

## Critical Essay: Susannah Gunning, *The Cottage*

In Miss Austen's view, the instinct for security, no doubt a part of woman's physical and social nature, was particularly important [...] in taking that position, she follows the lead of the women novelists of another generation.<sup>1</sup>

Susannah Gunning's *The Cottage*, published in 1769, embodies themes which yield to 'the instinct for security,'<sup>2</sup> and is richly drenched in the descriptions of women's 'physical and social nature.'<sup>3</sup> It is through these immediate, face value aspects, that the reader is able to draw distinct parallels with the work of Jane Austen. Considering these parallels in greater depth allows one to see how the society novel changed over the eighteenth century. Although *The Cottage* was written more than twenty years before *Pride and Prejudice*, and over forty years before *Emma*, it is possible that Jane Austen could have been influenced by 'the women novelists of another generation,'<sup>4</sup> one of these being Susannah Gunning. High society, marriage and financial affairs are prominent themes in *The Cottage*. Upon considering the plot, themes and contemporary reception of the novel, the narrative of *The Cottage* will be compared to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, determining how far, if at all, Susannah Gunning influenced Jane Austen.

*The Cottage*, an epistolary novel, was published in 1769, under the joint reward of the 'Miss Minifies' (Gunning's maiden name.) The eighteenth century saw the expansion and growth of authors, the book trade and there was an overall increase in literacy levels. As Harrison Steeves states in *Before Jane Austen*,

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<sup>1</sup> Harrison R Steeves, *Before Jane Austen* (George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1965) p.373.

<sup>2</sup> Steeves, p.373

<sup>3</sup> Steeves, p.373

<sup>4</sup> Steeves, p.373

At the beginning of the eighteenth century there was no novel. By the end, novels of every description were being published; not in dozens, but in hundreds [...] the history of the novel [...] is the history of quick growth, quick because in some respects it is no more than the adaptation and fusion of other and well-matured literary forms.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the notion of a literary ‘explosion’ in the marketplace, we must ask ourselves what the early writers, such as Susannah Gunning, did to influence the later authors of the century, such as Jane Austen. The majority of novels during the mid eighteenth century embody themes of sensibility, virtue and sentiment, with women dominating the readership. Taking into account the plot of *The Cottage*, we can see how these themes play on the surface and ask how far the plot influenced Austen and whether she created a more sophisticated version in her later novels.

Susannah Gunning lived and socialised in upper-class society, marrying the son of a Viscount, whose sisters moved in fashionable court circles.<sup>6</sup> The high society element of her life is reflected in *The Cottage*, which opens with a description of the ‘country gentlemen’ whose ‘benevolence is entailed with their estates.’<sup>7</sup> Thus, the themes of upper-class society, and its inhabitants are immediately established. ‘Nutt – Hill, and its situation, is to me the most complete thing in England.’<sup>8</sup> This description is resonant of what Jane Austen desired to create in her novels of a few families in a country village. Immediately, the readers are aware of the fact that the focus of the story will be upon a small community. Yet, one is also aware that this

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<sup>5</sup> Harrison R Steeves, *Before Jane Austen* (George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1965) pp. 1-2

<sup>6</sup> Ed. Janet Todd, *The Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1600 – 1800*, p.144 -5 (Routledge London, 1989.)

<sup>7</sup> Miss Minifie, *The Cottage; A novel: in a series of letters* (London, 1769) p.2

<sup>8</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.9

small community will represent greater aspects of life; they will be ‘the most complete thing’ available.

*The Cottage* is conducted as a series of letters, mainly to and from Lady Osborne and Lady Susan, discussing events relating to their friend, Miss Arbington. The friend in question has mysteriously disappeared, later to be discovered at a small, secluded cottage. The novel concentrates on the circumstances of her disappearance, and the results of these events. Volume one sets the social scene for the rest of the story, mentioning different dukes, duchesses, ladies, and lords. At one point, reference to the Royal family is made, one of very few indications of the world outside Nutt - Hill. Eton and Shakespeare are briefly referred to as well, but otherwise the focus rarely sways from the immediate community. It appears as though these elements feature in the narrative in order to shift the characters, readership and author to a higher level, one on par with the qualities and aspects of high society. The fact that *The Cottage* was sold for seven shillings, when the average for the period was five shillings<sup>9</sup>, also reflects the desire to allow the narrative to rest exclusively with the higher classes. This is also resonant in the descriptions of Miss Arbington. She is an orphan, but ‘she is visited by all the families of fashion.’<sup>10</sup> The similarities between Austen’s Harriet, in *Emma*, are apparent. The notion of an orphan, who is looked after by society’s upper-class families, contains a charitable element, but also suggests a certain amount of meddling behaviour, in the life of one who has no immediate role model.

Through various letters we learn that Miss Arbington disappeared because she fell in love with a man named Mr D\_. However, she is subject to the unfortunate

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<sup>9</sup> James Raven, *British fiction, 1750-1770: a chronological checklist of prose fiction printed in Britain and Ireland*, p.322 (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987.)

<sup>10</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.73

circumstance of being forced by her uncle to marry her “detestable cousin,”<sup>11</sup> a prospect Elizabeth has to face with Mr Collins who Austen dryly states ‘was not a sensible man.’<sup>12</sup> Thus, each author places their heroine in difficult position from the outset, allowing the reader to sympathise with them. However, the love between Mr D\_ and Miss Arbington is far more sentimentalised, as he describes her as “too good and too pretty.”<sup>13</sup> Whereas, Mr Darcy’s ‘first impressions’ (the original title for *Pride and Prejudice*) of Elizabeth are far less glamorised when he describes her as “not handsome enough to tempt *me*.”<sup>14</sup> Sentimentality towards Mr Darcy evaporates immediately, when he is talked of as a “most disagreeable, horrid man.”<sup>15</sup> It can be argued that, by not providing an instant love match, Austen is showing a more realistic view of society, one where people are ‘proud’ and ‘prejudiced,’ one where ‘first impressions’ can be the cause of future problems. On the other hand, Gunning does not criticise her characters in the way Austen manages to. Miss Arbington is presented in a flawless light, she is “too good and too pretty”<sup>16</sup> even for the narrative, given exclusivity by rarely writing letters, but often spoken about by the other characters. Austen paints Elizabeth, although undoubtedly the heroine of *Pride and Prejudice*, with flaws. The novel depicts the heroine’s learning process, where she learns the danger of judging on ‘first impressions.’ In *Emma*, too, the heroine is so preoccupied in interfering in the lives of others, that she is blind to her own life. Yet, Austen’s sophistication lies in the way she is able to foresee the reader’s attraction to a heroine, who is not entirely ‘handsome, clever and rich.’<sup>17</sup> She recognised the need for the readers to feel that the heroine was no more or less perfect than them, that they

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<sup>11</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.158

<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.61

<sup>13</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.158

<sup>14</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.13

<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.14

<sup>16</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.158

<sup>17</sup> Jane Austen *Emma* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.1

made mistakes too, and that rectifying and learning from past experiences is a satisfying and rewarding experience. Whereas Gunning's novel tries to compliment society by varnishing any imperfections, Austen highlights the imperfections in order to provide a more realistic, and hence more accessible, view of society. Steeves reiterates this ideology in *Before Jane Austen*:

Miss Austen was also the first novelist to free herself from conventions that had limited the novel both in matter and form [...] She discarded theatrical situations, took the primary virtues for granted, introduced upper-middle-class characters without aristocratic arrogance [...] made her characters flexible and amenable to reason, made a virtue of social intelligence and wrote in a language close to everyday use. No one before her had accomplished all of these things; few had accomplished many of them; many had accomplished none.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, one could argue that the society novel changed over the eighteenth century in what it depicted. Earlier novels like *The Cottage* presented a perfect view of the world in which they existed, but later narratives such as *Pride and Prejudice* uncovered the flaws and cracks in society that earlier authors had concealed.

In consequence of Miss Arbington's uncle forcing her to marry the cousin, Mr D\_ hides her away in the cottage, to be looked after by his friends Sarah and Isaac. Whilst at the cottage, she tells her uncle and cousin that her affections lie elsewhere. The news is taken badly at first, but her cousin soon resolves to say he will

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<sup>18</sup> Steeves p.4

“endeavour to forget his own disappointment.”<sup>19</sup> Miss Arbington is so relieved; she even goes as far to say, “the monster appeared handsome as an angel.”<sup>20</sup>

However, there is an underlying motive to her cousin’s apparently generous words. Miss Arbington travels to Newton Hall, and writes to Mr D\_ asking him to join her. When she arrives at her destination, she discovers that he has not replied to her letter and does not do so over the next few weeks. The novel then descends into the drastic hyperbole that Gunning is renowned for, Lady Harcourt coined the term ‘minific’ to describe the exaggerated quality of her writing<sup>21</sup>: “I saw nothing, that is, every object was nothing to me.”<sup>22</sup> Miss Arbington’s uncle dies soon after, the brief mention of this death contrasts starkly to the recent hyperbole. Discovering that she will inherit everything if she marries the cousin, and only five hundred pounds if she does not, Miss Arbington is in a difficult position for a single, orphaned woman in the eighteenth century. Again, we are reminded of the situation involving Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte Lucas accepts his proposal on the grounds that she is “not romantic [...] I ask only a comfortable home.”<sup>23</sup> However, Miss Arbington expresses Elizabeth and Emma style independence, courageously stating that she will “accept my small legacy with more pleasure, than I should millions gained by fraudulent means.”<sup>24</sup> Mr D\_ eventually tracks Miss Arbington down but she refuses to see him on the grounds that he has ignored her. Lady Susan calls him a “disgrace to mankind.”<sup>25</sup> However, on a visit to a friend, Lady Osborne discovers that Mr D\_ is

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<sup>19</sup> Minifie, vol.2 p.21

<sup>20</sup> Minifie, vol.2 p.21

<sup>21</sup> Ed. Janet Todd, *The Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1600 – 1800*, p.144-5 (Routledge London, 1989.)

<sup>22</sup> Minifie, vol.2 p.34

<sup>23</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.105

<sup>24</sup> Minifie, vol.2 p.52

<sup>25</sup> Minifie, vol.2 p.77

the Duke of Lester. He shows her a letter from Miss Arbington, which has been forged. In it she states that she will be marrying her cousin, and never to contact her again. Lady Osborne relays these events, and reveals the forged letter to Miss Arbington, who is overjoyed. Mr D\_ proposes to her and she graciously accepts.

In Volume Three, Mr D\_ is so angered by the situation, that he goes to visit Miss Arbington's cousin, and attempts to murder him. The courageous fight that Mr D\_ puts up reminds us of the 'fairy tale' stories that feature in gothic novels such as Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*. Although less sentimentalised, Mr Darcy pays Wickham so that the Bennett family are not disgraced by his marriage to Lydia, and in *Emma*, the heroine is always being protected and looked after by Mr Knightly. Thus, the idea of the virtuous princess, waiting to be rescued, protected and looked after forever by the handsome 'knight' is formed. However, unlike Emma and Elizabeth, Miss Arbington does not express individuality, strength and independence. Again, this is a method for addressing legal and political change in society, and its novels, over the eighteenth century:

It is not explained by a woman's being able to demand greater recognition, but by her awareness of what she wanted to recognise [...] Elizabeth Bennett could see, because she was qualified to see [...] <sup>26</sup>

Mr D\_ spares the cousin his life, and in exchange demands to know the name and address of the attorney who assisted with the uncle's will. Upon finding the attorney, Mr Y\_, he discovers that Miss Arbington is the rightful owner of her uncle's inheritance. Mr Y\_ was bribed by the cousin into writing a forged will, even though the uncle had made it quite clear he had "no notion of making my child miserable to

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<sup>26</sup> Steeves pp. 330 - 331

keep up a family.”<sup>27</sup> Towards the end of the novel we are told in great detail the material and financial aspects of Mr D\_ and Miss Arbington’s wedding. Lord Portland tells Lady Osborne “he has loved [...] her from the first time he saw [...] her.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, the novel is resolved by a number of happy marriages and love matches, a technique that features prominently in Jane Austen’s narratives.

Through a consideration of the plot structure of *The Cottage*, the reader is aware of the main themes and elements of high society, and those who operate within it. The narrative has resounding echoes of the themes Jane Austen has used in her succeeding work, notably *Pride and Prejudice*. As mentioned above, the proposals of two cousins in Austen and Gunning’s novels, mirror one another. However, it is what motivates the marriage proposals that highlight the similarities. Both are driven by greed. Gunning’s cousin is spurred on by pure financial drive, thirsty for his uncle’s inheritance. Mr Collins’ greed bubbles under the surface of power and social standing, as he is desperate to please Lady Catherine. Austen mocks him in his explicit discussion of the reasons for proposing to Elizabeth, and sets them out like a business contract:

“It is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness.”<sup>29</sup>

This appetite for social standing is reflected throughout *The Cottage*, the notion of ‘good breeding’<sup>30</sup> often referred to. Although we see Miss Arbington acting in the popular virtuous manner adopted by many female literary heroines of the eighteenth century by refusing to marry her cousin, even if it means inheriting her uncle’s

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<sup>27</sup> Minifie, vol.3 p.44

<sup>28</sup> Minifie, vol.3 p.89

<sup>29</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.89

<sup>30</sup> Minifie, vol.1 p.10

wealth, she still ends up marrying a Duke. However, it can be argued that she was unaware of his social status, as he has masked his social position, she only knows him by the name of Mr D\_. Yet, it is clear the society in which Gunning lived would not have ‘allowed’ her to marry any of her female characters into a lower ‘breed.’

Although Austen reiterates the importance of a ‘love match’ through Elizabeth and Emma’s firm refusal to marry for anything but love, she counter balances it with the underlying rules and tones of society. All her female characters marry within, or above their social standing. Lydia almost serves to break this mould, yet it is so vital that she does not, that Wickham is financially assisted. Although both authors feature highly ‘bred’ characters in their work, they each make a small attempt to break away from a complete elite set of personas, Gunning writes of Sarah and Isaac, and Austen forms Mr and Mrs Gardiner. One could speculate that Sarah and Isaac feature in *The Cottage* in order to provide a contrast to the upper-class families, highlighting the importance and exclusivity of social status. Austen’s lower class characters hold a different purpose. The Gardiners are blissful people, a source of advice for Elizabeth, presented in a positive light throughout. They serve to minimise a snobbish element to the novel, and to critique the society Gunning presents, where money appears to denote happiness.

Each author establishes pomposity and superficiality in their novels, not only by drawing upon themes of money and social standing, but through the continual references to appearances. However, these differ in the sense that Austen uses these descriptions to mock society, whereas Gunning seems to express a general interest, and uses them to furnish her writing. For example, she fills pages with the descriptions of the ‘silks’ at the wedding of her respected, romantic characters

whereas Austen uses one of her foremost characters of ridicule to describe Lydia and Wickham's wedding, Mrs Bennett:

“My dear, dear Lydia [...] She will be married [...] How I long to see her [...]

But the clothes, the wedding clothes!”<sup>31</sup>

Austen later describes Elizabeth as “sick of this folly”<sup>32</sup>, successfully varnishing the situation with ridicule and irony. The insistence on appearances during the period, as presented in *The Cottage*, is mocked in a subtler manner when Elizabeth goes to visit Jane. Miss Bingley is said to describe the heroine as having “no stile, no taste, no beauty [...] her hair so untidy, so blowsy!”<sup>33</sup> Again, the character of Miss Bingley is also a direct target for Austen's distaste and ridicule. Austen's likeable characters do not concern themselves with appearances. Bingley says “I thought Miss Elizabeth Bennett looked remarkably well [...] Her dirty petticoat quite escaped my notice.”<sup>34</sup> When Mr Darcy is pressed by Miss Bingley to criticise Elizabeth's opinion, he simply states that her eyes were “brightened by the exercise.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, it appears as though eighteenth century upper-middle-class society contained an obtrusive element on the importance of appearances. *The Cottage* paints a clear picture as to how great the concern with appearances was, and Austen serves to reiterate the irony. It is as though Susannah Gunning has been able to identify the problems with upper-class society, such as the greed and materialistic side, but she has not been able to criticise them effectively. However, it can be argued that she did not wish to do so. Austen was writing during the revolutionary period, hence it was more acceptable to criticise the world in which she lived. Gunning may not have been aware of society's flaws, as the lack of revolutionary values meant she did not have a worthy comparison. Jane

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<sup>31</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) pp.246 - 247

<sup>32</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.247

<sup>33</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.32

<sup>34</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.33

<sup>35</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Penguin Books, 1996) p.32

Austen's work manages to critique her society, by providing 'sensible' characters such as Bingley, Jane and Elizabeth to contrast to the irrational, upper-class 'snobs' like Miss Bingley. As Harrison Steeves tells us of Jane Austen's depiction of material aspects in comparison to earlier novelists of the eighteenth century:

In spite of her reliance upon taste as the cachet of quality, however, she does not accept it as the matter of determining interest in the life she depicts. She never confuses it with understanding, as the society novel before her time did.<sup>36</sup>

Women are the main focus in both Gunning and Austen's narratives, as the majority of the story is told through their eyes, or letters. However, the motive for placing the female at the forefront of each novel differs. With the distinctions between characters, as seen in the discussion of 'snobs' and 'sensible' people above, it is possible to see that Jane Austen wanted to present her stories through the eyes of a woman, in order to provide a subtler, feminist critique upon society. This critique embodies elements of marriage, money and appearances. Although Susannah Gunning concentrates on a small group of characters within a similar social setting to Jane Austen, they do not serve to provide any insight into the author's personal views and feelings regarding society at the time. *The Monthly Review* criticised *The Cottage* for a lack of differentiation between the characters modes of writing<sup>37</sup>. However, Gunning could have been hindered by the epistolary element, the first person narrative restricting her from having 'a godlike power to go anywhere and see anything.'<sup>38</sup> Austen's third person narrative allows her to act as an invisible gossip, able to paint distinguishing pictures of her characters. The styles of each letter are

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<sup>36</sup> Steeves, p.371

<sup>37</sup> Betty A Schellenberg *The Professionlisation of Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2005) p.133

<sup>38</sup> Paul Magrs 'Point of View' in *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, Ed. By Andrew Motion, Julia Bell and Paul Magrs (Macmillan, 2001) p.139

very similar, the writers and reciprocates do not have any distinguishing characteristics, technique or style. Hence, one finds it difficult to form an impression of each individual. Through this faultiness and lack of identification with the characters, a view of society was also hindered in formation. Creating many different personalities, writing styles and an overall wit, Jane Austen allows us to gain an informed insight into the depths of society. Mrs Bennett represents the materialistic side; Lady Catherine depicts the snobbery and, ultimately, Darcy and Elizabeth form the pride and prejudice. Although Susannah Gunning's heroine, Miss Arbington refuses to marry her cousin, she has Mr D\_ to protect and provide for her, thus she is not alone, which makes us question how independent her motives are.

However, the characters motives could be due to the author's political agendas. Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary *Reflections of the Revolution in France*<sup>39</sup> placed the family at the centre of the political sphere. One could speculate that Susannah Gunning leaned towards this type of politicisation. By preventing unique voices from breaking through in the narrative, she embraces the 'group' like family element, where each character echoes the next. The other themes resonant in the text such as that of orphanage, sisters and Sarah and Isaac's desire to have a family, all indicate inkling towards Burke's political ideals of the importance of a family unit. However, Jane Austen seems to create a greater political desire towards the ideals of Mary Wollstonecraft. She claimed that Burke's stress on the importance of family put women at the heart of discrimination, by only providing them with the role of mother

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<sup>39</sup> Ed. Vivian Jones 'Introduction' in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (Penguin Books, 1996) p.xiii

and wife. Austen's characters break out of this sphere and embody a 'libertine imagination.'<sup>40</sup> However, Steeves disagrees with this, stating;

[...] Elizabeth's awareness of what she could expect to receive without having to claim it was not the product of [...] Mary Wollstonecraft, but of a clearer covenant of society that may be read [...] a third of a century later.<sup>41</sup>

Austen and Gunning do not lean towards one set of political ideals in an entirety. Miss Arbington presents qualities of libertinism, by refusing to marry her cousin. Austen's Lydia also sways from direct politicisation and helps to represent Burke's ideas of the importance of marriage through her desperation to be the first sister married. Yet, Miss Arbington does not have the spark, independence and resistance to the restricting elements of society that Elizabeth does. Her 'voice' against this restriction does not resound throughout the text, because it is difficult to distinguish it amongst the others, and displays of independence are limited. However, perhaps this is because, as mentioned above, we do not have other characters' views to compare hers to, and we cannot distinguish her 'voice' amongst the others. Thus, what could have been an example of early 'libertine imagination,' Miss Arbington's attempted radicalism sinks into misrecognition, as we cannot distinguish her views uniquely between those of the other characters.

Another defining mechanism between Austen's and Gunning's narratives is that of the town and country divide. *The Cottage* gives the reader an insight into a confined society, unobtrusive to the world around it whereas Austen's is:

[...] not only a confined society, but a woman's society, seen through a woman's eyes.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ed. Vivian Jones 'Introduction' in *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen (Penguin Books, 1996) p.xiii

<sup>41</sup> Steeves, p.331

*The Cottage* also presents us with a view of society through a female's vision, yet it does not manage to scratch the surface of any political boundaries as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* have done. It simply provides us with a set of undistinguishable characters and a plot, but we are hard pushed to find any underlying themes or issues that are not obvious from the outset. This prevents the challenge of reading, of determining the novelists' views on society, life and the characters operating within this spectacle. The fact that both authors contain their narratives in a rural setting draws interesting conclusions in comparison. For Jane Austen:

The rural social setting [...] is the circumference of her interest. She chooses and almost confines herself to the country estates and villages [...] she draws pictures of her chosen society with distinction, and with cheerful confidence in its rightness as well as its comfort and security.<sup>43</sup>

We see an aspect of this 'comfort and security' in Susannah Gunning's novel when she tells us of Lady Osborne's insistence to "all live like cottagers."<sup>44</sup> To encourage her friend Molly to come and stay with her, she says:

"I know you will prefer our way of life here to all the gaiety you will see in the great town."<sup>45</sup>

The feeling towards the 'great town' that is presented, mirrors Jane Austen's view in *Pride and Prejudice*. Characters such as Mr Darcy and Bingley are often visiting London, those like Elizabeth are left in the country, unaware and unsure of what happens in London. It is presented as a place of mystery, and of conspiracy, as Jane and Bingley's ties are nearly severed whilst he is in London. The country element is so secure and safe in our eyes; we consider each village and small community to be

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<sup>42</sup> Steeves, p.369

<sup>43</sup> Steeves, pp.369 - 370

<sup>44</sup> Minifie, vol.3 pp.73 - 74

<sup>45</sup> Minifie, vol.3 pp.73 - 74

the same as the one we are reading about. However, the element of the ‘unknown’ when discussing the town creates a certain fear amongst the characters and the readership. In Jane Austen’s case, this could be her way of commenting upon the revolution. The town represents the more powerful and overcoming qualities, in terms of business, finance and class. Hence, it has a powerful hold over the country, as the upper class does of the lower classes. Yet, by the end of each novel, it is the country, not the town, that prevails, as this is where the ‘happy ending’ takes place. Although Austen manages to effectively link this idea to events of the period, one could speculate that Gunning’s fear of the divide derives from her personal situation of growing up in Somerset in a small village. Therefore, the town and country divide are resonant in both texts, yet Austen appears to have a political agenda for this, whereas Gunning’s views restrain her characters to the safety of the country because this is what she had experienced. Her sister-in-law and husband’s links with fashionable court culture could have served for her to embrace the safety net of the country even more so, especially after the break down of her marriage.

Therefore, the question as to whether Jane Austen was influenced by Susannah Gunning is multi-faceted. In one sense, the striking parallels such as the proposal and refusal of marriage to the cousin, Mr D\_ and Mr Darcy, and the multiple marriages at the end, act in favour of Gunning’s influence. Yet, the more broad themes of marriage, money and class, appear to be resonant in many other texts of the period, from Richardson’s virtuous *Pamela*, to the less obvious Adeline in Radcliffe’s *Romance of the Forest*. Hence, the idea of a ‘forgotten’<sup>46</sup> author such as Gunning,

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<sup>46</sup> Steeves, p.330

influencing ‘Miss Austen’s art’<sup>47</sup> appears to be an invalid assumption. However, through comparing Austen and Gunning’s style, the reader is able not only to see a change in the narrative, but in the way society operates. It appears as though Gunning has allowed society’s problems to bubble under the surface of her novel, without managing to express and address them. One could argue that this is reflective of society at the time, one that had not been teased with revolutionary ideals. Also, as previously discussed, it appears that this could be due to the fact that she failed to provide her characters with distinct voices, which prevents a rounded view of society, thus failing to bring any social conflict to light. Austen was successful in this method, creating certain characters in order to represent the problems with society, such the issues with class and money. It can be said that they are resonant of the social difficulties, which may have caused the revolution. Therefore, it is arguable that Jane Austen may have followed ‘the lead of women novelists of another generation.’<sup>48</sup> By employing similar themes and characters as Gunning, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* actually serve to critique novels such as *The Cottage*. Jane Austen took the ‘lead’ of other novelists in order to provide a valid critique of the society they so graciously presented in their work. The sentimentalised, perfection and completeness of Nutt – Hill and its inhabitants in Gunning’s work, are given the reality they deserve by Austen’s portrayal of a ‘prejudiced’ society, containing ‘proud’ characters, who learn that ‘completeness’ not only derives from money and social position. One could say that Austen revamped the social novel.

[Jane Austen] has moved out of the area of Miss Burney’s “novel of manners,” since its concern with the personal, rather than fashionable conduct,

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<sup>47</sup> Steeves, p.386

<sup>48</sup> Steeves, p.373

and provided a reason for a new descriptive term – the “novel of social satire.”<sup>49</sup>

Austen’s predecessors, such as Susannah Gunning, provided a template upon which she could place her satire, and provide the readership with an unobtrusive, witty and insightful critique of society. Without the lesser-known novels such as *The Cottage*, Austen may not have had a canvas to work from, expand and, ultimately, change the face of the novel.

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<sup>49</sup> Steeves, p.345

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