

# Submerged Symbols in Jane Austen

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In Jane Austen's novels the "props," objects used to lend a touch of concrete realism, carry clues to character and plot. As unconscious extensions of the psychological situation, the props bring moral issues into focus. Most have thematic implications; some are strikingly symbolic, though so integrated into the realistic context as to be unobtrusive. In addition, repeated mention of one object often sets up parallels between scenes, personalities and world views.

Since the tendency of Jane Austen's rhetoric is towards abstraction, it is easy to gloss over the touches of concrete detail. The weight of her narrative and of the discourse by her more complex characters centers on abstract nouns, often used with a percision typical of the 18th century. Norman Page goes so far as to say, "The concrete is thus equated with the trivial, which cannot long occupy the attention of the well-regulated mind and has no serious place in a novel which expects to be regarded as more than ephemeral."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as a reading experience, Jane Austen's novels are an emotional, moral penetration, not a visual movie; the preoccupations are with internal complexities, exposed through a flexible point of view and filtered through the minds of her characters. Still, despite this predilection to the abstract, she is acutely aware of the possibilities of irony and implication in the visual image.

In recent years, scholarship on Jane Austen has complemented, with analyses of style and structure, the earlier work done on moral issues, plot, and character. Following Mary Lascelles, Howard S. Babb, Norman Page, and Stuart M. Tave have concentrated on aspects of language—on key words, sentence structures, techniques of dialogues—to bring out underlying meanings.<sup>2</sup> They have shown how speech

habits reflect the moral fiber of her characters. Mark Schorer's suggestive remarks on the metaphorical implications of Jane Austen's choice of verbs has found sequels in more detailed investigations by Alistair M. Duchworth and Joseph A. Kestner.<sup>3</sup> Lloyd W. Brown's *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* draws on both these approaches and on the many works concerned with Jane Austen's debt to her 18th century predecessors.<sup>4</sup> His analysis of the types of communication and noncommunication that go on between the characters and between the narrator and reader combines careful scholarship with imagination. He is the only critic who dedicates an entire chapter specifically to symbolism, though his approach is somewhat different from my own.<sup>5</sup> A number of articles including Tony Tanner's introductions to *Mansfield Park*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Murrah's "The Background of Mansfield Park", and Edgar F. Shannon's "Emma: Character and Construction" pick up vivid and pertinent detail.<sup>6</sup> Their insightful comments point towards an integrated use of imagery (not simply in the lexical sense Schorer discusses) to foreshadow later events and to pinpoint themes.

Jane Austen's uses of objects are manifold. To bring out varying approaches and personalities, she will center conversations around a piano, a picture, a dress, just as in other places she centers conversations around definitions of words. Many members of her cast have characteristic objects, just they have characteristic speech patterns:—Mr. Woodhouse has his gruel, Lady Bertram her pug, Mrs. Allen her muslins. Certain types of objects appear repeatedly in one novel, such as food in *Emma* and carriages in *Northanger Abbey*, but show only scant evidence in others. This is parallel to her concentration in each novel on a distinct set of abstract nouns, or key words. At times she uses objects to carry the dramatic force of the words onto a nonverbal plane. (Wentworth's pen moves and pauses in rhythm with the undertones of the conversation he is overhearing.) In addition the mentality of her characters is exposed through the objects they men-

tion and the way they treat them, i.e. sentimentality usually leads to investing objects with symbolic overtones.

There is no space here to deal with all aspects of the subject. I shall confine myself, therefore, to a few of the objects which, however inconspicuous their appearance, carry thematic implications and symbolic weight. These divide into those which appear only once and those whose repeated mention colors the tone of the entire novel.

The beginning of the second volume of *Sense and Sensibility* opens with a combat of rivals over the love of Edward Ferrars. Lucy Steele has revealed her secret engagement of four years standing; Elinor Dashwood feels confident Edward loves her best. She is eager, however, to convince Lucy that her heart is unwounded. Both are masters at polite hypocrisy.

With a good sense of blocking, Jane Austen sets the stage for this encounter. The seven people in the room divide into three autonomous groups:— Marianne at the piano forgetting "that anybody was in the room besides herself," Lucy and Elinor under the cover of its noise bent over a filigree basket, and the other four seated around a card table. An unstable privacy is effected within the restrictions of formalized sociability.

The methods by which the girls have extricated themselves from the card table have illustrated the contrast among them. Marianne is selfish, antisocial, but forthright. Elinor is considerate, polite, and self-imposing. Lucy's hypocritical flattery consciously manipulates social situations for her own ends. The filigree beasket she uses as an excuse typifies the way she contrives to appear to busy herself on the behalf of others.

We see "the two fair rivals seated side by side at the same table, and with the utmost harmony engaged in forwarding the same work."<sup>7</sup> The interlacing of the beaded gold and silver wires repeats the inter-twinings of their repartee.

The basket functions on a variety of levels. Concretely, it is an object on which to fix the attention and shield the necessity of eye-to-eye confrontation. The reader is constantly reminded of the girls'

busy hands by pointed reference in the narration to eye movements. As the two girls feel each other out by way of backhanded compliments, glances indicate their unspoken comprehension, though the verbal exchange is consciously non-communicative. When Elinor asks, "Could you have a motive for the trust that was not honourable and flattering to me?" Lucy's "little sharp eyes" are "full of meaning." When Elinor rebuts Lucy's grandiose declarations of selflessness and constancy by ironically playing along, Lucy "looked up; but Elinor was careful in guarding her countenance from every expression that could give her words a suspicious tendency."

The basket also operates symbolically. Not only is the physical action of up and down, in and out, replaying the emotional and moral conflicts, but the basket itself is an ironic statement on Lucy's approach to life. Constructed with intent adroitness, it is a net of little safeguards laced together, an open work of flattery and self-interest. In as much as the construction of the basket is an image of building, it ties in with the theme of improvement and foreshadows Lucy's eventual marriage with Robert Ferrars, a self-styled builder.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in Jane Austen undo emphasis on menial labour often reflects a small or mean mind, such as Lucy Steele's (Mrs. Norris is a good example.) Finally the basket visualizes the structure of the novel, which alternates between two heroines, contrasting one with the other, interplaying one against the other, working towards an integration of both their life-styles, of both their senses and sensibilities.

The far-reaching implications of the basket are not surprising considering Jane Austen's careful artistry. She chose from any number of possible objects. In light of what a Dickens, a Hardy, or a Fielding would have done, however, her quiet evasion of the symbolic overtones brings to mind her own description that she works "with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour."<sup>9</sup>

A similar use of an object simultaneously to offset character, to fulfill a practical function in the plot, and to carry symbolic implications related to the novel as a whole is the pair of spectacles in *Emma*

which Frank Churchill mends. Again the scene is set in advance. We hear of the spectacles first from the talkative Miss Bates, whose diffuse conversations are replete with clues.

Oh! my mother's spectacles. So very obliging of Mr. Frank Churchill! "Oh!" said he, "I do think I can fasten the rivet; I like a job of this kind excessively." —Which you know shewed him to be so very ...<sup>10</sup>

Soon Frank is seen at work.

The appearance of the little sitting-room as they entered, was tranquility itself; Mrs. Bates, deprived of her usual employment, slumbering on one side of the fire, Frank Churchill, at the table near her, most deedily occupied about her spectacles, and Jane Fairfax, standing with her back to them, intent on her piano-forté.<sup>11</sup>

Frank hasn't gotten very far, despite a great deal of elapsed time. Jane is embarrassed, or at least avoiding notice. Mrs. Bates's slumber provided a perfect opportunity for a tête-à-tête—the surreptitious goal of Frank's deediness, as becomes apparent when his secret engagement to Jane is brought to light many chapters later. He covers up his motives by flirting with Emma and teasing Jane.

The fixing of the spectacles reflects his manipulative personality which, acting at its own convenience, delights in appearing to be dedicated to the pleasure and service of others. He is not as malicious as Lucy Steele, but he is most zealous in masking his true intentions. This scene is a minor replay of the hollow excuses he gave for putting off his visit to his father till Jane had arrived in Highbury.

Although the focus of the narrative here, as in the scene with the basket, is on mental attitudes, the objects are chosen with care. The image of the spectacles ties into the theme of the book: *Emma* is primarily concerned with clear vision. Repeatedly Emma blinds her judgement by jumping to conclusions on partial evidence. Her fancy clouds her objectivity. Though the reader knows from the beginning she is meant for Knightly, she herself takes the whole novel to recognise her own emotions.

The image of the placement of the rivet is also pertinent, because it parallels the fact that her failure is most often due to faulty assembling of clues. Frank himself turns out to be the rivet which, slipped into place, secures her proper vision of her world, and her marriage to Mr. Knightly. It is mortification over excessive flirtation with Frank which brings Emma to face herself and sympathize with Jane. It is clarification of her misunderstanding of Harriet's feelings toward Frank that leads her to the realization of her own destiny. It is Mr. Knightley's attempts to console Emma for her "loss" of Frank that brings about a full declaration of his love, and a proposal for marriage.

In the scene Frank actually implies obliquely that he is the rivet of Jane Fairfax's life :

Conjecture—aye, sometimes one conjectures right, and sometimes one conjectures wrong. I wish I could conjecture how soon I shall make this rivet quite firm.<sup>12</sup>

(i. e. how soon he will be free to marry Jane)

Both images discussed so far are inconspicuous detail, almost lost in the realism. At other times Jane Austen is quite explicit about the symbolic nature of an object, usually in a kind of burlesque or parody. Emma, when she tries to create story-book romances for those around her, equips the situations with suitable symbols; an example is the portrait she makes of Harriet. In preparation for making her sketch, Emma pulls out her past work and in the course of one paragraph uses the word "like" or its derivatives eleven times. Although "like" is used here consistently with the meaning of "faithful portrait," its more common meaning dominates the latent implications. Emma is making a painfully obvious effort to encourage Mr. Elton to like Harriet. Meanwhile he is gushing out exaggerated admiration of Emma (which she tries to interpret as directed towards Harriet).

In *Pride and Prejudice* portraiture is given much fuller attention. Ultimately the portrait of Darcy at Pemberly brings about Elizabeth's final recognition of his true qualities. As Tony Tanner points out, "Standing before the large and true image of the real Darcy, Elizabeth has in effect completed her journey."<sup>13</sup> Earlier, Miss Bingley teases

Darcy saying, "As for your Elizabeth's picture, you must not attempt to have it taken, for what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes?" References to portraiture run as an undercurrent through many of the conversations of the novel, with such phases as, "your picture (meaning description) may be exact," "such an exhibition" (i. e. self-exposure), "a faithful portrait," "sketch my character," "take your likeness."<sup>14</sup> A portrait is reality filtered through the eyes of the painter. Similarly, mental pictures of other people are fashioned, to some degree, by the ego: by pride and by prejudices. Self-awareness, recognition of the demands of the external as well as internal forces, controls the accuracy and fullness of the likeness, and is in turn a central theme of the book.

In *Persuasion* self-image is so essential to Sir Walter Elliot that he surrounds himself with mirrors, with the reflection of his unaltered, handsome figure.<sup>15</sup> This preoccupation with outward appearance extends to his supercilious attitude towards prestige and social relations. On the other hand his tenant, Admiral Croft, is his antithesis. In taking over the Elliot mansion, he does "little besides sending away some of the large looking glasses," for he says, "such a number of looking glasses! Oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself."

Sir Walter Elliot's superficial preoccupations contrast sharply with the character of his middle daughter, Anne, whose mirrors are window panes:— framed, clear glass through which she views the world. Anne Elliot is an introverted, responsive, compassionate girl. Self-effacing, she is able to experience through and with other people, and yet never lose sight of her own emotions. As Virginia Woolf comments:

Her (Jane Austen's) attitude to life itself is altered. She is seeing it, for the greater part of the book, through the eyes of a woman, who, unhappy herself, has a special sympathy for the happiness and unhappiness of others, which until the very end, she is forced to comment upon in silence. Therefore the observation is less of facts and more of feelings than is usual."<sup>16</sup>

Anne sits behind a window, yet perceives all that goes on out side with interest and compassion. The frame around the window pane suggests

a careful delineation between her own emotions, of which she is highly conscious, and those of others, of which she is equally aware.

Windows appear repeatedly at major points in the novel. The trial of Anne's first reintroduction to Captain Wentworth is broken by Charles showing himself at the window. When Wentworth finds himself unexpectedly almost alone with Anne, he walks "to the window to recollect himself." (a dramatization of his desire to escape). In Lyme, the sound of a carriage "drew half the party to the window" from where they watch the gallant young man who noticed Anne and they identify him as William Walter Elliot. It is again through a second-floor window that this same man's duplicity with Mrs. Clay is first observed. In Bath, Anne has the advantage of a few moments of preparation for meeting the newly arrived Wentworth, because she has, "As she sat near the window, descried, most decidedly and distinctly, Captain Wentworth walking down the street."

Earlier, while Anne waits alone at Uppercross, saddened by the accident at Lyme and the contemplation of the probable marriage between Wentworth and Louisa, she stares out of the window.

An hour's complete leisure for such reflections as these, on a dark November day, a small thick rain almost blotting out the very few objects ever to be discerned from the windows, was enough to make the sound of Lady Russel's carriage exceedingly welcome;<sup>17</sup>

The "misty glasses" (mentioned in the next sentence) through which she can see only dimly accentuate her own depression; they foreshadow the unreliability of what she thinks she foresees. Here, as often in Jane Austen's writings, the weather corresponds to the inner mood and deepens the ambience of the scene.

Finally, in the revised closing chapters of *Persuasion*, it is by a window that Captain Harville and Anne have their conversation about constancy in attachment. Captain Wentworth scribbles out his letter of declaration as he overhears the other two. An awareness of the movement of his pen and the arresting of its motion divides the attention between the abstractions of the talk and Anne's emotional



preoccupation with Wentworth. The crowded room is likewise broken into corners of privacy by "Captain Wentworth's hitherto perfectly quiet division of the room." Anne stands on the window side and Wentworth has only to look towards the light to see her unassuming depth and the freedom beyond. Here as in other places, the nonverbal communication is carried by eye contact, or the lack thereof.

"Opening," "closing," "framing" are recurrent motifs connected with the image of windows. Anne "prizes the open personality" and feels "imprisoned" by her father's apartments in Bath. All people connected with the open seas reflect its expansiveness in their personalities, while Sir Walter's and Elizabeth's "heartless elegance" are bound, just as the book of the Baronetage which he opens on the first page of the novel and closes at the end after entering Wentworth's name. More than in any of Jane Austen's other novels rooms feel circumscribed, limited by the lives and attitudes of the people who inhabit them, while the outdoors has a roving freedom, a freshness of air. The natural images of cyclical change, autumnal sadness and renewed bloom which lend this novel a unique poetic sensitivity are more integral here than to any of her other books.<sup>18</sup>

The theme in *Persuasion* of an open versus a closed mind, of flexibility versus stubbornness appears with the reversed emphasis in *Mansfield Park*. Restriction and comfort here are pitted against freedom and destruction. The action focuses on doors (not windows). Julia throws open the door to announce her father's unexpected arrival; Fanny rushes "out at an opposite door" when Henry Crawford proposes to her; Edmond holds the door open for Fanny to enter her first ball. At once adding to the sense of theater (a pervading theme of the novel), the recurrent spotlighting of the moment of entrance and exit reinforces the symbolism of enclosure as safe, rules and order as peace, and of by-passing boundaries into excitement as turmoil and dissatisfaction.

A great deal has been said by various critics about the symbolic implications of the iron gate (the rigid restrictions of civilized society) and how the scene where Henry Crawford helps Maria around it fore-

shadows their eventual adultery.<sup>19</sup> The highly allegorical atmosphere of the Sotherton trip and the continual blurring of the figurative with the literal suggests symbolic readings of all the happenings in that wilderness. The much-discussed iron gate, however, is only one of the many doors mentioned recurrently throughout the novel. The by-passing of the gate, only one of many exits and entrances.

The mention of doors begins with the Sotherton expedition when "Mr. Rushworth was at the door to receive his fair lady" and "the doors were thrown open to admit them." They "enter" the chapel, and later "meeting with an outward door, temptingly open ... as by one impulse, one wish for air and liberty, all walked out." During the same period when Henry Crawford is tempting Maria past the iron gate, Edmund and Miss Crawford are being tempted out by a "side gate, not fastened."

In the next episode, the fever of the theatricals prompts Tom to transform the billiard room into a stage, with the chief exit established by unlocking the door to Sir Thomas's study, a blatant disregard for his father's authority. This removal allowed Sir Thomas to step to the door rejoicing at that moment in having the means of immediate communication, and opening it, found himself on the stage of a theater.<sup>20</sup>

This prefaces the culmination of the "true acting" which began with Sir Thomas's arrival.

For the timid heroine, Fanny, doors are both an obstacle and a safeguard:

Too soon did she find herself at the drawing-room door, and after pausing a moment for what she knew would not come, for a courage which the outside of no door had supplied to her, she turned the lock in desperation, and the light of the drawing-room and all the collected family were before her.<sup>21</sup>

Behind the doors of her East room, however, she finds space to be herself and consult her conscience. A place to which she regularly escapes, this room is an extension of her inner self.

'Thank you, I am so glad,' was Fanny's instinctive reply, though

when she had turned from him and shut the door, she could not help feeling, 'And yet, why should I be glad? for am I not certain of seeing or hearing something there to pain me?'<sup>22</sup>

Aggression on her privacy which the opening of this door implies is treated with deference by some members of the household. Edmond "knocked at her door" before he entered. Hearing a heavy tread, Fanny finds, "It was indeed Sir Thomas, who opened the door, and asked if she were there, and if he might come in."

This respect for privacy maintained in Mansfield Park contrasts sharply with Portsmouth where "almost every door in the house was open." Noises, including the slamming of the parlour door till Fanny's "temples ached," echo everywhere. The cramped quarters become obvious when Fanny "saw there was no other door" to what she had thought was only a passage-room. In contrast to the "peace and tranquility" of Mansfield:

The doors were in constant banging, the stairs were never at rest, nothing was done without a clatter, nobody sat still, and nobody could command attention when they spoke.<sup>23</sup>

Chairs, sitting, immobility play a contrapuntal theme to the motion of doors. Lady Bertram, always pictured as sedentary, has a stagnation which is made palatable only by contrast to the destructiveness of the forces of activity. Fanny's physical weakness gives her a predilection for sitting, and once sunk into the "comfortable sized bench" in the wilderness, she does not budge; she is a focal center from which everyone else disappears and reappears. Fanny's stability is contrasted with Mary Crawford's activity: "I must move, resting fatigues me." While Mary is a part of the bustle of the theatricals, Fanny remains morally distanced and even her chairs are "very good school-room chairs, not made for a theater." Connected to the theme of theatricals in the first book, the mention of chairs and doors throughout the novel adds dramatic intensity and symbolically reinforces the theme of conservatism versus innovation.

## NOTES

1. Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1972. p. 59.
2. Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art*, London, 1939. Howard S. Babb, *Jane Austen's Novels, The Fabric of Dialogue*, Hamden, Connecticut, 1967. Stuart M. Tave, *Some Words of Jane Austen*, Chicago, 1973.
3. Mark Schorer, "Fiction and the 'Matrix of Analogy'" *The Kenyon Review*, vol XI No. 4, Autumn 1949.
4. Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory, Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction*, Baton Rouge, 1973.
5. He discusses symbolism as an attitude of mind, or extension of the personality, and spends perhaps too much space on the import of names. While very suggestive as far as he goes, unfortunately he has failed to distinguish between symbolic ideas like "drama" "priesthood," or "nature" which act as pivots and reflect mental attitudes, and symbolic objects such as Fanny's cross. True, Fanny's sentimentalism makes the cross a particularly potent symbol in her mind: "with delightful feeling [she] joined the chain and the cross, those memorials of the two most beloved of her heart, those dearest tokens so formed for each other by everything real and imaginary—and put them around her neck, and seen and felt how full of William and Edmund they were..." The cross, however, is not merely, as Brown implies, an extension of her psychological state, but also it carries symbolic implications of Fanny's role: one of self-sacrifice, of silent suffering. In addition, it ties into the professed subject of the novel—ordination.
6. Tony Tanner's introductions are found in the Penguin English Library publications of Jane Austen's works Hamondsworth, Middlesex, 1966. Charles Murrah, "The Background of *Mansfield Park*" *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad, Essays Collected in the Memory of James T. Hillhouse*, ed. Steinmann and Rathburn, Minneapolis, 1958. Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "*Emma*: Character and Construction," *PMLA* LXXI (1956), 637-50.
7. Brown points out that the harmony of the piano is another contrast to the non-communication of their dialogue. *Bits of Ivory*, p. 181.
8. This foreshadowing has been effected already in their first conversation, as Brown points out, when Elinor interprets her statements

- as meaning she is engaged to Robert Ferrars. *ibid.*, p. 180, 181.
9. *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, London 1952, p. 469.
  10. Jane Austen, *Emma*, Penguin, 1966, p. 245.
  11. *ibid.*, p. 247.
  12. *ibid.*, p. 248.
  13. Tony Tanner, "Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*" Penguin, 1972, p. 24. For a more complete discussion of Portait symbolism in P&P, see the preceding pages.
  14. Howard S. Babb has pointed out the recurring theme of performance, particularly in the first half of the novel. This parallels the theme of portraiture. In fact, Music and painting are related as the two forms of "accomplishment" of upper-class girls, and Jane Austen's heroines can be categorized as painters or players. This is most clearly done in *Sense and Sensibility*, where the rational Elinor paints scenes and the romantic Marianne plays the piano. All the more lively heroines play: Elizabeth Bennet, Mary Crawford, Emma Woodhouse (only she never applied herself), Anne Elliot. Jane Fairfax's proficiency at the piano is telltale proof of the intensity of her inner life, despite her "coldness and reserve."
  15. Charles Musgrove's admiration of the mirrors in Bath is evidence that full-length mirrors are essential decoration of his apartments wherever he is.
  16. Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen" first published in *The Common Reader*, 1925, reproduced in *Jane Austen, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt, Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1963, p. 23.
  17. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, Penguin, 1965, p. 139.
  18. Virginia Woolf comments, "She dwells frequently upon the beauty and melancholy of nature ... She talks of the 'influence so sweet and so sad of autumnal months in the country.' She marks 'the tawny leaves and withered hedges.'" Brown discusses cyclical change and constancy, p. 104-6.
  19. For discussions see Brown p. 92. Tony Tanner p. 25, Murrah, p. 34-35.
  20. Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Penguin, 1966. p. 198.
  21. *ibid.*, p. 194.
  22. *ibid.*, p. 231.
  22. *ibid.*, p. 384.