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ROLE JANE AUSTENOVÉ V SOUČASNÉ SPOLEČNOSTI

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JANE AUSTEN'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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V Plzni dne 21. 6. 2017 …….

Anna Šimicová

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ABSTRACT

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Jane Austen, in the last few decades, has become a feminist icon.

This thesis describes her work in relation to feminism of the 21st century. The theory of the movement in contemporary state of society is followed by an overview of the evolution of feminist criticism and also its relationship to Jane Austen and her work.

In the final part, an analysis of chosen works by Jane Austen is provided. The aim of this thesis is to find similarities and differences between the world created by Austen and the world the readers of these times live in.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

"Jane Austen's Role in Contemporary Society" examines Jane Austen and her work from the point of view of modern feminism. It provides an overview of the approaches towards Jane Austen and an analysis of areas in which contemporary feminism and her stories meet.

Jane Austen's novels have been adapted in the form of movies, series and even books, which continue with Austen's stories or use her themes, etc. Not only were her writings embraced by nonacademics, but her works have been critically analysed; the perception of her works has been influenced by many critical approaches that have examined them.

From the 1960s feminist literary theory became interested in Jane Austen's stories. Since then the idea of Jane Austen being a feminist stirred up the literary world. There were essays and books written about whether feminist thoughts are present in her novels, or not.

Taking into account the quality of literature that allows readers to interpret the written texts themselves—there were people who claimed that both, the ones in favour of her being a feminist and the ones against, can be right—it is uncertain, if one can definitely decide, what the right answer is.

For the last decades the feminist movement has been on a rise, and even though some people claim it is not needed anymore, the opposite is true. Genders did not have equal opportunities in the Jane Austen's times, feminism claims they still do not have it. The conditions have changed drastically since the nineteenth century. So in what ways exactly, if in any, does Jane Austen meet today's feminism and the notions of gender roles and stereotypes? The answer to this question should be given in this work by analyzing both feminism and the notion of gender in Austen's work and chosen novels.

The first part of this thesis is a description of feminism, explaining how it is defined today. The feminism described inclines toward modern or more progressive countries. In the

preface of *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985) Toril Moi says she as a "European trained within the mainstream of Western thought" might marginalize some areas (14). Because of similar reasons and also because of the widespread character of today's feminism, this thesis will deal with major selected topics and it might not cover all the relevant issues.

The depiction of present feminism is followed by commenting on literary criticism, feminist reading of Jane Austen's novels and the way the issues or topics reflected in her work, and trying to analyze chosen works from the modern feminist point of view.

2. FEMINISM

2.1 Evolution and the Contemporary State

Human society has been struggling for gender equality for not only decades, but centuries. Martha Rampton in "Four Waves of Feminism" (2015) and Margaret Walters in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (2005) offer a description of feminist evolution up to the present. According to their opinions, the roots of feminism can be traced even back to the ancient times and Sappho, medieval ages and Hildegard of Binden, Christin de Pisan, and then the eighteenth century and the famous Mary Wollstonecraft. One of the pre-feminist thinkers whose opinions and actions were the beginning of the movement is sometimes considered to be Jane Austen too. Walters also mentions *A Plea for Woman* (1843) by Marion Reid (40), a book that became an influential statement similar to Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for the Rights of Women: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). There were also male voices that called for equal treatment of genders—for instance, William Thompson and John Stuart Mill (Walters 41). Back then, feminism was related to other movements, such as abolitionism. A great example of woman of colour who defied social conventions and fought for civil rights was Sojourner Truth. They all, and others, advocated for change in women's stance and equality in different ways. It is the end of the nineteenth century that the beginning of the modern feminism is dated in, since then there has been an identifiable movement.

It is common to talk about three waves of feminism. Some experts suggest there is a fourth one emerging. From the nineteenth century on the movement that was formed (the rally at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 is considered to be the formal starting point) aimed for equal rights, the desired goal being achievement of balance between sexes. According to Walters, the waves existed in forms corresponding with the "Western countries" in Latin America or other places. The beginning mainly focused on suffrage and it eventually

succeeded. The main idea was that every citizen regardless of gender should be a part of civic sphere and politics. The first country to achieve suffrage for all inhabitants was New Zealand in 1893.

In the evolution of this movement one might notice the vehemence in the fight growing in certain times. As the norms were becoming looser, sexuality and reproductive rights were not as much of a taboo anymore. Newer terms were invented—such as gender in comparison to biological sex. As Rampton states, critiques were aimed against patriarchy, the woman's roles (wife and mother) and even against normative heterosexuality. After gaining their rightful place in educational institutions and the work place, their ability to be mothers, wives and working individuals was questioned again and again, and to some extent it is challenged in the present too.

One after another, the waves expanded its horizons and paid attention more to groups or areas overlooked by previous generations—women of colour, the situation in developing countries, transpeople, and others. Each part of the movement had its pros and cons, its wins and losses. Just as society, even attitudes and opinions inside the feminist community changed and evolved. Rampton says in her article that since the third wave, intersectionality is the key word and movements fighting for justice in the world are merging together now. That is the reason why nowadays feminism deals with even more than gender in the problems it focuses on. It scrutinizes the society and takes into account racism, ageism, ableism, etc.

From the 1990s onwards cyber environment became a noticeable influence (Rampton). The Internet enables its users to overcome the gender borders, although it has also liberated a large number of misogynists. The third wave and the emerging fourth are affected by the wide-spread reach of social media. After crossing gender barriers, borders of nations and geographical distance are also crossed, the result being united communities all across the globe.

After decades of existence of this particular movement, misconceptions prevail. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remarked, the movement and philosophy are quite often limited by stereotypes (3). She, like many others, is someone who was told that as a feminist "you hate man" and that "you think women should always be in charge" (11). That is not right. An important question is then, what today's feminism means.

A certain level of distaste sounds from those opposing the term—it is suggested it favours women over men. For centuries it was women who have been majorly oppressed by biases against their sex, and who felt the need to fight for their rights. And from there the word feminism originates.

While it is true that men and women both suffer from gender stereotypes and roles associated with the genders, it is meant to pinpoint the differences of sexism directed at men and women. Those are generally—in the words of Laura Bates—frequency, severity and context (327). Contemporary feminism does not forget there is gendered prejudice towards men's role in society, but in patriarchal society they still do have many privileges that women do not, women are often disadvantaged by the system they live in.

The main focus is gender equality. People of the movement might concentrate their attention to a great variety of problems connected to gender—that is why "this movement looks very different in different countries—it has widely varied goals and aims, and diverse means of achieving them" (Bates 379-380).

From personal life to public and professional one, people have been put in gendered boxes since the day they were born. Women are expected to possess certain qualities and traits, if they do not or if they have traits "typical" for men, they are often deemed wrong.

> Rampton's example of the concerns of the newest wave of feminism include issues that were central to the earliest phases of the women's movement . . . problems like sexual abuse, rape, violence against women, unequal pay, slut-shaming, the

pressure on women to conform to a single and unrealistic body-type and the realization that gains in female representation in politics and business.

She suggests that predicting what direction this movement will take in the future is nearly impossible, due to its relatively wide-spread character. But what are some of the main issues?

Women gained suffrage. Universities and all types of education are officially open to them. They can choose their career paths freely. Those are all victories of previous generations of women's rights activists. Nevertheless, not all problems are solved—sexism still exists. And the victories mentioned are often privileges of the modern countries; women in different parts of the world are struggling for all of these and more because they have to "confront additional, and even more intractable, problems" (Walters 89). Despite more inclusive environment in the movement, there are misconceptions about the life of women in different parts of the world. To understand fully, one has to consider the problems in context, together with "deep-rooted local beliefs . . . practices arising out of class differences, caste, religion, ethnic origins, and also . . . the legacy of colonialism" (Walters 90).

2.2 Gender in Professional Life

The process of women making their way toward education and better job opportunities was briefly mentioned in the overview of history at the beginning of this chapter. Women are able to attain good education and choose their expertise—officially (though not everywhere—in some parts, they have no or almost no access to either, so in this case it is meant the ones in the more developed and progressive countries). Prejudice and stereotypes are rooted in many minds, some jobs or positions are associated with certain gender even today, and if people deviate from the expected, they might be labelled as weird, or worse. Even though society changed and it is more open in many cases, how Adichie mentions in *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), "ideas of gender have not evolved very much" (18).

"A man and a woman are doing the same job, with the same qualifications, and the man is paid more *because* he is a man" (Adichie 17). The opponents of feminism regularly deny the existence of disproportionate treatment of men and women in the workplace. Some experts and organisations, for example the AAUW and Kevin Miller in his article "The Simple Truth about the Gender Pay Gap", say otherwise. The economic equality has not been reached fully, researches and surveys show a wage gap between men and women exists. In 2015 the average amount of women's earnings in the USA compared to men's was lower by 20%. The gap was reduced throughout the twentieth century, but it stagnated since 2007. With the slower progress, the time with just income situation is predicted to be the year 2152. The pay gap has an effect on women of all colours, ages, and on all levels of education, however, some groups are more affected. These groups include women above certain age or women of colour. Until the age of 35 women tend to earn 90% of men's pay, after follows decrease to 76-81 on average. These numbers refer to average earnings, but even when experts observed how the gap differs if occupation, level of education, and other factors are taken into account, the result remained the same—there is always a wage gap (Gould et al).

These data demonstrate that even though women have access to education and higher participation in work process, the space for progress remains.

Nobel peace laureate Wangari Maathai is quoted in *We Should All Be Feminists,* "The higher you go, the fewer women there are" (Adichie 17). In connection to this particular problem Laura Bates provides numbers and statistics. One of the most prestigious careers is politics, the estimated year when gender parity will be in Congress is 2121 (44). Women are a part of politics, undoubtedly, but comparing the numbers of the representation with men's, the lack of equality displays itself. "Worldwide, women make up 21.8 percent of total parliamentaries . . ." (44). Exploring the situation in the UK and the USA alone, public can

see that the first mentioned is 65th and the latter 85th when compared to the rest of the World in gender equality in Parliament (44).

Not only do politics not have equal representation, women are often treated differently from their male colleagues, examples of such behaviour are inadequate questions or comments. In 2010 Hillary Clinton was asked which designer she prefers, after she questioned if her male counterparts would also receive this type of question, the answer was simple—probably not (Bates 46). And the instances when female politicians are ridiculed or criticised not because of their work, but their clothes, beauty or sex are frequently repeated.

Work in media does not differ much from the previously described case. "Only 28 percent of speaking parts in the 100 most successful films of 2012 were female . . . ", "[j]ust 4 percent of directors and 12 percent of writers of the 100 most successful films of 2012 were female", "80 percent of reviewers and authors of books reviewed in the *New York Review of Books* in 2013 were men"—this is a fraction of data provided in *Everyday Sexism* (2014) (Bates 190). Moi, a feminist critic, admits her profession (writer) stays male-dominated (14). The highest ranks are majorly overtaken by male workers and the opposition of critics of that gap could argue that not enough women go and seek career in these positions. Even if that was the reality, there—undeniably—is a gender bias in work place from different branches.

Scientists from Yale University studied the gender biases held by employers in jobs connected to science. In this study identical CVs were sent to research universities—some of them with male, some with female names. The conclusion was as follows: male applicants were "significantly more competent and hireable", they were offered a higher starting salary and the option of career mentoring was offered to them generally more. The competence of women is thus doubted because of their sex (Bates 236).

The pressure to prove their competence increases for women expecting a child or having them already. Children might be an obstacle to a career. Not as much for men. That is

a consequence of the lasting expectation for couples and families. Stereotypically it is women who are the care-takers and men the breadwinners. It is not uncommon to hear the opinion that the man is the head of family—the one earning money, doing the important things and making decisions.

When women reach the top positions, there are expectations for them to be different from the male bosses, they should give it so-called "woman's touch". Where man is called ambitious, competitive or confident, she might be considered bossy, nasty, malicious and other pejorative names.

Media portrayal of women does not escape the scrutiny of feminism either. As an illustration, we have the analysis of films released in the US whose target audience is children by Geena Institute on Gender in Media and they found out

> that male characters outnumbered females three to one, a ratio that has remained the same since 1946. Gender stereotypes are also rife in these early thought-shaping films—from 2006 to 2009, the research found that "not one female character was depicted in G-rated family films in the field of medical science, a business leader, in law, or politics. (Bates 194)

It is important to note that when growing-up, and then in adulthood, women hear often that they are too emotional, hysterical and unable to control themselves (especially if they have their period). It can be objected that women should not let it affect them. But this type of rhetoric has an effect on females. As a result, their careers are affected by this prejudice too. One example is Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. Some of the voters could be heard saying that a woman is not suitable for the presidential post. The problematic part was not a criticism of her or her politics in the past and the present (constructive criticism of someone who candidates for a function in public sphere is to be expected), but that some

percentage of people voting for other candidates were so prejudiced they could not look beyond her being a woman and think more open-mindedly was.

Hobbies and interests are in connection with professional life. Females interested in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) can be met with surprise, the same goes for other types of pastimes. All of that might be the cause of lack of women on career paths in these fields.

This demonstrates that the problems some women (and men) encounter in their careers are results of the "innocent" stereotypical thinking and rhetoric, both originating in generally accepted "truths" and assumptions. For example "all women/men are..." phrases. Girls are taught to be likeable, boys to "be afraid of fear, of weakness, of vulnerability" (Adichie 26). It is not uncommon to hear the phrase "boys don't cry". Lately there has been a spreading tendency to eliminate the pejorative "doing something like a girl" talk.

2.3 Gender and Relationships

Marriage is a great part of life—in the past, today and possibly even in the future. Especially in the past it was not an uncommon occurrence to get married for economical reasons. While that is a reality even nowadays, more people (in western society at least) marry for personal reasons, such as love. In the liberated state, in comparison to the past, people in relationships often live together without formally acknowledging their status as a married couple. Sometimes they have to face being judged for their choices by others. What is the situation when people decide to be on their own, without marriage or settling down with one partner, like? Men are often considered free, focusing on their career and themselves, and—frequently—they are not judged as harshly as women in the same position.

Single women in the 21st century are not in the same situation as women of the past or the men of today. Unlike the previous generations, single women do have their rights. They can own and dispose of their own property. Nevertheless, double standards persist.

Comparing this situation to the past, one finds parallels not only with previous waves and their issues, also with the pre-movement era. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote in year 1792 that

> [w]omen are told from their infancy, and taught by their mothers' example, that a little knowledge of human weakness (properly called "cunning"), softness of temperament, outward obedience, and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man; and if they are also beautiful, that's all they need for at least twenty years.

Likewise, the way personality traits succumb to stereotypical expectations quite often is shown even in *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction,* where the author writes that even though there was progress in education of females from seventeenth century onwards, " . . . they [books for women] mostly recommended 'womanly' virtues of meekness, piety and charity, and all stressed the central importance of modesty, which was often used as a polite synonym for chastity" (Walters 32).

Adichie said, "Our society teaches a woman at a certain age who is unmarried to see it as a deep personal failure. While a man at a certain age who is unmarried has not quite come around to making his pick" (30). With this statement she encapsulates the notion of "necessity" of marriage in the gendered society.

She also shows how married women can be respected more than the unmarried ones. She depicts that with a personal story of a woman who decided to pretend she is married in order to gain more respect (29). While it is not a common practice among all her peers, it is a demonstration of the unequal treatment.

Expectations of the choice between career and marriage is not connected only to females, males who focus their attention on family life are often seen as feminine, weak and not the "right" type of men. Bates considers this and writes that there are "social assumptions about their inability to parent properly" and that those "feed straight back into narratives

about female domestic responsibility and expected gender roles" (284). This demonstrates how the stereotypes connected to gender affect lives of many, not only in the choice of hobbies, but also later in life with the ongoing dispute between domesticity and work.

What feminism means today? This chapter outlined the main ideas and issues. As Walters mentions, one feminist writer tried to "challenge the 'sense of inferiority or natural dependence'" of women and that could be said about the rest of the feminist (82). This broad political and social context has also affected how we read the literature of the past, and so we will now look at how feminism has affected the discipline of literary criticism.

3. LITERARY CRITICISM

3.1 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism is a branch of literary world dealing with females—as authors and as representation in characters. If one simplifies it. Variety of opinions present in this discourse caused problems with creating an exact definition. Important part is also providing women's point of view on literature as a reader and a critic. Moi says "essential part of the feminist critical enterprise" is "a political evaluation of critical methods and theories" (86).

Literature after Feminism (2003) offers a description—"a widespread and well-known field of study that, according to the Modern Language Association survey, has had more impact on the teaching of literature than any other recent school of criticism" (Felski 5)—and this book also states that the field contains "a wide range of theories, approaches, and methods" and "all kinds of dissenters and arguers" (2). This book for academic and non-academic readers traces some opinions and stances taken by feminist critics and its opponents. The connection between politics and literature is emphasized—some critics think that literature and literary criticism should only deal with language. Other critics disagree, and instead define both of these areas as having two sides—political and linguistic. Feminism being as varied as it is, even feminists themselves do not agree on the level in which politics and art should be divided (Felski 13).

Moi mentions in her book *Sexual/Textual Politics* that some feminist critics believe that "no criticism is 'value-free'" and everyone (implying every work of literature) is "shaped by cultural, social, political and personal factors" (42). She also shares the opinion that "the feminist [critic] openly declares her politics, whereas the non-feminist may either be unaware of his own value-system or seek to universalize it as 'non-political'" (83).

The beginning of feminist criticism can be traced back decades and centuries. Texts later crucial for feminist literary theory existed even before the establishment of feminist criticism—*A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf is an example. Like feminism, there is a formal starting point accepted by experts. With this particular literary section it is the late 1960s and the 1970s, the times of second-wave feminism. Why then? Feminism, its ideology and the spheres it appeared in, changed and transformed. Political, domestic and academic grounds were influenced by the movement (during certain waves one part more than the others). It was during the second one, when feminism struck the academia.

Throughout its history this school of criticism has varied in its opinions on female authorship and readership. Felski expresses it in her work too. She says, " . . . feminist scholars, depending on their political or theoretical proclivities, have crafted very different images of female authorship" (59).

The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (1979) by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar is a milestone of feminist criticism.

They write about history and how it is presented to people nowadays—that quite often it is confined to patriarchal viewpoint. They express the need to examine the course of history, in this case literary history, because so far (in their times) it was defined by males almost exclusively.

Classic works had to be reinterpreted and juxtaposed with the reality of life of women in the past. Gilbert and Gubar mention in the introduction the misconception of the personality of one of the most famous American writers Emily Dickinson. Though described as "prim little home-keeping person" (quoted by Gilbert and Gubar xxi), "her 'Tomes of solid Witchcraft' [was] produced by an imagination that had, as she herself admitted, the Vesuvian ferocity of a loaded gun" (xxi). With the second wave's wide involvement in many different areas, the need to give female perspective on things past and literary works ascended. It was

noted that women's past is not always identical to men's, in the same way the experiences which shape them are not (xxviii).

After the second wave, critiques were directed towards issues of race, class, sexuality and other aspects. Gilbert and Gubar were also criticised. As the feminist movement became more open to people other than middle-class whites and heterosexuals, the need for literature and its criticism of more diverse character rose. Women of colour prompted an important discussion on "the shared fact of femaleness" and if it should be "the overriding factor shaping the act of reading" (Felski 40). There was a crossing of barriers after it was established that "[canon of feminist criticism] has often assumed, too easily and confidently, that women share a common psychology and a common identity" (Felski 40). The last decades brought a re-examination of the values and notions used in politics and literature, "white middle-class First-World" feminists were compelled to question the definition of "their own preoccupations as universal female (or feminist) problems" (Moi 85).

Even more in-depth exploration of gender was reflected in the literary world. The realisation that gender is something "not anchored in any psychological or biological reality" (Felski 75) was one of the many steps in another transformation of feminism and its literary counterpart.

In the previous chapter we saw that feminism is interested not only in women, but also men. Because feminist literature and its criticism are related to the political movement, it also manifested in this field. So as Felski points out there was a "growing interest in the subject of masculinity" and terms such as "over-feminization" and "under-feminization" were further examined. There is a problematic domain of "literary segregation" and its connection to a person who is called woman writer or female poet (91-92). Some find it difficult to be defined by their gender in this way (similarly in other professions), and the thinkers are divided by their stance towards this particular problem. The segregation of men and women touches the

very roots of this area. As Felski suggests, there is a difference between acknowledging gender as "an influence on how people read" and "advocating a gender-segregated theory of reading" (48).

Attention was gradually shared not only with women of colour, different class, origin, etc., as society progressed the stance on sexuality and its image shifted. Felski mentions "sex wars" of the 1980s and the impact that followed. She said, "Arguments erupted about women's right to sexual freedom and experimentation in the light of the antisex and antipornography stance of some sections of the movement" (111). The growing interest in masculinity and sexuality led to "more expansive ways [of thinking] about women's use of classical male narrative" (Felski 115).

To summarize the position toward plot and women as described by Felski, it was perpetually assumed that the plotline most accessible to women is a love story. There was a need felt (and a struggle to do so) to substitute it with new plotlines, with new female myths. The outcome being several stories of characters who are somehow "warriors" (Felski 101).

The importance to write diverse female characters (even villains) increased. Before that there was a clash between writing authentically and creating role-models with whom readers could identify, characters that would be independent and impressive (Moi 46).

As shown in this subchapter, feminist criticism—being politically affiliated to feminism—has followed the movement and it has undergone as many changes. Being "man haters" is not the only prejudice feminists face. In addition, they often "loathe literature" (Felski 1).

There are numerous transformations that occurred in the world of feminism, and the same applies to this type of criticism. As some feminists warn, "Feminism . . . needs to remain open to multiple revisions and rewritings of its own stories" and it also needs to continue to confront confining notions (Felski 132).

3.1 Jane Austen, Literary Criticism and Context

Despite its many transformations, feminist literary theory of the twentieth century often addressed female writers of the previous one. There were women who devoted their time to writing before that time period. Women like Anne Finch, Aphra Behn, Anne Bradstreet, Ann Radcliffe and other women (not only in English speaking countries) throughout the times occupied the role of counterparts to male-writers (Gilbert and Gubar xxix). The question why the nineteenth century is in the centre of attention so frequently suggests itself. That is reflected upon by Gilbert in the introduction to her and Gubar's work. She connects it to the oppressiveness of those times in sexual and private life, and she also contemplates the centrality of this period being connected to its "aesthetic and political imperatives", which were an inspiration with its political changes, movements and one of "the richest productions of the female imagination" (xxxi).

Between the greatest personalities can be found novelists—the Brönte sisters, George Eliot and Jane Austen—and poets who included Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and others (xxviii). Jane Austen is one of the figures regularly featured on the lists of the most crucial female writers. Even in her own time she was "far from anonymous" in the literary circles (Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* 21).

The attitude towards the problems of society manifested in both—covert and overt—forms (Gilbert and Gubar xxx). The topic of female stance in society might not be expressed by Jane Austen in the same manner several other writers voiced it. In *Jane Eyre* (1847) the reader may find a radical (at least in those times) proclamation that "women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do" (qtd by Gilbert and Gubar xxx).

Jane Austen belonged to those who hid some of their deepest thoughts behind plot or setting (according to several feminist critics)—something that captures reader's attention—

and readers have to decipher the hidden meanings in text. It is often assumed that the critics attribute certain opinions to Jane Austen herself. Lloyd W. Brown expresses this in a journal article "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition" (1973), where he remarks that

> . . . more recent developments in Jane Austen criticism seem to assume that feminism in the novel should be examined not merely as a "collective classification" but as a coherent body of opinions held by the novelist on the identity and social functions of women. (321-322)

And this type of analysis "seems to respond to contemporary pressures, generated by the liberation movement, for thoughtful evaluation of female images in society and in literature" (322).

In *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1983) Margaret Kirkman mentions Gilbert and Gubar's objectors who were in favour of being more sceptical toward "uncovering" the truth (x).

As was already demonstrated, critics approached Austen and her novels and juvenilia differently. With evolving political stances the academy was changing and the attitude to some writers also. Another interpretive strand is psychoanalytical, which originated from Freud's theory and which tried to define what womanhood means in terms of being able to give birth and being mother. The characters of Austen were not spared this examination. Later in its existence feminism struggled to define these terms and it became quite problematic. This terminology was overcome and so was this analysis (Brown 324).

The struggle to interpret Austen did not differ from difficulties with many other writers. The main problem was (and sometimes it still prevails) the identification of the author. One side of literary academia is in favour of identifying the author with their works, others are against it and they incline more toward not connecting the two as much.

Jocelyn Harris touches this problematic in her essay in *Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (1977):

> It is a curious and inexplicable fact of literary theory that the default mode for reading Jane Austen is biography. . . . Ironically enough, it is the same mistake made by theatre-goers who equate the actor with the role. No wonder that critics disagree over Austen's opinion of the stage . . . (52)

Similarly to the ongoing discussion on theatre, the same situation is present in connection to her and her stances on women, marriage and other parts of life. How much and with which characters does the author identify with? No one can give a definite answer; it has been a subject to feminist literary discussion for decades now.

Not only, but also in connection to gender

> Austen has appeared . . . in a number of contradictory guises—as a cameoist oblivious to her times, or a stern propagandist on behalf of a beleaguered ruling class; as a self-effacing good aunt, or a nasty old maid; as a subtly discriminating stylist, or a homely songbird, unconscious of her art. (Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* xiii-xiv)

Several experts spent their time analysing literary women and they were able to summarize stereotypical groups women were put in. Moi provides a list of eleven "stereotypes of femininity" by Ellmann—"formlessness, passivity, instability, confinement, piety, materiality, spirituality, irrationality, compliancy, and finally 'the two incorrigible figures' of the Witch and the Shrew" (33-34). *The Madwoman* and its authors dedicated their work to the analysis of literary world (inside and outside of books) and a part of it to its distinction of women to angels and monsters, thus provided another analysis of stereotypes. Jane Austen did not escape this phenomenon. Attributes associated with her persona are quite often calm, not seeking attention or dispute, only writing for pleasure of herself and her small

audience; not a professional writer who also seeks profit and an outlet for her experience of a woman bound by social standards. If she had been seen that way, she would not have been the decorous angel, but she would have become the metaphorical monster. The picture of Jane Austen was altered by her brother to fit with the decorous angelic image as one of the essays in *Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* edited by Edward Copeland and Juliet McMaster states. Jan Fergus introduces his contribution to this collection of essays "The Professional Woman Writer" with Jane Austen's letter in which she precisely calculates her earnings from *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and contemplates the advantages of her copyright and he offers an impression of the author as someone who is "acutely conscious of her sales (as well as the possible future profit of her copyright)" (1). This professional attitude to her writing and its publishing submits different image than the one of "a genteel amateur" as implied in the biographical accounts written by her brother Henry (1).

Interestingly, the picture given to the public aligns with the mainstream thought of the nineteenth century and its opinion on women, especially on women's power. The opinion on the latter could be summarized by quotation from 1865 selected by Gilbert and Gubar which declares "woman's 'power is not for rule, not for battle, and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet orderings' of domesticity" (24).

Later in their book, the authors even considered a recurring theme in women writers' pieces—the search for a "female model" (50); and they tried to pinpoint that this model was not created to submit itself to patriarchal definition of femininity, on the other hand to "legitimize her [the author's] own rebellious endeavours" (50). Considering this, Jane Austen might have been more unconventional than the world sometimes tends to think she was.

Creative women of the past stood against prejudice and a mixture of problems. While becoming a writer (and not one who advised obedience at that), Jane Austen could not have escaped the harsh judgement of her time. Women often faced the danger of "loss of

femininity" (Copeland and McMaster 2) caused by presenting themselves in the public in such a professional way. She—with high probability—was aware of the risk she was putting her reputation in. And she did it anyway. That might be thought of as "rebellious", or even feminist. As Kirkman says, " . . . to become an author, in itself, was a feminist act" (33). Austen being aware of her stance is supported by a famous quote from one of her letters from 1816 in which she ironically describes her role as a female writer and asks how "little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" of hers could compare to "manly, spirited Sketches" (qtd by Gilbert and Gubar 63).

In the late decades of the nineteenth century, Jane Austen started to receive more attention than before and Janeism emerged (Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* 68), the word "Janeite" itself being used for the first time by George Saintsbury in 1894 (69). Formal club—titled Jane Austen Society—was founded in 1940 (138).

Jane Austen is a part of the discussion in literary professional circles; furthermore, she has a solid fanbase among nonacademic readers. The twentieth century brought people to Jane Austen's stories by the means of the film and television adaptations, especially since the nineties. The legacy of Jane Austen has rich history, reading and adaptations of her works did not cease in the last decades, and the debate about the social issues in her novels continues to be held.

4. JANE AUSTEN AND HER WORK

Jane Austen wrote six novels (this category contains *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Persuasion* (1818)), juvenilia, and there are some works left unfinished.

The current common tendency is to associate Jane Austen with femininity and women. Felski recalls in *Literature after Feminism* distaste expressed by number of her male students when reading Austen. In Johnson's *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* the reader learns that reading Austen was not always limited by the gender expectations of what is narrow-mindedly considered "literature for women", and she provides a different view of Austen, her connection to World War I and the "exemption from dismissively gendered readings" (110). Johnson continues with a historical overview and she associates the expansion of mass marketing Austen's novels to females to 1940s and 1950s—and with it relates feminization (150). Except for printed materials, mass marketing included screen adaptations (10).

These adaptations range from almost exact conversions of storylines from the novels to the screen, to "borrowing" the characters or plotlines. One of the transformed ones is for example *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, which was introduced in 2016. As movie classical adaptations are regarded *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and many others—television produced number of series such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995).

The subchapter "Jane Austen, Criticism and Context" outlines the main attitudes toward Jane Austen (by feminist critics). If one considers Jane Austen to be a feminist or her work to contain social criticism of gender and its limitation (apart from critique of class, manners, and other elements), there is an enduring question—could a twenty first century reader find parallels between Jane Austen's world and today's society; more specifically how do her books relate to modern feminism?

Lloyd W. Brown compares Jane Austen to her contemporary—previously mentioned in this thesis—Mary Wollstonecraft. He finds out that Austen's topics are comparable to those of Wollstonecraft. Kirkman shares that opinion, remarking that Austen's "viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft" (xxi). From these opinions one can conclude that Jane Austen reflected on the stance of women in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, following text will analyse those issues (as depicted in *Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice*, and *Sense and Sensibility*) and offer a reading of Austen in the light of modern feminism.

4.1 Economy, Education and Public Life

While women did not have access to professions as men did back in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century—in the same manner also in Jane Austen's novels—there were a few areas related to what today might be connected to professional life, or at least life outside of domesticity and relationships, as described in the first chapter about feminism those are (in this thesis) considered to be chiefly interests, education and finance. In several instances, these are reflected in the novels.

One of the instances is in *Sense and Sensibility* where Elinor contemplates the possible marriage between Edward Ferrars and Lucy Steele, where she emphasizes the importance of being educated, and not only being pretty or nice. And her attitude toward Miss Steele—not only in relation to Edward—concentrates on education, more precisely on the lack of it in the case of Lucy.

> . . . Elinor frequently found her [Lucy] agreeable; but her powers received no aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars, could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood . . . (97)

And she continues by saying she feels bad for her because of "the neglect of abilities which education might have rendered so respectable" and her "want of delicacy, of rectitude" (97). It was previously mentioned that experts found similarities between Wollstonecraft and Austen. In this particular text section, we can see one of the heroines commenting on the importance of education—real education—instead of delicacy, or conforming for the sake of being agreeable. Another similarity between the two authors, which is highlighted by Kirkman too (43), is their dislike for *Sermons to Young Women* (1766) by James Fordyce. In *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia interrupts Mr Collins' reading aloud the teaching of Fordyce's *Sermons* and he comments it was "written solely for their [young ladies'] benefit" and it should instruct them on their behaviour (113). By instruction is meant to be taught the manners of an "angel". The previous chapter "Feminist Criticism" demonstrates that this persisting and limiting idea of "good" women has been rhetoric for centuries. As long as one has good manners, does not talk back and does what they are told, they fall into the right category; if not, they lose their "angelic" charm and they become bad. Mr Collins is interested in women (namely Elizabeth) until he sees that in certain things she is unyielding and she has her own mind.

The economical situation of women differed from today. Women were much more dependent on their male relatives than nowadays. From the beginning of the story of Elinor and Marianne it is obvious it is their brother (and his manipulative wife) who clearly affects their lifestyle when he decides the amount of income they will receive from him. Sir Walter Elliot's successor is supposed to be a distant relative, while his daughters have to marry as best as they can to be economically secured as much as possible. Lady Catherine De Bourgh does not think of "entailing estates from the female line" as necessary (*Pride and Prejudice* 198), and she was fortunate her family thought the same, Bennets were not as lucky and they have to come to terms with their property passing to Mr Collins after Mr Bennet's death.

Education, economics and many other areas of life changed with class, and gentry, even though not at the top of society, had some advantages in comparison to lower class people. On the other side they were bound by rules or limits, other classes and occupations were not. And it is not something that the reader has to surmise; in *Persuasion* Anne states it explicitly when she considers the type of education and "great opportunities" of nurses (120). In more detail she expresses herself about men and their advantages when she finds herself in dispute with Captain Harville over women's and men's capability of devotion. Captain Harville suggests that the proof that man are more constant in their feelings lies in history and literature, according to him though, she will oppose by saying it was all written by men. Anne does counteract his arguments about proving anything in regards to women's feelings with literature and she states, "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything" (184). Interestingly, there is a parallel between this thought and feminist theory and criticism—women not having a say in telling their stories and history was one of the reasons for "foundation" of it.

While women did not have as much power in society, some of the female characters are dominant in households—not that they could decide about serious matters, but if they were smart, good manipulators and lucky, they could achieve their ends—and often the household maintenance was managed by them. Elizabeth in *Persuasion* was "laying down the domestic law at home" (5), Lady Elliot, before her death, handled the Kellynch property and Sir Walter's excessive spending so well, their house was without debt, Lady Russell being one of the two advisors to Sir Elliot demonstrates that even she was a capable thinker. These are a few examples of women having at least some power over money, property or dealings with these.

4.2 Private Life, Relationships and Character

In the chapter dedicated to feminist criticism, the plot of marriage or love story was encountered and with it the need for overcoming it that was felt by a section of the movement and literary discourse. Jane Austen's novels deal in great part with marriage, however, the stories do not advocate the common understanding of this institution. The life journey, correcting mistakes, crossing obstacles and evolving are inseperable parts of the stories. So is becoming an independent thinker. Elizabeth saw through prejudice, Anne did not succumb to persuasion anymore, Elinor and Marianne had to mature too, all before settling down. While these characters are not fighting with swords, guns or any kind of weaponry, they are not literal "warriors", they do challenge the notions connected to femininity, relationships, domestic duties, etc.

One of the lectures about marriage is that marrying someone is not always the best option, not even when the person is wealthy or they seem to be perfect. This is clear when Elinor refrains from speaking honestly about breaking off an engagement of Marianne. Only to spare her feelings, she does not voice her opinion that it might not be "a loss to her of any possible good", quite on the contrary it can be treated as "an escape from the worst and most irremediable of evils, a connection, for life, with an unprincipled man" (*Sense and Sensibility* 136).

In the novels marriage is often a tool for moving up the social ladder. In some instances Austen demonstrates how foolish or insensitive person might become when they bet everything on it. It can be clearly detected when Mr Dashwood, brother to Elinor and Marianne, dedicates more time to valuing his sister's chances of marrying well when she is indisposed, instead of being concerned for her actual health and mental state (*Sense and Sensibility* 171). Mrs Bennet, when she knew Jane was not in danger of dying, did not wish "her [Jane's] recovering immediately, as her restoration to health would probably remove her

from Netherfield" and Mr Bingley (*Pride and Prejudice* 87). Or when Mrs Jennings, described by the heroine of *Sense and Sensibility* as ill-judged (even though mostly having good intentions), sees marriage or potential love interest as cure for everything—after Colonel Brandon rushes out of the visit at the Park, concerned for him she wishes him "out of all of his trouble" and she does not forget to mention a good wife in her wish too—as if that would solve all his problems (53). Colonel plays a role of the cure later in the plot too—that is when Marianne is broken-hearted and Mrs Jennings does wish for him to come and "put Willoughby out of her head" (145). The insensibility of some characters when marriage is on hand is shown in *Persuasion* too with Lady Russell and her counting the amount of time left that should be given to a widower before she can begin her match-making between the widower Mr Elliot and Anne (122). She is impatient for him to be free to marry another without considering his mental state, only focusing on the proper timing of her schemes.

What the reader also receives is an image of a good marriage. Marriage that is not built solely on money or the social position of one participant. People who think of money as a good base for a relationship are not role-models. Mrs Dashwood, mother of the sisters, fixes her attention on Marianne and Colonel, and dares to draw the conclusion that she would be very happy, if not the happiest woman, with him, and Elinor contemplates her reasoning for thinking so, because she knows that "their age, characters, or feelings" were not considered (*Sense and Sensibility* 260). Mrs Bennet is also trying to find the richest partner for her daughters—it is not a surprise that she wants them to be looked after, but she does not consider anything beyond the shallow factor of finance.

Good marriage, which both Dashwood sisters achieve in the end, is also characterised as one that does not divide the parties from their loved ones, which shows that with marriage values or people of previous importance to the person do not (and should not) vanish. The happiest couple, or at least one of them, are the Crofts in *Persuasion*, couple in which the

parties respect each other and love each other. Couple in which woman is not only a submissive figure but someone with her own opinion—as shown in the scene where she tries to persuade Captain Wentworth about women being more than capable of living on the board with their husbands, of them being able to accommodate to the not so comfortable ways of living and them not expecting "to be in smooth waters" their whole lives (54).

In connection to relationships it is stated several times in *Sense and Sensibility* that the love is not everything. After Marianne's heart-break and her belief in own eternal misery, Elinor reminds her that she has a comfortable life, and friends, who are ready to help (137). She said it even more explicitly later on while discussing the engagement of Edward and Lucy, "And after all, Marianne, after all that is bewitching in the one's happiness depending entirely on any particular person, it is not meant—it is not fit—it is not possible that it should be so" (197). Also Elizabeth Bennet could not find it in herself to separate herself from her family, not even when she imagined good and comfortable life in Pemberley (*Pride and Prejudice* 268). She knows that (because of a different social status) the relationship to her uncle and aunt could be looked down upon.

Marriage has always been complicated; the process of proposing too. There are several proposals in *Pride and Prejudice*, and two marriages offered to Elizabeth are quite remarkable, especially if they are compared. Mr Collins proposes and, obviously, he can not understand the word "no". Elizabeth refuses him in a decent manner, without trying to hurt his feelings. She is assured he knows women well, so he will ask again, two or three times at total. The idea that Elizabeth might be a "rational creature" and not just "elegant female" does not occur to him (150). The other proposal is made by Mr Darcy, though the proposal itself is quite insulting to her, her social standing and her family, her refusal is accepted and in a letter he proclaims, "Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last

night so disgusting to you" (227). He proposes again, only after Elizabeth expressed her changed feelings. These two approaches and men are different, because one respected her opinion and answer, and the other could not. It is important to note that one sought a good wife, which equalled obedience to him, and the other wanted her for "liveliness of her mind" (388).

On the other side of marriage stands singlehood, and women of this status were viewed negatively. At the beginning, even Marianne is not in favour of single women at the age of twenty seven and she regards them as people who "can never hope to feel or inspire affection again" (*Sense and Sensibility* 28). The desperate state of being single women around the age of thirty were regarded to be in is a recurring topic. This is seen at first hand in *Persuasion*. Anne Elliot, a woman nearing the problematic age, is not in a good position. Sometimes the limit for becoming an "old maid" is lower than the age of seven and twenty, at the age of twenty two Jane is considered to be on the edge of youth by her sister Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice.* In this novel we see the fate of one woman, Charlotte Lucas, who marries the obnoxious Mr Collins because she feels it necessary. "Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune" (163).

Questioning the established "traditional" place of mothers and fathers is resembled in the stories too. Mary Musgrove, even though not the best of characters, challenged the idea that it should be her to stay behind back home with sick child, while her husband should be enjoying his time with friends instead, she then proceeds to leave with him (it is questionable how considerate it was to the child from both of them). After *Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates the bias toward the relationship between fathers and daughters, Lady De Bourgh states, "Daughters are never of so much consequence to a father" (240). It is not true, since Elizabeth has undeniably better relationship with Mr Bennet than her mother.

Qualities assumed to be owned by every representative of one gender, or at least the ones that are preferred to be owned by them, are reflected in the novels. Prettiness as the greatest value in women is underlined by none other than Mrs Jennings. The words describing her standing toward Marianne and Colonel, "*he* was rich and *she* was handsome" (27), which made them the perfect couple, serve as an example. Two shallow qualities used as the main criteria in judging compatibility of a hypothetical couple. *Persuasion* offers a look on the beauty as the highest priority too. Or to be exact, on it not being so. Captain Wentworth described his ideal as someone having "a strong mind, with sweetness of manner" and he tells his sister that he might be a fool because he considered his standards "more than most man" (47). It is the vain Elizabeth in the same novel that—just as her father—puts good looks before good mind or character, which implies that is not a desirable way of thinking. *Pride and Prejudice* reflects this issue too, as an example can be listed the marriage between Mr and Mrs Bennet. Younger Mr Bennet concentrated on appearance and he forgot to consider "weak understanding and illiberal mind" of his later wife, which "very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her" (262).

Being good equals being obedient. As long as one lives in the way dictated by the social norms and does not go against what is considered proper or right, people are good. Lucy and her sister were thought of as good, well-behaved young women, who earned an invitation for a visit by Mr and Mrs Dashwood, until one of them tried to marry out of her rank to their family, to Mr Edward Ferrars. After that they were not worthy, or good, anymore. Just deviating from the norm, in various areas of life, might stamp the person with the adjective wicked, or else. Not succumbing to other's expectations is highlighted by Elinor who questions Marianne and advises her to not "adopt their [acquaintances'] sentiment or conform to their judgement in serious matters" (*Sense and Sensibility* 70). The reader might find the simplistic categories of female character (the angel who is meek, submissive, obeying

vs. the monster who does not listen to others) were outstripped in the novels several times. Elinor is a good person, even though she suggests non-conformity in feelings and thoughts if obeying or conforming is against one's character or conviction.

The aim of modern feminism and feminist criticism is to bring attention to complexity of character, to teach there is more to women than being pretty, good or obedient—a complexity which can be found in Austen's novels—shallow qualities and submissiveness are often questioned by the characters themselves, either by word or action.

The stereotypical expectation of women as emotional, and men building their character on reason, is defeated in the stories several times. In chapter 10 of *Sense and Sensibility* the distinction between the two is evident in the behaviour of the characters—Elinor being the image of rational behaviour, and Willoughby being quite open about his emotions toward Colonel and not using much reason.

Sense and Sensibility and *Pride and Prejudice* provide a view of unfaithfulness, motherhood of single women and loss of "virtue" or "dignity". The latter novel has to deal with the reckless behaviour of Lydia, Mr Collins sent a letter to Mr Bennet with an extreme proclamation that his daughter dying "would have been a blessing" compared to her running away with Wickham (312). More reasonable characters react also with shock or shame, none of them considers it in such measures though. The fate of single mothers is depicted in the first novel mentioned. One ending up as single mother after affairs outside of her marriage—unhappy one, in which she was not treated with kindness—and the second one daughter of this woman, both of whom had to withdraw from society. They are not described by Colonel Brandon and Elinor as bad, only unfortunate in their lives, and they do not shame them; more importantly in the case of the young ward of Colonel they blame the vile personality of the person who ran away from their responsibilities.

Solidarity functions as a symbol of feminism, a little reference to women dragging other women down is in *Pride and Prejudice* too. Miss Bingley notes that Elizabeth is one of the people who "by undervaluing their own [sex]" try to improve themselves in the opinion of the other sex. Interestingly enough, it is not Elizabeth but Miss Bingley who uses this "very mean art" (85).

Persuasion offers a look at love, caring and devotion in couples and how differently men and women grasp these entities; it is done so in the scene already described in the previous subchapter, when Anne has a discussion with Captain Harville. Their debate leads to a question very important even nowadays: is it nature or nurture that determines men and women and their strengths and weaknesses, are these—using words previously quoted in the section about feminist criticism—"anchored in . . . biological reality" (Felski 75) or just a result of social expectations binding women to domestic spheres and duties?

This chapter was an overview of issues appearing in some of the Austen's published novels that are associated with gender, women's stance and life. The works were written more than two centuries ago, there is a need to be aware of the different time periods and the development of the feminist movement and thoughts. The debate about suffrage, abortions, women leaders and other topics do not appear, they had not been present as they were in the following century or as they are now. Analysis of a text written in a different age, in certain ways similar to now though, brings some difficulties—there is a question how much of today's theory is applicable to the texts. Lloyd W. Brown said that Jane Austen "questioned certain masculine assumptions in society" (324). She did not (and could not) cover all the topics present in the liberation movement as it exists decades after her death.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to describe the context of contemporary feminism and ask in what way it helps us to read Jane Austen's novels.

Some readers of the novels might find some of the biases strikingly alike to the ones of today, although they take different forms. The manifestation of stereotypes in the field of education, relationships and other areas of life are rooted in the thought that women are the "fairer" sex, too fragile for harsh reality. Perhaps this is why Austen's novels remain so compelling for readers and critics today: they allow us to view our own issues through the distancing effect of Regency England.

Jane Austen attracts readers and viewers—a part of them are drawn by the romance, others by the aesthetic (mainly with the filmed versions of her stories), however, there is more to the storylines than love. Love story is indeed present, but one could say the purpose of the writings is to show the complexity of one's existence, character and relationships. As Kirkman states, Jane Austen is a critic of "sexist pride, and prejudice as embedded in the laws and customs of her age" (82). The heroines found their happy-endings, an argument could be made that it was not because they were married, but because they knew their own value, they had their standards, and their opinions and thoughts were valued by their counterparts.

The novels (including the ones not analysed in this thesis) are, as Elaine Jordan expressed in the introduction to the Wordsworth Classics' edition of *Persuasion*, "participating in the debates of her time" and also an entertainment (vi). Besides that they are relatable in some sense to the readers even today.

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SUMMARY IN CZECH

Jane Austenová se v posledních desetiletích stala feministickou ikonou.

Tato bakalářská práce popisuje její tvorbu ve vztahu k feminismu 21. století. Teorie tohoto hnutí v dnešní společnosti je následována přehledem vývoje feministické literární teorie a také jejím vztahem k Jane Austenové a jejím pracím.

V poslední části jsou analyzována vybraná díla Jane Austenové. Cílem této práce je najít podobnosti a rozdíly mezi světem vytvořeným Austenovou a světem, ve kterém žijí současní čtenáři.