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Theory and Theory of Mind: Austen as Wollstonecraft's Judicious Narrator

"The person, be it gentleman or lady, who has not pleasure in a good novel, must be intolerably stupid." ~Jane Austen

"The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them" ~Mary Wollstonecraft

When Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, she couldn't have known that in the following years, some of her arguments, initially written in a logical polemic, would be reiterated within the pages of multiple novels written by Jane Austen. Though Austen is often criticized for writing unrealistic romantic novels, educated readers can see the deep threads of social criticism woven into each of her tales. Among these social criticisms, a reader will find that Austen examines some of the same social issues that Wollstonecraft called into question only years earlier, particularly the poor education of women and the unstable basis for marriage among the upper and middle classes.

Austen and Wollstonecraft were near contemporaries who came from different backgrounds. Despite the differences in their age and circumstances, there are many similarities between them. Both women lived only until about 40 years old. Both women authored books that are now considered classics. Both women's books criticize many of the same things from the society they lived in, especially the marriages of the time. The two main differences between these two women and their books is that first, they came from different social classes, which

certainly shaped their ideologies. The other difference is that Mary Wollstonecraft wrote mainly logical arguments while Jane Austen wrote fiction novels.

The “logic vs. emotion” argument is one that has been around for decades and the greatest works of these two authors, Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, are two books that lend themselves as perfect candidates for that very argument. Which of these works has a more lasting impact on its reader? During the age of reason, it would seem Wollstonecraft’s treatises would be more persuasive and have a greater effect on the reader. However while Wollstonecraft's theoretical polemic arguments are more powerful logically, Austen's applied narrative theory is more emotionally impactful for readers because of the way our brains experience the different genres.

BIOGRAPHY

In order to understand the works of these authors, let us first understand a little of their lives. Wollstonecraft was born in 1759 into a large family with an abusive father. Her young life was full of uncertainty and instability. It is believed that her radicalism began because of these early circumstances. She saw the effects of her parents’ poor marriage and later saw many other unhappy marriages when she took work as a governess. It was because of these unhappy relationships that she became a proponent for education reform for young girls. She published *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* to show how these reforms would not only improve their lives but improve marriages and therefore improve society as a whole (*Women* 47).

Although Wollstonecraft’s ideas were unusual, her ideas on education were widely discussed. Her thoughts about marriage were highly controversial from the beginning. Yet she wasn’t considered a radical until after her death when her husband, William Godwin, published a

biography of Wollstonecraft revealing her extra-marital pregnancy and multiple suicide attempts. Once people knew about her unconventional life, her writings became tainted and Wollstonecraft was cast as a radical (*Women* 49).

In contrast, we now look at Jane Austen who was born in 1775, just 16 years after Wollstonecraft was born. As a member of the lower gentry, Austen was raised in polite society, educated at mainly at home, and vacationed with family friends and relatives. Her access to her father's library developed a love of literature in Austen that also turned into a love of writing. As a child, in addition to some early novels, she wrote skits and plays to perform with her brothers and sisters for family entertainment. It was during these early years that she explored and experimented with different genres that would later shape her work. Originally, Austen's novels were written to entertain family and close friends only, but her work caught the attention of those outside those close-knit circles after Austen's brother helped her publish under a male pen name.

Although Austen's readership at the time wasn't large, it continued to grow after Sir Walter Scott noted Austen's skill at crafting the novel and capturing human nature in the everyday way of life. Of *Pride and Prejudice*¹ he said, "That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with."

Narrative was a thing of entertainment for Austen while Wollstonecraft likely had little time for such privileges as pleasure reading during the early years of her life. Wollstonecraft's harsher reality seemed to fit better with the more direct, no-nonsense style of argumentative prose while Austen's more privileged and sheltered lifestyle allowed her time to create a story in which to critique her society.

¹ *Pride and Prejudice* was voted the greatest British novel of all time by a BBC poll in 2005 (*Women* 50).

So how did these two women, who led very different lives, come to share largely the same criticisms about education and marriage in British society in their most popular books? The answer may be found by looking at the work of Robert Bage, another British author.

HERMSPRONG, THE MISSING LINK

If one has read both *Pride and Prejudice* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, many of the social criticisms each book makes may be apparent to the reader. However, it is difficult to connect these works and their authors for a few reasons. One reason is that, although their lives overlapped about 22 years, Austen and Wollstonecraft were not writing at the same time. Another reason is that authors were often connected through the genre they wrote. Because Austen wrote fiction and Wollstonecraft wrote polemics, they weren't necessarily in the same social circles. Additionally, these women came from different social classes which also would have affected any relation they would have had to each other. The last reason is that other than the social criticisms in their works, there seems to be no other connection between the two authors.

However, *Herm sprong, Or Man as He is Not* may be the book that connects the dots between the two.

Herm sprong, Or Man as He is Not is a book written by Robert Bage, published in 1796, that also criticizes British society. *Herm sprong* is the satirical story of a European man raised by Native Americans who then returns to Europe. He is appalled at the behaviors and attitudes around him. Herm sprong is, in essence, the embodiment of transcendentalist ideals in a man. "He preaches the virtues of simplicity, freedom, and innocence to a society absorbed in the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and power" (Perkins).

Although it is a satire, the book is known for its humor (Faulkner 133). However, the philosophical work was radical by the standards of its day. Shortly after its publication, it was already seen as outdated because of its radical ties with the ideologies of the 1780s and 90s ideologies (Perkins). Bage was known for being an avid supporter of Wollstonecraft and it is possible that some of his ideas stemmed from Wollstonecraft's ideas (Gilbert). One scene in *Hermesprong* takes place over dinner where Hermesprong is conversing with a Mr. Sumelin about the liberty of young women. "Hermesprong refers with approval to Mary Wollstonecraft's view that women's mode of education 'turns the energies of their minds on trifles'" (Faulkner 134).

Austen owned a copy of *Hermesprong, or Man as He is Not*² (Gilbert). A search of Austen's library, and her father's library, shows no record of Austen having ever owned Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. However, after looking through public library records, Gilbert found that copies of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* were in circulation in libraries in Bath and London during the time that Austen lived in those cities (Gilbert). So while we don't know for sure that Austen read Wollstonecraft, we can't yet rule out the idea that she did *not* read Wollstonecraft.

As mentioned earlier, the social criticisms present in both Bage's and Wollstonecraft's works were seen as rather radical, especially by the 1800s. Ascarelli suggests that, given the similarities in the social criticisms between Austen and Wollstonecraft, it is rather likely that Austen had in fact read *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; however, because Austen knew that Wollstonecraft's ideas were seen as radical, it is possible that Austen purposely hid any association she might have with Wollstonecraft's ideas so as not to taint her reputation. Austen

² On page 170 of *Hermesprong*, Bage uses the term "pride and prejudice." It appears that the first published use of the phrase appeared in 1782 in *Cecilia* written by Frances Burney. However, further study suggests that "pride and prejudice" may have been a common phrase of the time which means that Bage and Austen may have been responding to the vernacular phrase (Bander).

already had limited readership, and Ascarellie believes that associating herself with Wollstonecraft would have likely limited her readership even more (Ascarelli).

Ascarelli also explored some of the ideological differences between Austen and Wollstonecraft. It may be that both women dreamed of a world in which marriage and connections weren't the only way to better a woman's life, but Ascarelli deems Austen as a realist because Austen recognized that marriage was a social and economic factor for women that could not be ignored. So although Austen was criticizing her society, she may also have been showing women how to effectively navigate the systems into which they were born (Ascarelli).

This idea of working within the bounds of the society in which one lives is a theme of *Pride and Prejudice*. Many of the characters manipulate the system to make it work for their advantage. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft acknowledges that women do this. Instead of Austen's approach of teaching women how to work within their system more effectively, Wollstonecraft argues simply that the system should be changed to be more accommodating for women. She made a comment about novels with a similar ideology in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In the following quotation, Wollstonecraft expresses a distaste and popular criticism of novels for her time. She says,

The best method...that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them: not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments. (Wollstonecraft)

By this quote, it seems at first that Wollstonecraft is against novels—a blossoming new genre at the time, and one that was quite popular with the upper class, especially upper class women. However, by the end we see that it is not so much the form of the novel that Wollstonecraft objects to as much as it is the content.

It is as if, in response to Wollstonecraft's comment, Austen picked up her pen and wrote her novels in such a way that the narrator acts as the "judicious person"—the person Wollstonecraft sought—that points out the folly in the characters in the book. But Austen takes it even further. Her judicious narrator also points out the folly in much of the society around her characters. It is because this judicious narrator was written into the pages of a novel that Austen's works have been more impactful because of their genre.

THE BRAIN AND FICTION

Over the past decade, new studies have found that the way our brain interacts with novels and stories is more involved than previously thought. Researchers, during a study in Spain in 2006, asked participants to read words with olfactory associations such as "cinnamon" or "lavender." They found that the participants' olfactory area in their brain lit up when they read these kind of words. Additionally, they found that any word with a strong sensory attribute would stimulate activity in that respective part of the brain. This was only true of sensory words. For example, a "velvety voice" was stimulating while a "pleasant voice" was not (Paul).

The novel has already been recognized as a unique way to explore human interactions and social settings. However, some of the research also suggests that just as the brain treats descriptions of smells and texture as if they were real, the brain may also treat the interactions between fictional characters as if they are real interactions between actual people. Paul says,

Scientists call this capacity of the brain to construct a map of other people's intentions "theory of mind." She also claims that "narratives offer a unique opportunity to engage this [theory of mind] capacity, as we identify with characters' longings and frustrations, guess at their hidden motives and track their encounters with friends and enemies, neighbors and lovers. (Paul)

So while Wollstonecraft laid out the "theory," Austen narrates so that readers can construct the "theory of mind" that allows them to identify with the characters they are reading about. It is also worth mentioning that

The task of creating stories and characters that resonate with audiences is rendered particularly challenging when audience members hold traditionalist values that are at odds with the conveyed message. Similarly, characters and situations must be constructed to ensure they are believable and easy to identify with, and efforts must be extended to ensure that the message audiences take away from a story is the message its designers intend to convey. (Slater 160)

Not only did Austen have to create a story that people enjoyed reading, she was tasked with molding the ideas of people who had been engrained with these traditional values and societal norms. However, an examination of the characters in *Pride and Prejudice* will show that, not only has Austen succeeded in giving life to Wollstonecraft's social criticisms, but that she has also in creating relatable characters that deliver the message she designed to be taken away.

WOLLSTONECRAFT'S THEORY AND AUSTEN'S THEORY OF MIND

Wollstonecraft criticized women of her day for being vain, silly, uneducated, and altogether too emotional. She argued that if women were unable to use reason, it was not because they were

incapable of it, but because they had not been taught the value in employing it. Of women she writes that "...[T]heir sole ambition is to be fair, to raise emotion instead of inspiring respect; and this ignoble desire, like the servility in absolute monarchies, destroys all strength of character" (Wollstonecraft). Because women had been seen and treated as dolls without reason for so long, many women became what they were thought to be. Much of what Wollstonecraft writes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be read as a plea for men to see women differently, and for women to act differently. And after that, for men and women to see that women are competent human beings as well. "Make women rational creatures, and free citizens, and they will quickly become good wives..." (Wollstonecraft).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, we see many female characters that fit Wollstonecraft's description of what women have become. Mr. and Mrs. Bennett are the first characters the reader is introduced to. After a brief conversation between them, Austen characterizes the couple by juxtaposing them this way:

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop [sic]. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (3)

From this introductory passage, the reader is given a glimpse into their marriage for the rest of the novel. As the dialogue plays out, and the reader gets quips and subtle humor from both Bennets towards each other, the reader's understanding is that their marriage, although it may at

one time have been a happy one, is now often filled with contempt for each other. This suspicion is later confirmed when we learn that

[Mr Bennet], captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in the marriage put an end to any real affection for her. Respect, esteem, and confidence, had vanished for ever [sic]; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown. But Mr. Bennet was not of a disposition to seek comfort for the disappointment which his own imprudence had brought on, in any of those pleasures which too often console the unfortunate of their folly or vice. (Austen 176–7)

Despite their less than happy marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet are still sympathetic characters.

There is at least one admirable thing in this relationship and that is Mr. Bennet's fidelity. Not all women were as lucky as Mrs. Bennet here. Their daughter Lydia is one example of a less fortunate wife.

Lydia is the youngest daughter and Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. From the text it seems likely that Lydia may be a great deal like her mother was Mrs. Bennet was younger. Wollstonecraft says

Men are not aware of the misery they cause, and the vicious weakness they cherish, by only inciting women to render themselves pleasing; they do not consider that they thus make natural and artificial duties clash, by sacrificing the comfort and respectability of a woman's life to voluptuous notions of beauty, when in nature they all harmonize.

(Wollstonecraft)

Wollstonecraft points out that when women are only concerned about their beauty—and in the case of Lydia and Mrs. Bennet—and securing a husband based on that beauty, that these women are those who are in the most danger of being cast off by society. Wollstonecraft writes,

I cannot avoid feeling the most lively compassion for those unfortunate females who are broken off from society, and by one error torn from all those affections and relationships... for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, *ruined* before they know the difference between virtue and vice.... A woman who has lost her honour imagines that she cannot fall lower, and as for recovering her former station, it is impossible; no exertion can wash this stain away. Losing thus every spur, and having no other means of support, prostitution becomes her only refuge, and the character is quickly depraved by circumstances over which the poor wretch has little power.... (Wollstonecraft)

The two quotes above are played out in Lydia and Wickham. At fifteen years old, Lydia is already chasing after any man in a uniform and is quite flirtatious. After a ball at Netherfield has been announced, the week leading up to the event is full of rain so that none of the Bennet sisters are able to walk to Meryton to pass time in town. Of the younger Miss Bennets, Austen writes, “No aunt, no officers, no news could be sought after...” (67). Lydia’s character is furthered revealed after a local colonel and his wife invite her to spend the summer in Brighton as their guest. The troops are moved from Meryton, where they were stationed, to Brighton. Mr. Bennett assents to Lydia’s going. However, just weeks later, Elizabeth receives word that Lydia has run off with Wickham—the very soldier who had earlier expressed interest in Elizabeth herself. The whole family mourns the loss of Lydia. The implication in the text is that Lydia will never be able to marry or that she could become a prostitute.

Although the reader has already been informed of Wickham's dishonorable character through Elizabeth's interactions with Darcy, Lydia is unaware that Wickham is a scoundrel. "[S]he would not hear of leaving Wickham. She was sure they should be married some time or other, and it did not much signify when" (Austen 240). However, after Darcy questions Wickham about the arrangements, the reader learns that it "had never been *his* design" to marry Lydia at all. He had planned only to leave her and meant to "lay all the ill-consequences of Lydia's flight, on her own folly alone" (Austen 240). If it had not been for Darcy's intervention, it is unclear what would have been the consequence for Lydia. After receiving the news that Lydia and Wickham have been married, Elizabeth reflects "how little of permanent happiness could belong to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue" (232) while Mrs. Bennet bursts with joy that her daughter has found a husband.

When at last the family does see Lydia and Wickham, Elizabeth, Jane, and Mr. Bennett are embarrassed for the new couple who seem not to be embarrassed at all. Mrs. Bennet and the other sisters rejoice that Lydia has married and at such a young age. Elizabeth, as the sensible and moral character, by her disgust signals to the reader that we are to be unimpressed with this marriage and the situation.

However, as the reader follows Elizabeth through to the end of the novel, after seeing many undesirable marriages, the reader at last sees a relationship worth striving for.

Wollstonecraft mentions, very briefly, the ideal that marriages should be based on mutual affection and respect. She claims that if two people were to choose to marry each other based on mutual friendship and respect, then they would have a happy marriage and be equal partners (Wollstonecraft).

Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of all

affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time.... The vain fears and fond jealousies, the winds which fan the flame of love, when judiciously or artfully tempered, are both incompatible with the tender confidence and sincere respect of friendship.

Although Elizabeth has not been educated the same way Darcy was, their intelligence levels seem to match. They have been acquainted with each other for about a year and have gotten to know each other on multiple levels and in multiple settings. After Darcy has proposed again to Elizabeth, and asked permission of Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth counsels with her father about the engagement. To Elizabeth, Mr. Bennett says,

I know your disposition, Lizzy. I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior. Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage. You could scarcely escape discredit and misery. My child, let me not have the grief of seeing *you* unable to respect your partner in life. (282)

As we know that Elizabeth is Mr. Bennet's favorite daughter, his concern for her well-being is fitting. He trusts her enough to give his honest opinion, to warn her of the unhappiness that results from an unequal marriage— unhappiness that he himself has endured all these years in his marriage. However, as the novel concludes, the reader sees that Mr. Bennett's concern, although sincere, is unfounded.

Elizabeth assures her father of her affection and respect for Darcy, and shortly after they are married. Mr. and Mrs. Darcy express their joy at being home at Pemberley and away from family and neighbors whose conversations mortify them. As the novel closes, the perspective shifts to Georgiana's point of view. The young Miss Darcy is baffled by her brother's

transformation and more astounded at the way that Elizabeth and Darcy interact with each other. Just as Elizabeth was an example for the reader, she is an example to Georgiana as well. “By Elizabeth’s instructions [Georgiana] began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband” (Austen 290).

CONCLUSION

Georgiana’s comprehension may be the most important part of *Pride and Prejudice*. Here is an upper class young lady who has never seen a marriage before where the husband and wife had such a free-spirited and natural relationship. Austen says that “her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way” (290). However, it is implied that now that she has seen this kind of relationship, now that she has seen the happiness that can come from being equally matched with a spouse, Georgiana will not settle for less when it is her turn to seek a husband.

Moreover, the reader has learned along with Georgiana that marriages during that time could be more than contracts; marriages could be happy relationships between willing partners and not just a means for financial gain. This marriage, though fictional, was a model for what marriages could be if women, as Wollstonecraft encouraged, allowed themselves to be creatures of reason and sensibility instead of seeing themselves only for their vanity and ability to get husbands. As Wollstonecraft suggests, if marriage were seen as more than a financial advancement, the partners of the marriage would be happier. If all marriages were happier, than society itself would be improved.

The respectable thing about Wollstonecraft is that she proposed solutions for all of society by using logic and sound reasoning. We see that Austen employs those criticisms in the

lives of her characters; but rather than apply one solution for all, Austen employs the principles of Wollstonecraft's criticisms to the individual characters. The result is that each character becomes a guide, a case study, of what to do or what not to do. Because characters in fiction come alive in our brains, their experiences become our own. These experiences, because of their emotional connections, have the ability to persuade us in ways that logic never can. Furthermore, Austen shows her readers through the experiences of these living characters that, by applying Wollstonecraft's principles, happiness and equality in marriage can be achieved. Though *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Pride and Prejudice* are wonderful books on their own, their full power is revealed when read in light of each other, or perhaps when the reading of one informs the reading of the other.

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