



Jane Austen's Novels: Reading and Revelation

In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, Colonel Brandon meets with Elinor Dashwood for a private conversation. Elinor's neighbor Mrs. Jennings overhears a few phrases of the conversation and concludes that Colonel Brandon has proposed. She approaches Elinor afterwards with a smile: "I assure you I never was better pleased in my life, and I wish you joy of it with all my heart."

Elinor thanks her: "It is a matter of great joy to me; and I feel the goodness of Colonel Brandon most sensibly. There are not many men who would act as he has done. Few people who have so compassionate a heart!"

Mrs. Jennings is astonished (as many of us would be) at this reaction to a proposal: "Lord! my dear, you are very modest!" But the confusion is soon clarified. Colonel Brandon was, in fact, telling Elinor that he wished to offer the parish on his estate to Elinor's friend Edward Ferrars, who had been disinherited by his family for refusing to break off an engagement of which they disapproved. This scene shows in miniature the larger strategy at work in Austen's novels. Her books give us a better vision of reality first by showing us how our current vision falls short. We seek the truth more earnestly once we realize we don't already have it.

How do we discern a book's meaning? In *The Act of Reading*, the literary critic and theorist Wolfgang Iser affirms that the meaning of a book is not a product lying passively in the text, waiting to be excavated like a treasure in a box. Rather, the book's meaning is found in the *experience* the reader undergoes as she reads. This is why a paraphrase or a summary of a great book can

never substitute for the original. Only by moving temporally through the book itself, with its series of perspectives carefully arranged by the author, can we grasp the book's true significance—which lies in the way the author ultimately changes our perspective. What does this process look like? We get a glimpse of it through Mrs. Jennings.

When we read a book, we enter a new world full of new, unfamiliar data. To explain these data, we form a hypothesis, some overarching account of events, and use that hypothesis to make sense of new data as they arise. We have to form these hypotheses because great authors tend not to explain everything at the beginning. They force us to work out certain things for ourselves so that our minds and imaginations will be engaged as we read. The facts presented may appear inconsistent. There may be elements left unexplained or occluded from our view; like Mrs. Jennings, we don't get to hear the full story right away. And like Mrs. Jennings, we form hypotheses that illuminate not only the facts but also key features of ourselves.

Sherlock Holmes famously said, "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." What Austen's novels reveal, however, is that in literature *and* in life, we must almost always start theorizing before we have all the data, because it's almost impossible to get all the data. In Austen's world, the heroines must (like Holmes) use all of their powers of deduction to make the best possible inferences about the qualities and intentions of others. The very direction of their lives may depend on it.

Austen's novels are full of the language of judgment: reason, evidence, probability, certainty. These terms occur particularly when one person must infer another person's inward state from his outward behavior. Such situations arise constantly, because young women must form some idea of people's characters—especially those of potential husbands—in contexts in which social conventions prohibit intimate conversations or extended time alone. Instead of asking direct questions, women must seek answers indirectly through inference. One woman, examining the male friend she believed to be in love with her, ponders his behavior in these terms (*italics mine*):

It was *evident* that he was unhappy; she wished it were equally *evident* that he still distinguished her by the same affection which once she had felt no *doubt* of inspiring; but hitherto the continuance of his preference seemed very *uncertain*; and the reservedness of his manner towards her *contradicted* one moment what a more animated look had *intimated* the preceding one.

This is Elinor considering Edward Ferrars. She soon learns the reason for Edward's discomposure; as he was falling in love with her, he was also secretly engaged to another woman. But there are other mysteries, too. Elinor's sister Marianne falls in love with the dashing John Willoughby. Willoughby is all admiration and attention until, one morning, he suddenly bids goodbye to the Dashwoods in awkward embarrassment and leaves the county. Unwilling to interrogate Marianne, Elinor must work out for herself what Marianne's relation-

ship with Willoughby is and why he left so abruptly: “Something more than what he owned to us must have happened”, she says to her mother. “What can it be?”

Her mother responds, “I can perfectly account for every thing that at first seemed strange to me as well as to you.” She has formed a hypothesis that she believes can explain all the puzzling data. Willoughby’s rich aunt, on whom he depends for money, must have learned of his relationship with Marianne, disapproved, and sent him away. She is aggravated when Elinor does not immediately accept her theory: “Are no probabilities to be accepted, merely because they are not certainties? Is nothing due to the man whom we have all such reason to love, and no reason in the world to think ill of?”

Their discussion is full of words like reason, probability, and proof, the language we might find in a detective story. Some critics have actually likened Austen’s novels, especially *Emma*, to detective stories because of the way the plot turns on a crucial fact that has been concealed. Clues have been carefully planted that an astute reader might catch but that first-time readers might miss, just as the characters miss them. For Austen, the question is not simply what the concealed fact is, but *why* the characters miss it.

Why would you “twist” a fact to suit a theory? Why wouldn’t you put the highest priority simply on discerning the truth? A key word in Holmes’s sentence is “insensibly”. We are often unaware of how we can subtly distort what we learn to make it fit what we believe, because what we believe can arise from what we wish. We misperceive reality because of the subconscious desires and biases in our own character.

We witness this phenomenon, too, with Mrs. Jennings. Just before Elinor and Colonel Brandon step aside to speak, Mrs. Jennings tells the Colonel how dull life will be when Elinor and Marianne have left. The narrator tells us:

Perhaps Mrs. Jennings was in hopes, by this vigorous sketch of their future ennui, to provoke him to make that



offer, which might give himself an escape from it;—and if so, she had soon afterwards good reason to think her object gained; for, on Elinor’s moving to the window . . . he followed her to it with a look of particular meaning . . .

When she overhears pieces of the conversation and hypothesizes an explanation, Mrs. Jennings does not begin from neutrality. We know from this and earlier scenes that she *wants* the Colonel to propose to Elinor. This desire makes her all the more ready to interpret their conversation as a proposal in accordance with her desires. When we read that the Colonel follows Elinor with “a look of particular meaning”, we may think that this is the narrator’s report and that we can therefore trust it as accurate. But Austen is famous for her pioneering use of what is called “free indirect style”. Her novels are related by a third-person narrator who also sometimes presents the viewpoints of the characters themselves. Austen doesn’t signal, however, when the narrator’s voice leaves off and when the character’s begins. The reader must judge whether a statement represents the (more) objective truth of the narrator or the more subjective opinion of the character—just as the characters themselves must judge when they have arrived at truth and when they are still limited by the subjecti-

ty of their own opinions. Austen reveals how hopes and desires can influence perception and judgment by showing this phenomenon at work, not only in the characters, but in the reader herself.

When we read, Iser says, there are two crucial elements at play. One is the *theme*: the object we are considering. The other is the *viewpoint*: the perspective from which we consider it. The text supplies us not only with content but also with a proposed attitude towards that content. As we read, we incorporate the content into our attitudes. As we learn more about the world of the novel, our attitude towards that world changes. The theme, we could say, becomes our viewpoint.

But this process can also work the other way. The author can focus our attention on that very perspective from which we have been regarding the world the whole time. Now the viewpoint *is* our theme. We judge our own modes of judgment. This process—of turning a critical eye on one’s own perspective—is at the heart of *Pride and Prejudice*.

In this novel, a new neighbor brings the lively Elizabeth Bennet into contact with the aristocratic, off-putting Mr. Darcy. Over time, Elizabeth concludes that Mr. Darcy is not only cold and rude—not simply a man she vows “never to dance with”—but dishonest, unjust, malicious, inhumane,

and full of “abominable pride”. She bases this conclusion on Mr. Darcy’s own words, her firsthand observations, and the accounts of others. Chief among these is the story she hears from Mr. Wickham, a handsome young soldier who tells Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy’s father had bequeathed Wickham a valuable living in the church but that Mr. Darcy then withheld it from him. She believes that Mr. Wickham “must always be her model of the amiable and pleasing” and that Mr. Darcy may be condemned as “the worst of men”.

Halfway through the novel, Mr. Darcy, astonishingly, proposes. Elizabeth refuses him, citing among other reasons his disgraceful treatment of Wickham. Mr. Darcy

she sees now that one could interpret the facts in a way that renders him entirely blameless. She must now judge which interpretation is true. “She put down the letter, weighed every circumstance with what she meant to be impartiality—deliberated on the probability of each statement.” As she considers the evidence on each side, Elizabeth reflects on why she was so ready to believe Wickham’s account in the first place. And in doing this, she comes to crucial realizations about herself.

Earlier in the novel, Mr. Darcy refused to dance with Elizabeth because she was no better than “tolerable” to look at. Elizabeth then told her friend, “I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*.”



gives Elizabeth a letter laying out what he claims is the real story: that Wickham voluntarily gave up the living and then attempted to seduce Mr. Darcy’s young sister for her inheritance. This letter obliges Elizabeth to make her viewpoint her theme. She had adopted a certain perspective on the facts before her. Now she must reexamine that perspective.

Mr. Darcy’s letter proves, Elizabeth realizes, that “the affair . . . was capable of a turn which must make [Mr. Darcy] entirely blameless throughout the whole.” While she had interpreted Mr. Darcy as a villain,

This was chiefly a joke. But now Elizabeth realizes that it was Wickham’s social graces and flattering attention, and not any real proof of honesty or goodness, that had secured her trust—and, equally, Mr. Darcy’s lack of cordiality that had lost it. “I, who have prided myself on my discernment! . . . Vanity . . . has been my folly,” she realizes. “Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away.”

The narrator tells us that Elizabeth

began to read Mr. Darcy’s letter “[w]ith a strong prejudice against everything he might say”. Elizabeth now becomes conscious of that prejudice. She casts her mind over all her encounters with the two men and realizes how deeply that prejudice had influenced her interpretation of every encounter. With a new hypothesis in mind—that Darcy is the innocent and honorable one—Elizabeth sees that every encounter now takes on new meaning, a meaning more consistent with other established facts. The new hypothesis also explains behaviors in Wickham that she had been unable to explain before. Her prejudice had led her to twist facts to suit theories. But the shock of discovering her prejudice also helps her to overcome it. The experience of adopting a view and being forced to revise it helps her see more clearly the world and herself: “Till this moment,” she reflects, “I never knew myself.”

The lesson Elizabeth learns is central to the novel’s concerns. Austen wants to explore how prejudice arises and what its effects can be. But imagine what lesson we the readers would actually take away if we did not see the story chiefly through Elizabeth’s limited perspective and instead had all the information all along. How might we react when we came to the scene in which Elizabeth realizes her mistake? Perhaps we would learn something about human susceptibility to error. But perhaps we would take away only the lesson that *other* people are susceptible to error—other people less discerning than ourselves. In this case, we would not be learning Elizabeth’s lesson; we would be repeating Elizabeth’s mistake.

That is why Austen does not merely tell us about fallibility but brings us to experience it, by aligning our viewpoint with Elizabeth’s. Elizabeth Bennet is a highly likable heroine, independent and witty. Hers are traits we like to think we share, so it’s easy to share her perspective. That means we also share in her correction. This is even more true of *Emma*. In this novel, writes English professor John Mullan in *The Guardian*, “The narrative was radically

experimental because it was designed to share [Emma's] delusion. . . . The narration follows the path of Emma's errors. Indeed, the first-time reader will sometimes follow this path too, and then share the heroine's surprise when the truth rushes upon her." On our first reading of Austen's novels, we may undergo the same experience as the heroine: forming a judgment, finding it wrong, and gaining new insight into our own limitations.

Great literature is constructed, Iser says, to achieve this very purpose. It deliberately creates gaps and ambiguities in its narratives and steers us through a variety of incomplete, conflicting perspectives, so that we apply our own minds to interpreting the story and filling in the gaps. If Austen left out those initial uncertainties, we would miss the later experience of finding our blind spots exposed and our perspective broadened by her final resolution. At the end of a great novel, the changes in the story also change us.

With a new attitude towards Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth rereads his letter. "Widely different was the effect of a second perusal", the narrator tells us. The same is true of the novel itself. When we read the novel again, we can see the clues that we missed, the places where we went wrong. This rereading cautions us, however, not to grow too confident even in our improved perspective. It wasn't only Elizabeth's prejudice that led her to misjudge the two men. It was also the difficulties of judgment itself.

Throughout the novel, Elizabeth hears others express what turns out to be the correct view on Wickham and Darcy. But the trick is this: they offer the *right view* for the *wrong reason*. Caroline Bingley, for instance, tells Elizabeth that Darcy had been generous to Wickham and that Wickham abused his generosity. Elizabeth dismisses this claim, however, because of its source. She takes Caroline, rightly, to be snobbish and insincere, and so she generally distrusts her. It is likely that Caroline hopes to humiliate Elizabeth with this news. Nevertheless, her account is true; and Elizabeth's principle of distrusting Caroline, however well-advised

in general, leads her wrong in this instance.

Elizabeth's sister Jane likewise advises her not to accept Wickham's account of Darcy's behavior: "No man of common humanity, no man who had any value for his character, could be capable of it." Jane's advice turns out to be correct. But the *reason* she gives it is not that she has unusual perception about this particular case; it's that she has a general desire always to exonerate everyone. (Later on, this same desire also leads her to try to exonerate Wickham.) Elizabeth knows that this is her sister's disposition and so pays her no special attention, although in this one instance, it would have been better if she had.

Such moments reveal that judgment will always be difficult. We cannot guarantee correct judgments simply by maintaining certain principles. ("Always think the best of everyone"; "Never believe anything if this person says it.") We must maintain an openness to the world, letting it inform us rather than deciding ahead of time what we will find in it. This is, after all, the only way we can learn what reality is really like.

Iser believes that great literature can feel like life precisely because it carries us through this process of change, bringing us to revise our conceptions and to alter our perspective. Great novelists like Jane Austen can teach us not only what life is like but how we can live better. This includes how we live the life of faith.

We sometimes equate faith with consistency. A faithful friend never changes; faithful devotion is unswerving. This notion may make us fearful of change, afraid that alteration is infidelity. But it needn't be. Sometimes the best way to be constant to a deeper truth is to uproot our reverence for a shallower opinion that we have mistaken for truth. We make mistakes (as Austen shows) constantly. The best way to keep faith, then, may not be always to keep going in the same direction. We should also be checking our compass, reexamining our viewpoint, recalibrating our ways—and if we've gone off the right way, we had better change as quickly as we can. As C. S. Lewis said, "The longest way round is the shortest

way home."

Christ's disciples had to make this sort of recalibration. Like Austen, the author of the Gospel of John is a powerful ironist. In this Gospel, Christ often makes statements that his audience misinterprets because they adopt too literal, too limited, a perspective. Christ declares, for instance, that he would raise the temple, under construction for forty-six years, in three days. His hearers are amazed because they do not realize that he is referring to his body. But "[a]fter he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken" (John 2:22). The disciples, too, learn that there is more than one way to interpret events and that a "second reading" of Christ's words yields a widely different meaning.

The author ends the Gospel by saying that if all of what Christ did were written down, "I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written" (John 21:25). We could never write down all of the possible meanings and messages that God's world might have in store for us. But we have books that teach us how to be open to them, whatever they prove to be.

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