the knowledge that Charles Musgrove proposed to her only after he was refused by Anne. Anne is the liaison between the members of her family: her vain and thoughtless father, Elizabeth, the sister most nearly his prototype; and Mary, the indolent married daughter. If it were not to air her own grievances in the expectation of Anne's sympathy and understanding, Mary would not have written at all.

Lydia Bennet in Pride and Prejudice and Lucy Steele in Sense and Sensibility write letters notably insensible. Their letters are thoughtless and crude; the authors, young and foolish, give little thought to the hurt they cause others. They write to receive laurels for their iniquitous deeds and are incapable of understanding that their readers do not applaud their triumphs. Mary Crawford and Mary Musgrove's letters seem to expose their writers as insensible, since their letters cause as much distress as Lydia's or Lucy's; the appearance of insensibility in their case is a result of their self-absorption. Mary Crawford, though her letters are painful to Fanny, is unaware of this effect; she is vain and frivolous, because she concentrates on her own interests, but not malicious or deceitful. Mary Musgrove, also, is capable of understanding, but she is indifferent to the effect of her letters; the outpouring of her feelings is a catharsis for her.

Lydia Bennet, on the other hand, glorying in what she considers a supreme coup, writes to her hostess at Brighton a note exposing her insensible and inconsiderate nature. This first letter written after her elopement with the dashing red-coated Wickham, does not thank them for their hospitality or apologize for any embarrassment that her actions may bring to them. It is a note which Ian Jack

terms "startlingly irresponsible":

You will laugh when you know where I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself at your surprise tomorrow morning, as soon as I am missed . . . you need not send them word at Longbourn of my going, if you do not like it, for it will make the surprise the greater, when I write them, and sign my name Lydia Wickham. What a good joke it will be! I can hardly write for laughing . . . (p. 125)

Lydia regrets the ball she will miss and mentions that she will send for her clothes. Her vanity and rudeness are reflected when she writes:

I wish you would tell Sally to mend a great slit in my worked muslin gown before they are packed up. (p. 125)

This is a master stroke of ingratitude and thoughtlessness, perfect for the character of Lydia.

A congratulatory letter from Lydia to Elizabeth on her forthcoming marriage is brief and explicit. Lydia thinks of no one but Lydia, and this note stating what "a great comfort to have you so rich" is followed by Elizabeth's astute commentary. She recognizes Lydia's insensibility and refuses to burden Darcy with her sister's extravagances.

Lucy Steele in Sense and Sensibility also writes unfeeling letters. They are characterized by a superior attitude which is an attempt to camouflage her insecurity and ignorance. She sees Elinor Dashwood as a threat to her

hold on Edward, which she knows hangs as precariously as the mythical sword of Damocles. Lucy knows that she has long ago lost Edward's love but relies on his honorably fulfilling his promises to her. If Elinor were not emotionally involved, she might realize that the lady doth protest too much. In her letter to Elinor she makes idle boasts about his fervent love for her and his refusal to listen to her suggestions of parting:

I am sure you will be glad to hear . . . I spent two happy hours with him yesterday afternoon, he would not hear of our parting, though earnestly did I, as I thought my duty required, urge him to it for prudence sake, and would have parted for ever on the spot, would he consent to it; but he said it should never be. (p. 546)

Thus Elinor is perspicacious enough to realize Lucy's motive in her reference to Mrs. Jennings, but too involved personally to suspect deceit concerning Edward.

Lucy's letters are a constant irritation to Elinor from their first meeting where she fondles letters from Edward to embarrass Elinor. ¹⁶⁹ Lascelles gives discerning commentary on this use of letters to disclose Lucy's true character. Jane Austen, she states, shows social inequalities in dialogue through "syntax and phrasing, rather than by vocabulary." She compares this method to Fanny Burney's Branghtons whose blatant vulgarity is instantly apparent in their use of language. Although the elder Steele sister knows how to manage her tongue with a degree of facility,

in a letter her crudeness and lack of education is readily
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visible. She begins her letter in the formal third
person probably following a pattern formulated in the
stereotyped letter-writing guides that were prevalent at
the time. As she becomes caught up in the passion of her
subject, however, she changes in the middle to the personal
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"I." The numerous grammatical mistakes and solecisms
are typical of the Austen method of allowing the character
172
to expose herself.

Just as it took only one letter from Mr. Collins to
expose his insincerity, so too, with Lucy Steele this one
letter is enough to expose her insensibility and gaucherie.
Another letter from Lucy, however, serves an important
purpose: it is an ironic contrast with the first. Though
the first letter reflects her insensibility, it is in this
second one that the extent of her ignorance is apparent.
This letter revealing what Jack calls a "vulgar little
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hussy" is written to Edward following her precipitous
marriage to his brother. The reader learns from this letter
what was only surmised in the first:

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Lascelles, pp. 95-96.

171

Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, p. 162.

172

Jack, p. 175.

173

Ibid.

Being very sure I have long lost your affections, I have thought myself at liberty to bestow my own on another, and have no doubt of being as happy with him as I once used to think I might be with you; but I scorn to accept a hand while the heart was another's. (p. 619)

Along with other Austen characters, Isabella Thorpe in Northanger Abbey is apportioned a fair share of defects. In common with Mary Crawford and Mary Musgrove, she is conceited; along with Lydia Bennet and Lucy Steele, she is insensible. The one complete letter that she writes in the novel, however, is distinctive for exposing her deceit. Like Frank Churchill, she writes what she would like her reader to believe rather than what is sincere and honest. The heroine of Northanger Abbey is at first captivated by her levity and self-confidence. Catherine naively trusts Isabella's first letter to Northanger "speaking peace and tenderness in every line." In a long letter, however, her perfidious character is revealed. Catherine remarks:

'She must think me an idiot, or she could not have written so; but perhaps this has served to make her character better known to me than mine to her. I see what she has been about. She is a vain coquette, and her tricks have not answered. I do not believe she had ever any regard either for James or for me, and I wish I had never known her.' (pp. 180, 181) 174

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All quotations from Northanger Abbey are from the Everyman's Library edition, Mary Lascelles, ed. (New York, 1963).

The letter that causes the disillusionment in Isabella's character begins innocently with excuses for her not writing. After it is initiated, the letter seems to seize control making her words impassioned. She denounces Bath as "horrid" and exults, "Thank God! We leave this vile place tomorrow." In the middle, as if remembering her purpose for writing, Isabella appears to be again subdued as in the following abrupt change:

I am quite uneasy about your dear brother, not having heard from him since he went to Oxford; and am fearful of some misunderstanding. Your kind offices will set all right: he is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it. The spring fashions are partly down . . . " (p. 179)

This section containing her protestations of love is ironically the least ardent in the letter. The sentiments are expressed mechanically displaying little feeling and even less sincerity. A. H. Wright claims that Isabella perpetrates an unplanned anti-climax by jumping from her concern for James to the spring fashions. He states further:

The juxtaposition of her reassertion of love for James with her remarks on the spring fashions only shows that she puts both on the same level and cannot be quite serious about Catherine's brother.¹⁷⁵

The letter reverts to passion again when Isabella mentions Captain Tilney. It is evident to Catherine and her hostess at Northanger that Isabella has been infatuated with Captain

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Wright, p. 188.

Tilney, who trifled with her affections and then dismissed her fawning devotion to pursue other amours. Her lines on the subject are memorable for their unintentional irony:

I rejoice to say, that the young man whom, of all others, I particularly abhor, has left Bath. You will know, from this description, I must mean Captain Tilney, who, as you may remember, was amazingly disposed to follow and tease me, before you went away. Afterwards he got worse, and became quite my shadow. Many girls might have been taken in, for never were such attentions; but I know the feeble sex too well. (p. 179)

Jack claims that Catherine had to learn like other Austen heroines "the important art of assessing character through
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letters.

Letters play important roles, for instance, in the lives of Elizabeth Bennet, Elinor Dashwood, Emma Woodhouse, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot. Their lives are affected favorably or otherwise in proportion to their ability to judge accurately the sincerity of the letter-writer through his letter. For example, Elizabeth Bennet must decide whether Darcy's letter condemning Wickham is sincere or fraudulent. Since she is predetermined to distrust Darcy, she does not accept him immediately upon reading his letter, but she begins to have doubts. Elinor Dashwood recognizes that her love for Edward Ferrars is doomed because she is unable to judge that sentiments in Lucy Steele's letters

are fabricated. Emma Woodhouse inaccurately prejudges Frank Churchill on the basis of his insidious letters. Her fantasies about him condition her to fall in love with him. Fanny Price, on the other hand, is an accurate analyzer. Edmund's letters, containing forthright protestations of love for Mary, and Mary's trifling letters create for her few problems of interpretation. Anne Elliot, also, needs little effort to interpret Frederick Wentworth's passionate letter which is the climax to her eight years of unflinching love.

Caroline Bingley in Pride and Prejudice exhibits characteristics remarkably comparable to those of Isabella Thorpe. Their letters, as well, share a closer affinity than any other of Jane Austen's female writers. Though Isabella's deceit shatters Catherine's affection for her, Caroline's deceit is too subtle to discourage Jane's faith in humanity. In common also with other Austen characters, she shows facets of her personality in discussions about letters and letter-writers as well as in her own letters. Caroline Bingley precipitates a revealing conversation with Mr. Darcy which once again is of great consequence. Not only do Caroline and Mr. Darcy reveal themselves, but Elizabeth and Bingley add comments which add to the readers' conceptions of them as well.

The motivation for this discussion is engendered by Mr. Darcy's preoccupation with a letter to his sister.

Miss Bingley is determined to distract him by "repeatedly calling off his attention by messages to his sister." The author tells us that

The perpetual commendations of the lady, either on his handwriting, or on the evenness of his lines, or on the length of his letter, with the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received, formed a curious dialogue, and was exactly in unison with her opinion of each. (p. 21)

Elizabeth is "sufficiently amused" by their conversation because Darcy's sarcastic rejoinders in no way deter Miss Bingley's inquisitiveness. Mr. Bingley adds comments about his own style of writing which contrast sharply with Darcy's:

'My ideas flow so rapidly that I have not time to express them -- by which means my letters sometimes convey no ideas at all to my correspondents.' (p. 22)

Elizabeth is appreciative of Bingley's humility, but Darcy remonstrates with him for justifying careless and unimaginative letter-writing.

An early sample of Caroline's letter-writing style is frivolous and exuberant, rather than deceitful:

My Dear Friend,

If you are not so compassionate as to dine today with Louisa and me, we shall be in danger of hating each other for the rest of our lives, for a whole day's tête-a-tête between two women can never end without a quarrel. Come as soon as you can on the receipt of this. My brother and the gentlemen are to dine with the officers. Yours ever, Caroline Bingley (p. 14)

In a later letter, written on "a sheet of elegant, little, hot-pressed paper, well-covered with a lady's fair,

flowing hand," she writes to Jane concerning the move from Netherfield; she disguises her lack of feeling under protestations of warmth and friendship. Elizabeth listens to "these high-flown expressions . . . with all the insensibility of distrust." (p. 52) Caroline, it seems, had previously underestimated her brother's attraction to Jane. Becoming aware of it, she does not react with delight, as Mary Crawford does in Mansfield Park, at the thought of her brother's mésalliance. Her ambitions include affecting a union between Bingley and the wealthy Miss Darcy.

Jane insists that Elizabeth continue reading Caroline's scathing letter and points out the part that "particularly hurts":

'I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments; and the affection she inspires in Louisa and myself is heightened into something still more interesting, from the hope we dare entertain of her being hereafter our sister. I do not know whether I ever before mentioned to you my feelings on this subject . . . My brother admires her greatly already, he will have frequent opportunity now of seeing her on the most intimate footing . . .'(p. 53)

Jane is stunned by the contents, but she is unwilling to believe that Miss Bingley's motives are insincere; she feels, in spite of Elizabeth's observations to the contrary, that Caroline wants to spare her of further involvement with Bingley whose affections are committed elsewhere. Jane answers Elizabeth's astute criticism with characteristic optimism:

'Caroline is incapable of wilfully deceiving anyone; and all that I can hope in this case is that she is deceived herself.' (p. 55)

Another imperfection of character notable in Jane Austen's caricatures is an emptiness of mind. Mrs. Jennings in Sense and Sensibility is the finest example, for she personifies vacuity. She occupies herself with meaningless pursuits, thrives on gossip, and is impervious to the most blatant insincerity. Like Mr. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice she reveals her character in reaction to letters rather than through writing her own, for we are given but a few excerpts from her letters. Miss Kaye-Smith suggests that Mrs. Jennings' name should be changed to "Mrs. Gullible," because she is honestly deceived by Lucy Steele's letter. She is flattered by Lucy's panegyric and exclaims "'very well indeed! How prettily she writes! . . . That sentence is prettily turned . . . It is as pretty a letter as ever I saw, and does Lucy's head and heart great credit.'" Such insensibility parades her emptiness before the reader.

Mrs. Jennings¹⁷⁷ is a romantic who revels in what she believes to be an unofficial engagement between Marianne and Willoughby.¹⁷⁸ She pokes and pries and has comments to

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Child, XII, 263, finds fault with the handling of Mrs. Jennings and her relations. They do provide a kind of "comic relief" but are not controlled within the novel with the usual Austen finesse.

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Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, pp. 162-163.

make on the letters that are delivered to Marianne. One of these letters she deduces contains bad news, for she has learned that Willoughby is engaged to Miss Grey. Though she loves gossip, she remorsefully realizes that

' . . . the letter that came today finished it! Poor soul! I am sure if I had had a notion of it, I would not have joked her about it for all my money.' (p. 478)

Mrs. Jennings is given little information concerning Marianne's romance. She never tires of fantasizing about it, and on one occasion unknowingly perpetrates a cruel hoax. With a letter from Mrs. Dashwood in her hand, she tells Marianne, "Now, my dear, I bring you something that I am sure will do you good." Marianne, breathlessly anxious to hear from Willoughby, immediately concludes the letter is from him. With hopes thus stirred she takes the letter from Mrs. Jennings. The author describes this poignant moment:

The handwriting of her mother, never till then unwelcome, was before her; and, in the acuteness of the disappointment which followed such an ecstasy of more than hope, she felt as if, till that instant, she had never suffered. (p. 484)

Marianne yielded to tears which "streamed from her eyes with passionate violence." Though Mrs. Jennings is astonished by Marianne's outburst, she completely misconstrues the silent accusation. The author claims that Marianne's reproach was

. . . so entirely lost on its object, that after many expressions of pity, she withdrew, still referring her to the letter for comfort. (p. 484)

We are not given a sample of Mrs. Jennings' writing style, and it is just as well, for a letter from her would be as informative and reliable as a local scandal sheet. A few sentences extracted from her letters corroborate the fact that she writes as unfeelingly as she speaks. In a letter to Sir John Middleton she prematurely announces that Marianne is close to death. In the end of the novel she is obliged to write to Elinor after she learns of Lucy Steele's duplicity. She writes, according to Miss Austen,

to vent her honest indignation against the
jilting girl, and pour forth her compassion
towards poor Mr. Edward, who, she was sure, had
quite doted upon the worthless hussy, and was now,
by all accounts, almost broken-hearted, at Oxford.
(p. 624)

Lady Bertram in Mansfield Park, unlike Mrs. Jennings, is not interested in gossip, in romance, or in activity of any kind. She is thoroughly indolent, languishing through the pages of the novel in a lethargic trance. One interest arouses her, however, and that, suitably enough, is letter-writing. She is a supreme representative, Miss Kaye-Smith tells us, of the class of pampered ladies of the time who with little else to occupy their days penned charming notes with ease and eloquence and cultivated letter-writing as an art.

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We are given only selections from these epistolary

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Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, p. 166.

masterpieces along with comments by the author on her style. When Fanny leaves Mansfield for Portsmouth, Lady Bertram promises "to be a good correspondent." Her letters, however, provide little opportunity for displaying her "creditable, commonplace, amplifying style," for, as the author states, "everybody at all addicted to letter writing, without having much to say, which will include a large proportion of the female world at least, must feel with Lady Bertram."

Therefore, when her son becomes ill, she glories in having a subject suitable to her epistolary endeavors. Her vanity and indolence do not diminish until she realizes that he is actually in danger of dying. Then there is notable change in her "diffuse style" and "in the language of real fear and alarm," she writes to Fanny of her fears as if she were speaking to her:

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He is just come, my dear Fanny, and is taken upstairs; and I am so shocked to see him, that I do not know what to do. I am sure he has been very ill. Poor Tom, I am quite grieved for him, and very much frightened, and so is Sir Thomas; and how glad I should be, if you were here to comfort me. (p. 353)

Thus we see that even when roused by maternal worry, Lady Bertram is still too indolent to expend much of her small store of energy.

In contrast to Lady Bertram is Mrs. Weston in Emma.

We understand that she is a thoroughly good person who has devoted her life to her young charge, becoming her confidante and companion. We see her generosity in her reactions to her stepson's letters and her concern that he has misrepresented his intentions to Emma. She feels herself "a most fortunate woman" because of his attentions to her. Her letters are actually notes to Emma, usually explaining Frank Churchill's sudden departures. We are given one note, which is the prelude to Frank's long letter of explanation. It is marked for its kindness and concern for others, typical of the selfless character of the writer. Mrs. Weston like Mr. Bennet is a more noble character and is not characterized in her letters with a dominant weakness; her importance in the novel is as a liaison between Frank Churchill's letters and Emma.

Realistic Exposition of Facts

Although the revelation of character is Jane Austen's prime reason for employing letters, she uses them, also, to present information in a realistic manner; at the same time, they dramatically heighten the suspense, clarify and intensify important facts, as well as typify the character of the letter-writer. Naturalness is maintained because, according to Edward Wagenknecht, an informative letter allows the author to relate necessary facts in a concise

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and believable manner. Another reason why letters are so natural in Jane Austen's novels is that communications among the characters never appear to come from the author's knowledge but arise realistically from the situation. Dramatic intensity, another important effect of the epistolary method, is heightened because there is rapport between the characters and the reader; this rapport is engendered if the information is written down when the character is in the throes of an intense situation. Such feelings could not be conveyed merely through the author's summary. The letters also provide a means to unravel perplexing facts and to understand mysterious characters. Such letters are natural and believable only because they are typical of the letter-writer. Mary Lascelles explains that Jane Austen was consistent in her endeavor to have information "faithfully observe the idiom of the character through whom they reach us, whether in the form of dialogue, letter, or reflection."¹⁸²

In Pride and Prejudice there are notable examples of Jane Austen's use of letters to achieve the realistic presentation of facts. The letters of Jane Bennet, Mr. and

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Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel (New York, 1943), p. 53.

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Lascelles, p. 101.

Mrs. Gardiner, and Mr. Darcy will be discussed here because their most important function is to transmit news from one character to another rather than to heighten the dramatic suspense, or to typify the letter-writer. Of course, as the heading of this section says, we are concerned with the realistic presentation of this news. Realism is achieved only because it is a logical extenuation of the plot and is typical of the letter-writer.

While Elizabeth Bennet is vacationing with her aunt and uncle, she receives a distressing letter from her sister Jane. The author tells us that the letter "contained an account of all their little parties and engagements, with such news as the country afforded; but the latter half . . . gave more important intelligence." (p. 117) This remaining information, no longer summarized by the author, is presented in two letters in Jane's own words, explaining, first, that Lydia Bennet has eloped with Wickham and, secondly, that Mr. Wickham "never intended . . . to marry Lydia at all." Jane further explains how this information was conveyed to the Bennets: Colonel Forester, Lydia's host at Brighton, discovering her absence and fearing Wickham's motives, came to Longbourn "with the kindest concern . . . and broke his apprehensions to us in a manner most creditable to his heart." (p. 117)

Thus the author in this letter accounts for pertinent information (the how, when, and why of Lydia's disappearance)

in a personal and emotional manner. Besides the facts involved, there is a feeling of empathy between the reader and Jane. If the contents of this letter were revealed by anyone but Jane, there would not be the same impact and intensity. Jane, the angelic member of the family, obliged to recount this shameful episode, is filled with remorse and despair. Because we see her in an untypical mood, her emotions are transferred to the reader, as they are to Elizabeth; this is one of the prime advantages of the epistolary technique. It is a medium, according to V. S. Boas, through which impressions can be conveyed "while feelings have all their first poignancy and facts their original clearness of outline."¹⁸³ Within the omniscient point of view, the letter provides a mode for stylistic variation; the variation itself is a factor in affecting the reader's emotional involvement.

Mr. Gardiner, the mediator in the affair of Bennet versus Wickham, writes several informative letters from London. His letters give him a reason for being in the novel, for he is not characterized in any depth. The reader is vaguely aware that he is a "sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister, well-bred and agreeable." He is seen as his wife's shadow until he fulfills his *raison d'être* by sending these communications. The fact

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Boas, pp. 40-41.

that Mr. Gardiner rather than Mr. Bennet, who also is in London, sends the information to the other Bennets enforces the naturalness, for the reader knows that Mr. Bennet abhors writing. Mr. Gardiner's relationship (an in-law who is removed enough to be objective) plus his stability make him perfectly suited to transmit confidential information. The author prepares the reader to accept his active participation:

When Mr. Gardiner was gone, the Bennets were certain at least of receiving constant information of what was going on . . . (p. 126)

The first of these informative letters is quoted in part. He explains what he has done to locate Lydia and Wickham and reports that his efforts have been fruitless. His second letter is given only summary treatment, since there is still no news to report, though he does acquaint them with the distressing intelligence that Wickham owes a number of gambling debts. He tells them also to expect Mr. Bennet at home. Thus, Mr. Gardiner is left in London to handle the affair, for the author relates that Mr. Bennet

Rendered spiritless by the ill success of all their endeavours, . . . had yielded to his brother-in-law's entreaty that he would return to his family, and leave it to him to do whatever occasion might suggest to be advisable for continuing their pursuit. (p. 123)

Having Mr. Bennet at home to receive the letters from his brother-in-law makes the succeeding scenes more natural, for the monetary nature of Mr. Gardiner's communications

is appropriate to the head of the household. An approval of Mr. Gardiner's financial arrangements from either Mrs. Bennet or one of the girls would seem contrived.

The most important information comes to the Bennets in an "express" which is quoted in its entirety. Mr. Gardiner relates that he has tidings about his niece at last: he has found Lydia with Wickham, has spoken with the two transgressors and has discovered that Wickham did not intend to marry her. There is, he states, the possibility of resolving the matter, if Mr. Bennet will comply with negotiations made in his behalf. These monetary conditions are listed in the letter, and the recommendation is forwarded that Mr. Bennet immediately write his consent. Mr. Gardiner states that "Mr. Wickham's circumstances are not so hopeless as they are generally believed to be." He tells Mr. Bennet to "stay quietly at Longbourn."

The reason for Mr. Gardiner's last communication from London is explained by the author: "The principal purport of his letter was to inform them that Mr. Wickham had resolved on quitting the Militia." (p. 134) In the same letter Mr. Gardiner relates that Wickham, upon joining the Regular's, will be stationed in the North; his debts have been honored in a manner which Mr. Gardiner methodically summarizes. The letter ends with his mediation on behalf of the newlyweds in requesting an invitation for them to visit Longbourn. Thus, each of Mr. Gardiner's

letters contains necessary information concerning Lydia and Wickham; each is awaited breathlessly by the Bennets and heightens the suspense; and each (solid and unemotional) is an extension of Mr. Bennet's character.

Mr. Gardiner's communications from London satisfy all but one of the Bennets. Elizabeth senses omissions in his narrative. She has learned by chance that Mr. Darcy was in attendance at the marriage of Lydia and Wickham; her curiosity prompts the request for further details from her aunt:

You may readily comprehend what my curiosity must be to know a person unconnected with any of us, and (comparatively speaking) a stranger to our family, should have been amongst you at such a time. Pray write instantly, and let me understand it . . . (p. 137)

Mrs. Gardiner's response provides Elizabeth with all the facts. It is appropriate for the additional intelligence to come from Mrs. Gardiner rather than from her husband, since the romantic undertone of her disclosures could not be as effectively told by a man.

Mrs. Gardiner's long and thorough letter is dramatically intense with numerous references in italics to emphasize a double meaning for Darcy's intervention; for example, she writes he had "ANOTHER INTEREST" and "ANOTHER MOTIVE." Mrs. Gardiner did not know that Elizabeth was unaware of the true state of affairs, so she writes:

Nothing but the belief of your being a party concerned would have allowed Mr. Gardiner to act as he has done. But if you are really innocent and ignorant, I must be more explicit.
(p. 138)

Here the intensity is at a high level, for the reader, sharing Elizabeth's growing feeling for Darcy, senses the value that her aunt's disclosures will have on their relationship. Mrs. Gardiner explains that Mr. Darcy felt obliged to intervene, for it

was his conviction of its being owing to himself that Wickham's worthlessness had not been so well known, as to make it impossible for a young woman of character to confide in him. (p. 138)

Darcy, thus, had a valid reason for intervening in the Bennets' affairs, but his efforts, it appears, were quite excessive: Mrs. Gardiner continues to relate that Darcy contacted a Mrs. Younge in London who knew of Wickham's whereabouts; he bribed her to get information, tracked down Wickham and Lydia, and forced Wickham to face his responsibility. After satisfactorily arranging matters, Mr. Darcy consulted with Mr. Gardiner.

She relates further how despondent Mr. Gardiner was for taking the credit for completing the affair:

I really believe your letter this morning gave him great pleasure, because it required an explanation that would rob him of his borrowed feathers, and give the praise where it was due.
(p. 139)

This is a natural tribute by a devoted wife to her husband's strength of character. Mrs. Gardiner's manner, dignified and gentle, is notable throughout the letter, but this

reference to her husband is particularly characteristic of her sympathetic nature.

Besides the facts transmitted in the letter, there is additional reflecting on Mr. Darcy which gives a final picture of him:

His behaviour to us has, in every respect, been as pleasing as when we were in Derbyshire. His understanding and opinions all please me; he wants nothing but a little more liveliness, and THAT, if he marry PRUDENTLY, his wife may teach him.

Hers is the first truly appreciative account of Darcy's character.

Another letter which brings to the surface many facts which were formerly submerged in a sea of mystery is Mr. Darcy's lengthy letter. His proposal to Elizabeth comes as a surprise more to her than to the reader, but the information contained in his letter is received with amazement by Elizabeth. Darcy's letter, consisting of "two sheets of letter paper, written quite through, in a very close hand," brings a defense of what he terms "two offences of a very different nature and by no means of equal magnitude." The first offence concerns his intervention in Mr. Bingley's affairs and the second his maligning Mr. Wickham's character. In the matter concerning his friend and Elizabeth's sister, Darcy admits contriving to separate them. He claims that he would not have obtruded his own feelings if he thought that Jane exhibited

more than a casual interest in Bingley. The disparaging statements that he makes about her family are not news to Elizabeth and though he apologizes by writing, "Pardon me -- It pains me to offend you," he then proceeds to give vituperative comments about her closest relations.

The fact that Darcy was involved in a scheme to dissuade Bingley from a connection with the Bennets is not of especial interest to Elizabeth, for she had conjectured as much. She is, however, attentive to the knowledge that Bingley did not know that Jane was in the city; his absence, therefore, was not due to lack of interest.

The other matter with which the letter deals he labels "the more weighty accusation, of having injured Mr. Wickham." He claims that the only way to answer her charges is "by laying before her the whole of Wickham's connection with Darcy's family." His lengthy revelations read like a biography of Wickham. Each statement adds to a vile portrait. Whether the following is an accurate account is not disclosed at this time: Wickham's father held until his death a responsible position with the Darcys. The son was a favorite with Mr. Darcy's father, who had financed the boy's education. In the senior Darcy's will was the recommendation that his son "promote Wickham's advancement in the best manner that Wickham's profession might allow." Darcy had for a long time been acquainted

with Wickham's character and knew that "Mr. Wickham ought not to be a clergyman." Wickham, instead, stated the desire to study law, so Darcy made a financial settlement with him to replace the assistance specified in the will. After dissipating the money, Wickham again sought assistance from Darcy who refused it. Motivated by spite and personal profit, Wickham bewitched Darcy's sister Georgiana, who was then only fifteen years old, and would have eloped with her if she had not disclosed the situation to Darcy. In conclusion Darcy writes:

This, madam, is a faithful narrative of every event in which we have been concerned together; and if you do not absolutely reject it as false, you will, I hope, acquit me henceforth of cruelty towards Mr. Wickham. (p. 88)

There is a great deal of information given in this letter; facts are revealed in a natural manner which heighten the suspense. There is, however, little rapport between Darcy and the reader, because the reader has no more knowledge of the truth of his statements than Elizabeth does. When, however, Darcy's character and the facts in his letter are completely understood, the letter will again become important in the light of this new knowledge. The letter will be reread many times by Elizabeth; the reader also will undoubtedly reread it. These facts might account for Barker's statement that this letter is the "decisive moment," because the facts presented to Elizabeth help to bring into focus other comments about Darcy which she has up to this moment discounted.

Darcy's letter is a fine example of one given primarily to disclose unsuspected facts, but it also warrants Kennedy's belief that it "does more than inform us and Elizabeth of facts which we did not know." It is the first time that the reader along with Elizabeth has an insight into "the new Darcy, the true Darcy."¹⁸⁴

The Control of Emotion

There are other letters in Jane Austen's novels which are not given primarily to reveal character or to present information; they are the letters in which feelings are effusive. Such letters reflect her closeness to the sentimentality of the epistolary novel, and yet Jane Austen was never a sentimentalist. At strategic points in her novels, however, letters are introduced as a natural mode for what Black terms "analysis and reflection."¹⁸⁵ Further, the sentimental letter provides another use for Jane Austen, the satirist. The "direct expression of emotion," according to McCarthy,¹⁸⁶ is a crime of the first magnitude in a satirist. Although she uses these letters to expose her characters' loss of emotional control, Jane Austen's own voice maintains its objectivity. Hence the appropriateness of Black's term

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M. Kennedy, "How Ought A Novelist . . . ?" Fortnightly Review, CLXXVIII (1952), 341.

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Black, p. 103.

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MacCarthy, p. 241.

"analysis and reflection." Examples of this use are Edmund's prolix epistle to Fanny in Mansfield Park; Marianne's impassioned and naive notes to Willoughby in Sense and Sensibility; Jane's poignant letter to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's short but affecting note to her aunt, both in Pride and Prejudice.

Edmund Bertram, in Mansfield Park, stung by Cupid's arrow, is ineffectual in his pursuit of Mary Crawford; he writes his cousin Fanny Price a letter which reveals his overwrought condition. Fanny deduces what the contents contain when she notes the length of the letter and "prepared herself for a minute detail of happiness and a profusion of love and praise towards the fortunate creature Mary, who was now the mistress of his fate."

The letter opens with his apology for not writing from London, but at the time, he was only interested in communicating good news. He has returned to Mansfield and explains to Fanny that unfolding everything to her "will be a comfort." Mary's behavior, he claims, was less than he hoped for: "she was altered; my first reception was so unlike what I had hoped." He attributes her coolness to the influence of Mrs. Frasers and her sister who "have been leading Mary astray for years." The comparison of Mary with them and then Mary with Fanny calls forth his prejudicial feelings for Mary:

When I think of her great attachment to you, indeed, and the whole of her judicious, upright conduct as a sister, she appears a very different

creature, capable of everything noble . . . I cannot give her up, Fanny. She is the only woman in the world whom I could ever think of as a wife. (p. 328)

From his panegyric he reverts again to his own feelings and contemplates how he will bear it when he is emphatically denied. His resolution is to write to her for "I shall be able to write much that I could not say" but proceeds to condemn the use of a letter:

A letter exposes to all the evil of consultation, and where the mind is anything short of perfect decision, an adviser may, in an unlucky moment, lead it to do what it may afterwards regret. (p. 329)

Exhausted from his soul-searching, Edmund changes to an assessment of his sister's marriage; he claims, "there is no appearance of unhappiness." The letter concludes with warm and friendly remembrances to her from his family plus his own compliment:

You are very much wanted. I miss you more than I can express. (p. 330)

Fanny displays as much emotion while reading the letter as Edmund must have expended in its composition. She reflects:

'He is blinded, and nothing will open his eyes, nothing can, after having had truths before him so long in vain -- He will marry her, and be poor and miserable. God grant that her influence does not make him cease to be respectable!' (pp. 330, 331)

In Sense and Sensibility Marianne Dashwood also pours out her heart in her letters. These letters are a record of her relationship with John Willoughby. Her notes to him are precipitated by the romantic notion of their mutual love.

The reader is provided with an opportunity to peruse them only after the affair is terminated, when Willoughby returns her letters. There are three of Marianne's notes given. The first is a short exuberant one telling Willoughby that she is in London: "How surprised you will be, Willoughby, on receiving this! and I think you will feel something more than surprise when you know I am in town." The second note tenderly expresses her disappointment for not having seen him at the dance at the Middletons' and her "astonishment at not having received any answer" to her note. The last note, as Elinor expresses it, "so full of affection and confidence" was written after Marianne witnessed his uncavalier behavior to her when they accidentally met.

What am I to imagine, Willoughby, by your behaviour last night? Again I demand an explanation of it. I was prepared to meet you with the pleasure which our separation naturally produced, with the familiarity which our intimacy at Barton appeared to me to justify. I was repulsed indeed!
(p. 472)

She continues in the letter to question what his aloofness could mean and ends:

My feelings are at present in a state of dreadful indecision; I wish to acquit you, but certainty on either side will be ease to what I now suffer. If your sentiments are no longer what they were, you will return my notes, and the lock of hair which is in your possession. M. D.
(p. 472)

Elinor, the sister characterized consistently as "Sense" reflects on her sister's "Sensibility" after reading her "unsolicited proofs of tenderness." Not only has Marianne

erred in expressing herself openly and passionately in letters, but by merely corresponding she has placed herself in a compromising situation, for letters between unmarried couples were socially taboo. Elinor had assumed an engagement on the basis of their writing.¹⁸⁷

Miss Kaye-Smith believes that the expressions of emotion revealed in Marianne's letters would be "unendurably painful" in any situation but a letter. There is, she claims, "passion betrayed like wild music between her every written line."¹⁸⁸

Another instance of discourtesy causes Jane Bennet in Pride and Prejudice to write to her sister about her disillusionment in Caroline Bingley. The letter is far less impassioned than one would be from Marianne Dashwood, for instance, because the writer is able to exercise control even in a distraught state. She begins:

My dearest Lizzy will, I am sure, be incapable of triumphing in her better judgment, at my expense, when I confess myself to have been entirely deceived in Miss Bingley's regard for me. (p. 65)

She continues with details concerning Miss Bingley's reciprocal visit with her which gave no pleasure to either. Miss Bingley was "so altered a creature, that when she went away, I was perfectly resolved to continue the acquaintance no longer." Characteristically Jane devotes some lines to justify Miss Bingley's actions and to pity her. She pardons

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Robert W. Chapman, Jane Austen, Facts and Problems (Oxford, 1948), p. 512.

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Kaye-Smith, More Talk of Jane Austen, p. 164.

her behavior because it resulted from concern for her brother: "Whatever anxiety she may feel on his behalf, is natural and amiable." Jane reticently expresses suspicion of intrigue in connection with Bingley's decreased affection for her. She rapidly changes to optimism, however:

But I will endeavour to banish every painful thought, and think only of what will make me happy; your affection and the invariable kindness of my dear uncle and aunt. (p. 66)

To be given a letter by one of Jane Austen's heroines is an uncustomary occurrence, but to be given one which is written by a heroine in a moment of ecstasy is doubly rare. Elizabeth Bennet writes a short but intoxicating note to her aunt; it is written in Darcy's presence after their feelings for each other are confirmed. She thanks her for satisfying her curiosity about Darcy's mediation in Lydia's unsavory elopement, and continues, excitedly, to describe her relationship with Mr. Darcy:

You supposed more than really existed. But NOW suppose as much as you choose; give a loose to your fancy, indulge your imagination in every possible flight which the subject will afford, and unless you believe me actually married, you cannot greatly err . . . I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but no one with such justice. I am happier even than Jane; she only smiles, I laugh. (pp. 164, 165)

This short, enthusiastic note shows Elizabeth's intense emotion; it is uncharacteristic only because she confides personal feelings in a letter. Elizabeth's letter is a perfect example of the author's instinct for effective use

of epistolary material; here, as in the other personal letters cited, is a blending of ingredients to make a superb creation: expressions characteristic of the writer, variation in the narrative method, and self-revelation of the characters' feelings.

Structural Effectiveness

Jane Austen uses letters within the structure of her novels to serve many functions, as has been noted. Besides revealing character, presenting facts in a natural manner, and providing a vehicle for the uncharacteristic display of emotion, they can also be an important link in the development of the plot. Examples of this use are Wentworth's letter of proposal in Persuasion which is the climax of the novel; Willoughby's shocking letter in Sense and Sensibility which is the turning point of the novel and the culmination of Marianne's faith in men; Edmund's letter in Mansfield Park, which brings an end to Fanny's exile and clears the way for the final events; and Jane's brief but urgent letter in the opening pages of Pride and Prejudice, which begins the main action by hastening Elizabeth to Netherfield (where she nurses her sister and is observed and admired by Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy). These letters with the reactions that they engender are indispensable to the progression of the novel.

A most important letter towards which an entire novel progresses is Wentworth's famous letter in Persuasion. An

explanation of pertinent events leading up to this letter in which he "poured out his feelings" is necessary to an understanding of the letter itself.

Anne Elliot has been in love with Frederick Wentworth for eight and a half years. Though she had rejected his proffered love on the advice of her godmother and trusted friend, Lady Russell, her love for him has never wavered. When Frederick returns to Somersetshire as Captain Wentworth, he is no longer socially unacceptable; he takes little notice of Anne, however, and eagerly seeks the company of the neighborhood's unattached young ladies. Anne stoically accepts his indifference, and, though the realization is painful, feels there is nothing left of his former affection for her. It is on the subject of the constancy of women versus men that she engages in a conversation with Westworth's friend, Captain Harville. She is unaware that Wentworth with unabashed curiosity is listening to her claims that a woman remains faithful to the man she loves even "when existence or when hope is gone." The two realize how near Wentworth is only when his pen dramatically drops during their discussion. After this interruption, their conversation continues in the same vein, and Captain Wentworth writes furiously at the desk. When Westworth finishes his writing, he quickly prepares the envelope and hastily departs. Anne barely has the opportunity to move her position, however, when Wentworth, on the pretence of forgetting his

gloves, returns and surreptitiously leaves in their place the following letter for her:

I can listen no longer in silence. I must speak to you by such means as are within my reach. You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone forever. I offer myself to you again with a heart even more your own, than when you almost broke it eight years and a half ago. Dare not say that man forgets sooner than woman, that his love has an earlier death. I have loved none but you. Unjust I may have been, but never inconstant. You alone have brought me to Bath. For you alone I think and plan. Have you not seen this? Can you fail to have understood my wishes? I had not waited even these ten days, could I have read your feelings, as I think you must have penetrated mine. I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others. Too good, too excellent creature! You do us justice, indeed. You do believe that there is true attachment and constancy among men. Believe it to be most fervent, most undeviating in

F. W. (p. 205)

The charged atmosphere in this scene is the result of clever handling by the author. Throughout the dialogue, while Wentworth is writing, the reader expects something of import to happen, but Wentworth leaves deflating these expectations. The reader has barely enough time to realize there is a fluctuation in tone, however, before Wentworth returns. ¹⁸⁹ The whole progression of events then climaxes in the emotional letter. The short, unvaried sentences, beginning predominantly with "I," give the letter a breath-

less quality which attests to its hasty composition.

Having the structural climax of the novel occur in a letter is unusual in the history of fiction. It was a unique inspiration¹⁹⁰ and shows, according to Jack, the author's "closeness to the epistolary tradition."¹⁹¹

In the original draft of the novel the climax did not occur in a letter but in a dramatic scene primarily comic in tone. B. C. Southam claims that this comedy is "wholly out of keeping with the seriousness and emotional intensity required of the novel's climax." The circumstances of this original work are an artificially contrived meeting between Wentworth and Anne; their final declarations are made after clumsy misinterpretations are clarified.¹⁹² The claim is made in the Memoir, XII, that Jane Austen was dissatisfied with this chapter and wanted to make it unusual and memorable.¹⁹³ This she achieved in full measure.

The change to the use of a letter is, according to Miss Lascelles, an instance of the author's realization that her own words could not do justice to the emotional demands of the situation; she uses the letter as a personal vehicle for

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Kaye-Smith, Speaking of Jane Austen, p. 153.

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Jack, p. 173.

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Southam, p. 88.

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Baker, VI, 117-118.

climactically exposing Wentworth's true feelings.

Another letter which serves as a climax is John Willoughby's letter to Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility.

In this case the letter brings a climax to Marianne's aspirations but is not the climax of the novel. Willoughby's letter to Marianne is an attempt to absolve himself from his previous attentions to her. Elinor Dashwood's reaction to his letter is succinctly summarized after she peruses it:

. . . she was not aware that such language could be suffered to announce their separation! nor could she have supposed Willoughby capable of departing so far from the appearance of every honourable and delicate feeling -- so far from the common decorum of a gentleman, as to send a letter so impudently cruel: . . . a letter of which, every line was an insult, and which proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villainy. (p. 469)

The letter of which she speaks so strongly deserves her deprecations. It is not, however, on the surface an insulting letter. He speaks of the "honour of receiving Marianne's letter" and "his most grateful pleasure" in knowing her family. It is in the ironical contrast to his former amorous behavior that the letter appears malicious and insensible. He denies that he has ever had more than a friendly interest in Marianne and apologizes for any false impression:

My esteem for your whole family is very sincere; but if I have been so unfortunate as to give rise to a belief of more than I felt, or meant to express, I shall reproach myself for not having been more guarded in my profession of that esteem. (p. 468)

Marianne had previous to his letter met with a personal rebuff from Willoughby which left her confused and depressed but not without hope. His letter, so cold and austere, perpetrates a final break in their relationship. Wright claims that the letter is the climax to Marianne's "feverish access of grief." It is also the turning point in the novel, for Marianne, denied of any hope of the continuance of her love, wallows in despair and depression which culminates in a severe illness.

The letter that Fanny Price receives in Mansfield Park from Edmund Bertram is not so rapturously received as Frederick Wentworth's in Persuasion; nor is it so completely discouraging as Willoughby's to Marianne in Sense and Sensibility. The letter, in fact, does contain an account of much happiness, but it puts Fanny "in the greatest danger of being exquisitely happy, while so many were miserable" for it is the letter that precludes her return to Mansfield. The letter is structurally important because it brings an end to her exile and prepares the way for the final events in the story.

The importance of Edmund's letter, therefore, is not what it says but what it causes, though it reveals new

information also. We learn that Maria and Henry, who had run away together, have not been found and that Julia, his other sister, has eloped with Yates. At another time this news would be quite alarming but compared to her sister's perfidious conduct (leaving her husband and running away with Henry Crawford), the marriage is received with little agitation. The main communication begins after his disclosures about his sisters:

My father is not overpowered. More cannot be hoped. He is still able to think and act; and I write, by his desire, to propose your returning home. He is anxious to get you there for my mother's sake. I shall be at Portsmouth the morning after you receive this, and hope to find you ready to set off for Mansfield. (p. 345)

This letter, as Jack points out, "heralds Fanny's own happy ending."¹⁹⁵

The last letter to be discussed as an example of Jane Austen's use of letters as a structural device is in essence but a short note. Elizabeth Bennet in the beginning of Pride and Prejudice receives a note from her sister who has been visiting Jane Bingley at Netherfield. Jane who needs her sister's moral and physical aid tries to make her request as unalarming as possible:

My dearest Lizzy,

I find myself very unwell this morning, which I suppose, is to be imputed to my getting wet through yesterday. My kind friends will not hear of my returning home till I am better . . . (p. 15)

Thus Elizabeth, responding to Jane's letter, hastens to her and to romance, for Mr. Darcy is also a guest of the Bingleys. In such close proximity he has opportunity to observe Elizabeth's concerned and solicitous ministrations to her sister. Jane's note, then, is far more important in the development of the novel than its briefness and mildness might indicate.

There is, as these many examples attest, a prominent use of letters within the novels of Jane Austen. It has been shown that she was influenced by Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney and that she had a long experimental period of almost exclusive use of the epistolary method. It is from their influence and from her experimentation that the six major novels evolved; this supreme achievement was to give their creator a prominent place in the history of the English novel. No one factor can be cited as Miss Austen's outstanding contribution, for each novel is a synthesis of many superior qualities. The letters, however, so prominently and effectively used within the novels have been considered here as one substantial reason for her success.

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