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THE MARRIAGE PLOT AND CHARACTER ARCHETYPES ACROSS THE  
CENTURIES: JANE AUSTEN ENDURES

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## ABSTRACT

“The Marriage Plot and Character Archetypes Across the Centuries: Jane Austen Endures” explores how pop culture and literary authors allude to Austen within their works, incorporating her character archetypes and addressing similar concerns embedded in her works, such as class boundaries and imposed social norms. The first chapter discusses Helen Fielding’s adaptations, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, and examines the relationship they share with their parent texts, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. In particular, I probe how Helen Fielding adapts specific scenes responsible for driving the marriage plot from Austen’s original versions. Fielding highlights the effects such stories have when internalized by readers, offering a critique of social standards. Like Austen, Fielding employs irony and allows her characters to repair their mistakes, lending to her comedic tone. Ian McEwan frames his novel *Atonement* in terms of Austen, and makes several nods to her by touching on similar issues, such as absentee parents, childhood, and the negative implications of a stringent class system. McEwan also adopts similar character archetypes but employs them in a tragic context, discussing what happens when a character must suffer the consequences of irrevocable mistakes.

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## Introduction

### Jane Austen's Appeal: Character Archetypes and Revocable Mistakes

What enabled Jane Austen's works to survive across two centuries full of major historical changes, remaining relevant to modern readers today and spawning a genre of fan fiction and adaptations devoted to her six major novels? Austen's longevity stems from her character archetypes. Erich Auerbach, a literary critic, used mimesis as a way to interpret literature, and many popular culture and literary authors engage in mimesis when responding to Austen's novels, producing imitations and representations of Austen's characters. In William Deresiewicz's *A Jane Education*, the critic shares life lessons he acquired from reading Austen's books, particularly focusing on his identification with Austen's lovable but flawed characters as he came of age and matured alongside them. Deresiewicz pays tribute to the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Austen's most popular novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, in a *New Yorker* article, and he contends Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy persist in literature today because they are "archetypes of the way we want to be" ("Happy Two-Hundredth Birthday"). Since Elizabeth and Darcy are "figures who [speak]...something permanent about the human condition," "we do not cease to tell their story—so we re-tell it" ("Happy Two-Hundredth Birthday").

Austen's archetypal characters make revocable mistakes, contributing to their long-lasting appeal; readers desire to believe their mistakes can also be redressed. For the purpose of comparison, irrevocability of mistakes defines tragedy and possessing the ability to correct mistakes defines comedy. Comedy makes space for cultural critique that is not always available in tragedy; when readers worry about characters' actions and ruined lives, they are not concerned with manners. Austen's appeal also hinges on her ability to blend high and low literature,

enabling those with different interests to enjoy her works. Alexandra Alter, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, observes that Austen's "arch humor and wit," coupled with "her storybook endings, give her novels both highbrow and lowbrow appeal" (Alter). Austen's influence on literary writers George Eliot, Ian McEwan, and Jeffrey Eugenides, as well as popular culture authors Helen Fielding and Shannon Hale, supports Alter's claim.

I am interested in the multiple ways literary and pop culture authors adopt the archetypes Austen inaugurates in her body of work and allude to similar societal issues Austen addresses in her texts. Helen Fielding's comedic adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on Bridget and Mark Darcy, characters resembling Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. In her sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Fielding adapts one of Austen's more obscure novels, *Persuasion*. Fielding revisits Bridget and Mark, now mirroring Austen's Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. Bridget and Mark face many of the same miscommunications and misunderstandings that challenge Austen's couples. Fielding places her pair of lovers, however, in a modern evolving world where women are able to pursue careers and support themselves economically, a world unfathomable to Austen's Fanny Price, Catherine Morland, or the Bennet sisters. Fielding, like Austen, follows the marriage plot: her novels focus on courtship and culminate in relationships. In Fielding and Austen's worlds, mistakes are not absolute. Through her actions, Elizabeth shows Mr. Darcy she learned not to judge people so quickly, and Bridget demonstrates to Mark she learned not to trust Daniel Cleaver. If mistakes were irrevocable, we would be unable to laugh at many of Bridget's actions. Bridget's obsession about her weight or her concerns about whether her crush knows how often she telephoned him would cease to be funny if she was unable to correct her major missteps. Fielding employs satire in her novels of manners, allowing her to question social norms and offer a critique of what women think they have to do to lure a man.

Unlike pop culture writer Helen Fielding, literary author George Eliot does not craft an adaptation of Austen, but she still uses Austen's character archetypes in her tragic works.

Resonances of Jane Austen's masterpieces in Eliot's *Middlemarch* draw attention to Austen's influence on the literary field and the work of later women writers. Rebecca Mead, a critic, asks, "Could there be a more Austenesque scenario than the beginning of *Middlemarch*, which presents two young, well-born, unmarried women recently arrived in a country neighborhood, one of them filled with sense and the other brimming with sensibility?" (Mead). As Mead implies in her *New Yorker* article, the Brooke sisters in *Middlemarch* mirror the Dashwood sisters from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Dorothea's idealism, emotions, and naïveté direct her decision to marry Casaubon, a dreadful mistake; her decision echoes how Marianne's optimism and feelings leave her vulnerable to the charming John Willoughby. Celia's common sense, realistic point of view, and keen perception mimic Elinor's astuteness. Dorothea also resembles Austen's heroine Emma. Both female characters become so immersed in their own purposes—Emma's desire to play matchmaker to Harriet and Mr. Elton; Dorothea's wish to build cottages for poor villagers—that they are blinded to Mr. Elton and Sir James Chettam's apparent romantic interest in them. Neither is aware her actions may have indicated a reciprocation of that interest. Emma increases her interactions with Mr. Elton in order to plot seeds of affection for Harriet in his mind, and Dorothea increases contact with Sir James Chettam to implement her cottage plans. Dorothea's intentions are honorable and, she does not mean to mislead; yet, like Emma, she misreads the behaviors and signals of others. Dorothea views Sir James Chettam's continual visits to Mr. Brooke's estate as a symbol of his affection for her sister Celia, recalling to Austen readers' minds how Emma construes Mr. Elton's frequent presence at Hartfield as proof of his feelings toward Harriet. This brief sketch of the similarities across the two author's works highlights Austen's crucial influence on Eliot: "without Austen, no Eliot" (Mead).

Eliot builds on the character archetypes Austen sets up and then explores what happens when they are placed in a different context. Eliot, like Austen, conveys the rituals of courtship in *Middlemarch*, such as in the early stages of Lydgate and Rosamond's relationship. Her work,

however, also contains many tragic elements, distinguishing it from Austen's comedies. While Austen's novels all end when the couple weds, Eliot moves beyond the traditional marriage plot, which only covers courtship and the wedding ceremonies. Eliot portrays marriage itself, and as the story progresses in *Middlemarch*, the married characters' misery increases as their relationships unravel. Will Ladislaw witnesses Dorothea openly sobbing in Rome on her honeymoon, and Casaubon grows enraged and jealous at Dorothea's communication with Ladislaw, altering his will to prevent them from uniting in the future. Rosamond resents Lydgate for providing her with a less refined lifestyle, and Lydgate's happiness collapses under Rosamond's cold and withdrawn manner. Eliot delineates the dissatisfaction of many of her married characters, and Jeffrey Eugenides, a literary author, addresses her depiction of marriage in his novel *The Marriage Plot*. Madeline, the female protagonist, writes her thesis on the marriage plot and plans to probe Austen's comedies before turning to Eliot's *Middlemarch*, "where things got more complicated and considerably darker" (Eugenides, 22). While Eliot's novel "begins with the traditional moves of the marriage plot—the suitors, the proposals, the misunderstandings," it "kept on going" even "after the wedding ceremony," looking at the characters' "disappointed married lives" (22-23). Austen also explores unsatisfactory marriages in her works, such as Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet's marriage and Lydia and Wickham's marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*. Depicting minor characters as unhappy in their relationships keeps Austen from appearing too optimistic. When Elizabeth marries her equal in intelligence and cleverness, however, she repairs, or at least addresses, her father's mistake; the emphasis on Elizabeth and Darcy's happiness overshadows the minor characters' dissatisfaction. Thus, by highlighting her characters' dissatisfied marriages, Eliot portrays marriage in an entirely different vein from Austen, whose emphasis at the end of her novels centers on the happy couples.

The irrevocableness of characters' mistakes casts Eliot's *Middlemarch* in a tragic light. We see two characters, Rosamond and Lydgate, yoked together and making each other miserable,

forever stuck in a shattered relationship. In Eliot's works, several of the heroines' lives are ruined at the end of the novel, usually an unfathomable possibility in Austen's comedies. Eliot's characters make many of the same mistakes as Austen's heroines, such as Dorothea prematurely judging people like Emma Woodhouse and Elizabeth Bennet. Emma gains an opportunity to show Mr. Knightley she learned from her mistakes, as does Elizabeth with Mr. Darcy, and the novels culminate with their blissful engagements. But unlike Austen's heroines, Rosamond cannot revoke her decision to marry Lydgate, and this finality makes the story tragic, addressing broader issues of marriage, love, and economy in the process. Ian McEwan emulates George Eliot in his acclaimed literary work, *Atonement*. He also employs Austen's character archetypes to show tragically what happens when we cannot redress our mistakes. *Atonement* emphasizes the finality of thirteen-year-old Briony's decision to accuse their servant and family friend of rape. As a female protagonist, Briony resembles Austen's heroines Catherine Morland, Emma Woodhouse, and Elizabeth Bennet. Like Catherine, she navigates the world around her through a fictional lens; like Elizabeth, she prematurely judges people; like Emma, she means well but misreads others. Briony shares the same flaws Austen's characters possess, but the consequences her actions engender are permanent. Briony's inability to take back her words and repair her mistakes differentiates her from Austen's characters. She ruined Robbie and Celia's lives and sparked the dissolution of the Tallis family, forced to forever atone for her unchangeable deeds.

In sum, this thesis discusses the means through which pop culture author Helen Fielding and literary author Ian McEwan respond to Austen's novels, adopting her archetypes and transferring them to different cultural contexts and exploring similar societal concerns, such as class and gender expectations. Helen Fielding bases her storylines on Austen's marriage plot, stressing how Bridget's mind absorbed those familiar narratives about love and marriage. Although Fielding's language and narrative strategies at times diverge from Austen's, she creates a three-dimensional character resembling Austen's heroines. While McEwan does not focus on

the marriage plot in *Atonement*, he also frames his narrative in terms of Austen. By placing his protagonist, whom he depicts as similar to Austen's heroines, in a world where actions are indelible, McEwan speaks to the consequences of decisions and the dangers of misreading situations and others' characters.

## Chapter 1

### Marriage, Men, and Mimesis: Helen Fielding's Adaptations of Austen

Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, one of the most popular Jane Austen adaptations to date, sold millions of copies and later obtained cinematic success. After receiving praise on the initial diary, Fielding wrote the sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, and modeled it after Austen's *Persuasion*. In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, Fielding admits to "stealing" the "plot" of *Bridget Jones's Diary* from *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's second novel, which was first published in 1813. Fielding joked she figured Austen "wouldn't mind" the plot theft, since "she's dead" (Ferris, 71). Ultimately, Fielding "thought that Jane Austen's plots were very good," and through imitation and modernization, she exhibits her appreciation of Austen (Ferris, 71). In both of her works, Fielding calls attention to their intertextuality and an old trope, specifically the idea that reading novels can harm a young woman's mind. Austen addresses this trope in her own works, offering a defense of the novel and arguing they are valuable but misreading them can be harmful (*A Jane Austen Education*, 114). Fielding patterns certain moments in her adaptations after specific scenes from Austen's original texts; these scenes each possess a function related to the marriage plot, either creating conflict for the characters or driving the characters toward one another. The Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet archetypes shape Bridget's characterization, and the Frederick Wentworth and Fitzwilliam Darcy archetypes frame Mr. Darcy's portrayal. Helen Fielding employs sarcasm and irony to demonstrate her admiration for Austen and to critique social norms. Fielding's language, specifically diary shorthand, grants readers access to Bridget's thoughts, drawing attention to her complexity as a character.

### **Bridget and the Power of Stories**

Stories shape Bridget's choices and identity; the way Bridget looks at the world is filtered through the stories she has been told. For instance, after her parents separate, Bridget "smug[ly]" applauds herself for taking on the "new role of carer" and "wise counselor," elaborating, "It is so long since I have done anything at all for anyone else that it is a totally new and heady sensation. This is what has been missing in my life. I am having fantasies about becoming a Samaritan or Sunday school teacher, making soup for the homeless...or even retraining as a doctor" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 43). Bridget's "fantasies" allow her to imagine a future in which she counsels others and carries out deeds commonly associated with the caretaker role. Her aspirations show how Bridget inserts herself into narratives that already exist, which is exactly what Fielding does by adopting *Pride and Prejudice* as a model for her own novel. "Fantasies" denotes the opposite of reality, and Bridget reads these idealistic stories and then wants to slot herself into them. In her fantasies, Bridget lives through other people, rather than through literature, another realm through which characters can fantasize, such as Jane Austen's heroine Catherine Morland and Ian McEwan's protagonist Briony. Whether it is through other people or through literature, however, all three characters adopt fantasies as a means to imagine themselves as characters navigating their way through predetermined, familiar narratives.

Bridget's fantasies enable her to project herself into a story already unfolding and allow her to live through other people. Living through others permits Bridget to diffuse responsibility, no longer needing to create her own story or make her own choices. Despite Bridget's brief attempts to live through others, she never acts on her fantasies; she does not become a Sunday school teacher because her fantasies do not align with her real life. Bridget also echoes Austen's Emma Woodhouse; however, Emma acts on her fantasies, such as attempting to set up Mr. Elton and Harriet when mistakenly believing Mr. Elton fancied Harriet. Ultimately, Bridget's

“fantasies” show how she romanticizes and creates narratives for herself based on stories and roles she has heard about before. Mary-Catherine Harrison, a literary critic, discusses stories’ capacity to shape readers’ thoughts, and Bridget may be viewed as a “storied se[lf] living in a story-shaped world” (2).

Bridget also inserts herself into existing narratives during a New Year’s party where her parents want to set her up with Mark Darcy, a wealthy son of their friends. Bridget immediately judges Mark based on her knowledge of Mr. Darcy’s disposition from the BBC mini series version of *Pride and Prejudice*. After the party, Bridget recounts her observation of “the rich divorced-by-cruel Mark” in her diary, writing Mark “scrutinized the contents of the Alconburys’ bookshelves: mainly leather-bound series of books about the Third Reich, which Geoffrey sends off for from Reader’s Digest” (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 12). Bridget concludes, “It struck me as pretty ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party” (12). Bridget’s comparison of Mark Darcy to Mr. Darcy shows she assumes readers are familiar with *Pride and Prejudice*, calling attention to meta-fiction, the self-referential nature of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Meta-fiction allows an author purposefully to allude to a work’s literary elements. Because Helen Fielding’s novel consists of fiction about fiction, it expects readers to possess a certain familiarity with Austen’s classic work. *Bridget Jones’s Diary* could also be viewed as fiction about a film adaptation of fiction, however, since Fielding’s interpretation of *Pride and Prejudice* more closely aligns with the BBC miniseries and Colin Firth’s sexy portrayal of Mr. Darcy than with Austen’s actual novel (Ferriss).

The diary entry reveals Bridget recognizes Mark’s name from a classic piece of literature, and a pop-culture miniseries sensation, affecting her judgment of him. She reads him as Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*, the hero who initially seems to be condescending toward the townspeople during the first ball he attends while visiting the country with Mr. Bingley. In Austen’s original story, Mr. Darcy refuses to dance and insults Elizabeth. By viewing Mark

Darcy through a literary lens and reading him as the persona of fictional Mr. Darcy, Bridget automatically assumes Mark judges the hosts, who are from a lower class. As a result, she concludes Mark looks down upon Geoffrey Alconburys' middlebrow taste in books. By applying the qualities and behaviors of Jane Austen's characters to people she encounters in her own life—such as applying Mr. Darcy's "snoot[iness]" at "a party" to Mark Darcy because they share the same last name—Bridget demonstrates how existing stories and characters influence her navigation and understanding of life. "The form and content of fictional narratives," like Mr. Darcy's taciturn personality and initial haughty pride, "shape the stories [she] perceive[s] and construct[s]" in her own life (Harrison, 2).

As the first novel progresses, Fielding focuses on conversations Bridget shares with her singleton friends, highlighting how fictional stories are deeply engrained in Bridget's perception of reality. Bridget writes about watching BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* and deconstructing it with Jude afterwards; both women relate the fictional story to their own real-life interactions. Bridget and Jude discussed "the comparative merits of Mr. Darcy and Mark Darcy, both agreeing that Mr. Darcy was more attractive because he was ruder and that being imaginary was an advantage that could not be overlooked" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 215). Bridget's comparison of a real human being to a fictional character and her debate on their "relative merits" shows the magnitude to which stories influence her opinions about Mark. By stressing the fictional character's relative "advantages," Bridget illustrates the ways her conceptions about ideal courtships and ideal men are molded by fiction. Thus, Austen's classic narrative influences Bridget's perceptions, and Bridget's conversation with Jude suggests she may conflate made-up stories with reality.

Like Bridget, many of Austen's heroines, such as Elizabeth and Emma, misapprehend reality and make faulty judgments. While Elizabeth and Emma both form fallible opinions about others, their judgments are not necessarily acquired from fictional stories. Bridget's misreading of Mark Darcy, however, stems from her familiarity with Austen's books. Elizabeth wrongly

identifies Mr. Wickham as a victim and Mr. Darcy as his persecutor, a belief she gleans from the story Mr. Wickham weaves together. While Mr. Wickham's narrative influences her, it cannot be called a literary reference. Bridget's opinions of people come from literature or adaptations of literature. Literature, in part, exacerbates and contributes to her misreading of Mark Darcy.

Bridget inaccurately reads other characters, in addition to Mark Darcy. After a conversation with her smug married friend Magda, Bridget again shows how fictional narratives about happily-ever-after, rather than reality, frame her ideas about marriage and womanhood. Magda shares her frustration with the misconceptions people hold regarding stay-at-home mothers: "...it's much more fun going out to work, getting all dressed up...and having nice lunches than going to the bloody supermarket and picking Harry up from play group. But there's always this aggrieved air that I'm sort of ghastly Harvey Nichols-obsessed lady who lunches while he earns money" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 113). Bridget misses the crux of Magda's argument, writing instead about her own "single-minded obsess[ion] with the shame of being a single woman in her 30s" (Harrison, 28). Bridget writes, "I..am ridiculed as an unmarried freak, whereas Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 114). Bridget interprets "going to the bloody supermarket" with her children as leisurely "shopping all day," revealing how Bridget does not hear Magda's argument. Bridget instead fixates on her status as an "unmarried freak" in a society where singleness is considered socially unacceptable.

As a result of her obsession about living up to societal norms, Bridget becomes so influenced by the marriage plot and the desire to marry that she willfully ignores the day-to-day "despair she observes" and hears about "in modern marriages" (Harrison, 28). In her skewed summary of Magda's complaints, we see Bridget deliberately misunderstand the hardships of marriage. Her inability to access fully what Magda says about married life stems from the fact that most marriage plot books, like *Pride and Prejudice*, end immediately after the wedding and

do not portray the marriage itself. Such a narrative structure enables Bridget to ignore the struggles of marriage, allowing her to focus unduly on courtship. Contemporary reality television shows, such as “Say Yes to the Dress” also emphasize the engagement and wedding rather than lifelong commitment, thus fostering similar misconceptions. Bridget’s diary ultimately functions to perpetuate certain familiar narratives and gloss over others. Because Bridget has specific views about marriage based on cultural narratives—kernels of knowledge gleaned from watching *Blind Date* and BBC’s *Pride and Prejudice*—she misreads reality. These fictional stories are “key to how [she] think[s] about marriage and organizes stories about [her] own li[fe]” (Harrison, 7).

Stories frame Bridget’s understanding of the world, and, similarly, literature plays a “key” role in determining Madeline views romance and love in Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot*, another intertextual book. While Eugenides believes “the marriage plot doesn’t function in our society now in the same way it did for Jane Austen’s heroines,” he sees how her books still instill certain ideas about marriage into modern young women’s minds (Sibree; Harrison, 34).

Eugenides argues “reading these books and seeing all the movies that they rise to” foster “certain expectations about love, romance, and marriage,” consequently “affecting how we behave” (Sibree; Harrison, 34). Fielding explores this phenomenon in her own works; we see Austen’s novel and the seminal BBC miniseries shape Bridget’s expectations about romance, affecting her courtship rules and guiding her behavior toward Daniel Cleaver and Mark Darcy. Like Bridget, Eugenides’s Madeline has her own set of dating rules derived from fiction, and she also breaks them often. While Eugenides does not think the marriage plot operates the same way in the twenty-first century as it did in the early nineteenth century, Harrison notices Eugenides still “respond[s] to the marriage plot as it was instantiated in 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature” (Harrison, 34). In *The Marriage Plot*, Madeline, an English major completing her senior year, writes her thesis on the marriage plot, and as a result, acquires what Eugenides refers to as the “received ideal of romance” (Sibree; Harrison, 34). Madeline suspects books possess a certain

influence over her, “sometimes worr[ying] about what those musty old books were doing to her” (Eugenides, 21). Despite these occasional reservations, she continues to seek a certain type of literature out because she “felt safe with a nineteenth century novel” (47).

In her semiotics class, Madeline discovers Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*, “marveling at its relevance to her life” (Eugenides, 53). *A Lover’s Discourse* profoundly affects Madeline, signaling to her “she wasn’t alone” and providing “an articulation of what she had been so far mutely feeling” (49). In the first section of the novel, Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* begins to influence Madeline’s thoughts about relationships, reminiscent of the way *Pride and Prejudice* influences Bridget’s beliefs about the rules of courtship and marriage. As Madeline tries to navigate an intense relationship with her enigmatic boyfriend Leonard, who experienced a troubled childhood, Barthes’s book becomes a point of contention between the two. Paralleling how self-help books divide Bridget and Mark in Fielding’s *The Edge of Reason*, *A Lover’s Discourse* plays a role in Madeline and Leonard’s break-up in Eugenides’s novel. After Madeline admits her love for him for the first time, Leonard points to a page of *A Lover’s Discourse*, where Barthes explains the words “I love you” carry “no meaning whatever” (67). After Leonard trivializes her love for him, Madeline throws the book at his head. Despite the role it played in the downfall of her relationship, Madeline seeks solace in the book afterwards. She rescues the treasured book on her way out of Leonard’s apartment, even though it “prove[d] Leonard’s point: that she had an unhealthy obsession with *A Lover’s Discourse*; that, contrary to dispelling her fantasies about love, the book had served to reinforce those fantasies” (78). Madeline’s manner of speech when discussing how books drive her “fantasies” and “obsessions” about love imitates Bridget’s diction.

Like Bridget, Madeline is a “storied self,” and her ideas about love stem from literature, particularly her familiarity with nineteenth century novelists, such as Austen and Edith Wharton. Wharton and Austen wrote about “weddings” and “all kinds of irresistible gloomy men,” the

types of narrative Madeline finds attractive and “wickedly enjoys” (Eugenides, 48). Both Bridget and Madeline derive pleasure from the marriage plot stories, yet such narratives create issues within their romantic relationships by “reinforcing” unrealistic expectations and fantasies. In the period of wallowing and isolation following her break-up with Leonard, Madeline found “the more of *A Lover’s Discourse* she read, the more in love she felt. She recognized herself on every page...Here was a book addressed to lovers, a book about being in love that contained the word love in just about every sentence. And, oh, how she loved it! (79). Like Bridget, who desires for Elizabeth and Darcy “to get off,” Madeline finds pleasure in narratives about romance, and as a result, frames her views on love and relationships in terms of fictional stories (*Edge of Reason*, 215). In conclusion, both Eugenides and Fielding, although seeking different audiences—the former directing his novel toward literary readers, the latter for popular culture readers—address the fantastical conceptions readers develop from books.

### **Scandals and Moment of Recognition: Parallel Scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary***

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* share several commonalities, most especially in terms of their plots and narrative structures. Society views singleness as unacceptable in both novels, causing each heroine to cope with a meddling mother trying to pair her daughter with a rich man. Austen and Fielding’s novels of manners emphasize codes of behavior, and each culminates in a successful relationship uniting the two main characters. The scandal and revelation scenes in each of the works connect to the structure of the marriage plot; the scandals force the heroes and heroines apart, while the moment of recognition scenes allow the pairs to come together.

One of the crucial plot changes in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* occurs when Lydia runs off with Mr. Wickham, a sexual scandal that threatens to "humiliate[e]," "bring misery" to, and disgrace the entire family, including the other four unmarried daughters (210). Austen employs free indirect discourse as a narrative strategy in order to entice the reader to view most events from Elizabeth's perspective. This tactic enables us to see Elizabeth's recognition of the significance and impropriety of the situation, which Austen juxtaposes with Lydia and Mrs. Bennet's complete lack of awareness concerning the long-lasting effects of such indecent actions. The narrator and, by association, Elizabeth, perceive Mrs. Bennet's willful ignorance and lack of embarrassment regarding the sexual scandal: "[Mrs. Bennet] was more alive to the disgrace, which the want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham, a fortnight before they took place" (236). Like Mrs. Bennet, Lydia is also not "alive to the disgrace" of "eloping and living with Mr. Wickham," and such "insensibility" provokes Elizabeth's "disgust" (236, 239).

Upon returning to Longbourn after marrying, Lydia reveals her lack of shame through her "untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy and fearless" behavior (*Pride and Prejudice*, 239). Lydia displays her boldness when she proudly proclaims, "I am sure my sisters must all envy me. I only hope that they may have half my good luck. They must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands" (241). Lydia's emphasis on artificiality—such as discussing the fashionable "place" to travel to and marry—and her complete lack of decorum—such as "le[ading] voluntarily to subjects, which her sisters would not have alluded to for all the world"—illustrates how she and her mother share the same shallow priorities and a similar lack of embarrassment (240). Austen utilizes Mrs. Bennet and Lydia's ignorance and impropriety to contrast their characters with those of Jane and Elizabeth, who "felt for [their sister] probably more than she felt for herself" on "her wedding day" (239). Jane and Elizabeth "blush" for their sister and her new husband, grasping the magnitude of Wickham and Lydia's misconduct. Austen contrasts

their sensitivity to transgressions against propriety with the superficial natures of Mr. Wickham and Lydia, who “caused the confusion” but “suffered no variation of colour” on “their cheeks” (240). The scandal further points to Elizabeth’s moral nature and positive qualities, in juxtaposition to Mrs. Bennet’s and Lydia’s misplaced priorities and elevation of artificiality over substantive matters. The emphasis on Elizabeth’s sense of decency endears her to the readers, causing them to feel concern over Elizabeth’s predicament.

While *Pride and Prejudice* addresses sexual transgressions through Lydia and Mr. Wickham’s elopement storyline, the nineteenth century society’s rule against premarital sex relaxed by the time Fielding began writing her novel at the end of the twentieth century. Fielding addresses cultural differences and updates the scandal to adapt to modern concerns, and so the scandal in *Bridget Jones’s Diary* involves money and fraud. Fielding portrays Mrs. Jones as a combination of Lydia and Mrs. Bennet; Mrs. Jones shares their lack of sense and decorum. The diary form in Fielding’s novel also functions as a way for readers to see events from Bridget’s point of view. Fielding aligns Bridget with Elizabeth because, like Elizabeth, Bridget grasps the repercussions of her mother’s actions and feels shame and embarrassment, even though her mother does not act repentant and lacks awareness of the distress she imposed on others. Bridget “naively assum[ed] that Mum would be chastened by what she had gone through” and “was determined [her Mum] wasn’t going to brazen this one out, sweep the whole thing under the carpet and start patronizing all of us again” (*Bridget Jones*, 244). Despite Bridget’s assumptions and intentions, Mrs. Jones’s attempts to ignore the whole incident when she says, ““All sorted out now, darling, just a silly misunderstanding. Has someone been smoking in this car?”” (244). Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Bennet are both “more alive” to artificial matters—like the smell of smoke in the car and the type of wedding clothes one wears—than the embarrassment engendered by scandalous actions, like Mrs. Jones’s role in the fraud and Lydia’s sexual indecency. All three

women privileged triviality over reputation, and they also minimize and ignore past scandalous behavior once it has been covered up to the outside world.

While Mrs. Jones's lack of decorum echoes Mrs. Bennet and Lydia, Bridget's belief one must follow certain codes of behavior parallels Elizabeth's principles. At the airport when police escort Mrs. Jones on her return to Britain, Bridget grows incredulous at her mother's attempts to ignore the scandal: "How, after being totally disgraced and narrowly escaping several years in custody, can my mother just plop back into being exactly like she was before, flirting openly with policemen and torturing me" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 252). Bridget's frustration with her mother's ability to "plop back into" her old life after such an embarrassing situation highlights Bridget's sense of manners and shows she grasps the degree of her mother's transgression. Mrs. Jones directs her attention toward flirting, rather than repenting; Mrs. Bennet directs her attention toward Lydia's wedding clothes, as opposed to thinking about the ramification for the family's reputation. Bridget and Elizabeth's embarrassed responses to their unethical parents draws attention to their maturity. The scandals in both novels operate in similar ways; they emphasize the heroine's decent nature by juxtaposing her with characters mired in triviality.

Although the diction in *Bridget Jones's Diary* includes more vernacular and colloquialisms than the nineteenth century language adopted in *Pride and Prejudice*, the words each author employs creates a lexical group centering on disgrace and shame. In both novels, the author associates scandal with embarrassment and stresses the importance of determining which characters feel humiliation and which characters do not. Bridget uses the adjective "brazen" to describe Mrs. Jones, which shares the same meaning as "unabashed" in *Pride and Prejudice*, an adjective Elizabeth uses to describe Lydia. Both these manners of speaking show how, after the scandals, Mrs. Jones and Lydia recommence with their daily lives without feeling any shame. On the other hand, Bridget and Elizabeth adopt terms related to shame when describing their respective family members, drawing attention to their understanding of moral codes and deeper

self-awareness. Austen and Fielding contrast Elizabeth and Bridget's ability to feel humiliation with Lydia, Mrs. Bennet, and Mrs. Jones.

Jane Austen's classic novels brought popularity to the marriage plot; Fielding mimics the marriage plot, but updates it to align with contemporary times. The critic Harrison explains how both *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice* share the typical conventions of a marriage plot: "Conflicts, misunderstanding, and tension threaten to derail the relationship, but ultimately the two characters correctly understand and express their love for each other" (4). According to Harrison, "Fielding as a literary critic and novelist recognizes the structure of the marriage plot" that Austen employs "and works to fulfill our own 'human need' for her heroine and hero to be united" (32). Fielding imitates Jane Austen's narrative structure, specifically by using a scandal as a "conflict" "threaten[ing] to derail" the couple's relationship. Both scandals are strategically placed toward the end of the novels, propelling the story towards its climax and resolution. After the scandals arise, Elizabeth and Bridget predict their dignified, high status men will not associate with them in the future. Elizabeth sorrowfully reflects on her relationship with Mr. Darcy after receiving news of Lydia's impending marriage: "...for at any rate, there seemed a gulf impassable between them...She wanted to hear from him, when there seemed the least chance of gaining intelligence. She was convinced that she could have been happy with him; when it was no longer likely they should meet" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 236). Elizabeth does not realize she "could be happy with" Mr. Darcy until presented with the possibility of permanent separation, a scenario the scandal creates. As a result, the scandal drives them together by forcing her to reflect on her feelings for him in his absence. The scandal also pushes them toward one another once Elizabeth realizes Mr. Darcy aided Lydia by providing a suitable dowry and discovering the couple.

Bridget finds herself in a similar situation and dwells on the likelihood she will never encounter Mark Darcy again, given her mother's shameful theft of his family's money: "So wish Mark Darcy would ring. Was obviously completely put off by culinary disasters and criminal

element in family, but too polite to show it at time. Paddling-pool bonding evidently pales into insignificance alongside theft of parents' savings by naughty Bridget's nasty mummy" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 242). The scandal enables Bridget to discover Mark Darcy's generous nature; he finds Julio and her mother together and takes care of the repayment. The situation also forces Bridget to realize her feelings for Mark, which cannot occur until after their separation. Therefore, the scandals in both novels cause the female protagonists to recognize their feelings for their male counterparts after some time has passed.

Mark Darcy and Mr. Darcy blame themselves for the scandals, feeling guilty for not previously disclosing the damaging information they had acquired concerning the antagonists, Mr. Wickham and Julio. Because they feel responsible, both heroes attempt to repair their mistakes by rescuing the heroines' families from disgrace. In Mrs. Gardiner's letter to Elizabeth, she writes: "[Mr. Darcy] generously imputed the whole to this mistaken pride, and confessed that he had before thought it beneath him, to lay his private actions open to the world...He called it, therefore, his duty to step forward, and endeavor to remedy an evil, which had been brought on by himself" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 244). Instead of severing all connection to Elizabeth because of the disrepute Lydia's affair creates for her sisters, the outcome Elizabeth expects, Mr. Darcy views the scandal as a consequence of "his mistaken pride." He tries to redeem the situation as a means to show his affection for Elizabeth, telling her, "I thought only of you" (280). His comment leads her to undergo a moment of revelation, realizing his actions stemmed from his "wish of giving happiness to [her]" (280). The scandal provides an opportunity for Mr. Darcy to demonstrate his feelings for Elizabeth, leading Elizabeth finally to recognize his love for her. As literary critic Andrew Miller notes in *The Burdens of Perfection*, "Elizabeth and Darcy" "must be estranged if they are to be united," because it grants them the chance to transcend misunderstandings and conflict, demonstrating the strength of their bond (137).

Mark Darcy feels responsible for the predicament Mrs. Jones's fraud creates both for his family and Bridget's family, saying, "I blame myself...I should have made myself more clear at the Tarts and Vicars party. I knew there was something dodgy about Julio" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 238). When Bridget asks Mark "why" he "bother[ed] doing all of this," he responds, "Bridget, isn't it rather obvious?" (266). Upon learning his affection for her motivated his response to the fraud, Bridget experiences a moment of recognition. Therefore, despite the temporary, unpleasant issues the scandals create for the two couples, they essentially function as a means for the hero to rescue the heroine from a family's disrepute, enabling him to express his affection for her in the process. In other words, the scandals in the novels initially emerge as an obstacle preventing the two couples from getting together; yet, in actuality, they provide an opportunity for the characters to recognize their feelings for one another.

### **Eavesdropping and Injuries: Parallel Scenes in *Persuasion* and *The Edge of Reason***

Fielding creates parallel scenes when modeling her sequel *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* after *Persuasion*, Austen's final novel, published posthumously in 1818. The relationships between the hero and heroines—Fielding's Mark Darcy and Bridget Jones; Austen's Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth—dissolve as a result of the meddling influence of the heroines' well-intentioned but misguided friends—Lady Russell in Austen's novel, and singletons Sharon and Jude in Fielding's. The consequences of the break-ups and the potential for re-unification drive the novels' plots, indicating the similar narrative structures of both works. Moreover, the characters' interactions and observations stress how certain moments in both novels allow for self-evaluation and evaluation of others. These analytical moments emphasize how the characters try to figure out what others think about them. The scenes depicting a

conversation in the woods and then an injury contribute to Austen's execution of the marriage plot, first creating obstacles and then eliminating those challenges to reunification.

In Austen's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot overhears an interchange between Mark and Louisa in the woods. Louisa critiques her sister, Henrietta, who acted against her initial plan of visiting her lower-status, love-struck cousin. Louisa boldly proclaims herself to be stronger in character and will: "Would I be turned back from doing a thing that I had determined to do, and that I knew to be right, by the airs and interference of such a person?—or of any person I may say—No,—I have no idea of being so easily persuaded. When I have made up my mind, I have made it" (*Persuasion*, 83). The diction—such as "persuaded," "made up my mind," and "determined"—self-reflexively calls attention to the title of the novel and the work's central theme. The lexical group reminds the reader of the predicament looming over Anne. She must cope with her decision to follow Lady Russell's advice in breaking her engagement with Frederick, a man she truly loved but was not her equal in terms of wealth and status. Thus, while Louisa's commentary allows Louisa to contrast herself to her sister, it also enables Austen to contrast Louisa to Anne Elliot.

Frederick's reaction, which Anne also overhears, affirms Louisa's beliefs: "Your sister is an amiable creature, but *yours* is the character of decision and firmness, I see...My first wish for all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all of her present powers of mind" (*Persuasion*, 84). Frederick's response is significant on two levels. First, he hints at his preference for Louisa, stemming from her "firmness" and "powers of mind," and Anne acutely notices with surprise his "words of such interest, spoken with such serious warmth" (84). Second, we can infer that he is not "interested in" Anne Elliot because she is not "firm." The topic of persuasion dominates Louisa and Frederick's conversation; Louisa explains her family prefers Anne to Mary Elliot and wishes Anne would have accepted her brother Charles's proposal instead. Louisa's

family speculates the reason for Anne's refusal: "They think Charles might not be learned and bookish enough to please Lady Russell, and that therefore, she persuaded Anne to refuse him" (84). Louisa implies Anne lacks decisiveness, and because Frederick proclaims he "wishes" "all" "whom [he is] interested in" to be "firm," we deduce he loses all romantic interest in Anne, if any still existed.

Austen shows how Anne jumps to conclusions when reflecting on the discussion she overheard: "She had much to recover from...she had heard a great deal of painful import. She saw how her own character was considered by Captain Wentworth" (*Persuasion*, 85). While Frederick never outwardly expresses his opinion about Anne during this conversation, Anne makes conclusions based on what she heard, a mental process we as readers imitate. Anne attempts to figure out what Frederick thinks about her. Because he harps on how "firmness" and "decision" are vital to one's "character," Anne assumes he esteems her less than Louisa, since Louisa possesses the resolve she lacks. In sum, the presence of another woman, Louisa, threatens to divide the hero and heroine. Louisa's presence functions the same way as the scandal's presence in *Pride and Prejudice*: both create obstacles to relationships, a crucial aspect of the marriage plot.

Fielding constructs a similar situation for her characters in *The Edge of Reason*. During a walk Mark and Rebecca embark on, the pair shares a similar conversation to Frederick and Louisa's. Bridget, like Anne, overhears the pair speaking. Mark reveals he knows Bridget's friends posed an obstacle in their relationship, telling Rebecca, "The danger is if you've been single for a time, you get so locked into a network of friends...that it hardly leaves room for a man in their lives, emotionally as much as anything because their friends and views are their first point of reference" (*Edge of Reason*, 205). Austen draws attention to Mark's perception that Bridget did not act of her own accord. Rebecca takes advantage of Mark's critique on persuasion, deducing the qualities in a woman that trouble Mark and employing this knowledge to paint

herself in the most attractive light. Rebecca responds, “If I decide I love someone, then nothing will stand in my way. Nothing. Not friends, not theories. I just follow my instincts, follow my heart” (205). Rebecca’s diction resembles Louisa’s manner of speech, forming a lexical group centered on decision and will. Mark emulates Frederick by expressing admiration for his new companion’s resolve: “I respect you for that. A woman must know what she believes in” (205).

Mark’s reply causes Bridget to grapple with the implications of being a woman who “does not know what she believes in.” Like Anne, Bridget agonizes over how Mark thinks of her, especially when juxtaposed with Rebecca. Bridget lacks the quality that attracts Mark to Rebecca, causing readers to fret over whether Mark and Bridget can reunite. Fielding’s purpose appears to align with Austen’s intention in *Persuasion*. When Mark and Frederick explain that their attraction to Rebecca and Louisa is related to the ladies possessing “powerful minds,” Bridget and Anne jump to conclusions. As a result, Bridget and Anne assume Mark and Frederick are no longer interested in them because they lack resolution. Austen and Fielding thus contrast Frederick and Mark’s new love interests to Anne and Bridget, marking them as opposites. Because a marriage plot culminates in a relationship between a hero and heroine, casting Louisa and Rebecca as rivals to the heroines creates concern about the threat they pose to the overall goal.

While the eavesdropping scenes create challenges, the “injury” scenes turn the plots around; these moments highlight the consequences of resoluteness, eliminating the obstacles to reunification and providing hope that the heroes will return to the heroines. Toward the middle of *Persuasion*, the young people venture on a short trip to Lyme, and Louisa’s stubbornness results in a near-death experience. While “all were contented to pass quietly and carefully down the steep flight,” “Louisa must be jumped down them by Captain Wentworth” (*Persuasion*, 105). Frederick was not very “willing” to partake in the activity because of the “hardness of the pavement for her feet,” and “he advised her against it” (195). In spite of his cautions the “jar was too great,” Louisa

asserted she was “determined” (105). By drawing attention to Louisa’s willful opposition to warnings, this passage functions to paint Louisa’s character in a different light, implying her determination was foolish and unreasonable rather than admirable. In the eavesdropping scene, Austen first contrasted Anne with Louisa, suggesting a firm character was preferable to a persuadable one and leading readers to worry about the threat Louisa posed. In the injury scene, Austen still juxtaposes Louisa and Anne, but she reverses her point, no longer casting Louisa as a threat. The reversal occurring in the injury scene solves a conflict, propelling the marriage plot closer to its resolution. This accident scene has a specific narrative purpose: removing a barrier (Louisa) to Anne and Frederick’s reunification. Furthermore, by portraying Louisa as the “exception,” who refuses to “carefully pass down the steep flight of stairs,” Austen not only paints her as a self-centered and attention seeking young woman, but also implicitly distinguishes her character from Anne’s (105). Through such juxtaposition, Austen implies Anne is careful, rational, and easy to please.

As Anne points out on her ride back to Uppercross, Louisa’s injuries prove a determined character is not always exemplary. Anne refers to the conversation she overheard between Louisa and Frederick, wondering if he has altered his opinion of her. In turn, Anne wonders if Frederick will “question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character,” hoping “it might...strike him, that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits” (*Persuasion*, 112). Anne thought Frederick “could scarcely escape” “feel[ing]” that “a persuadable temper might sometimes” be as admirable “as a very resolute character” (112). Her reflection also illuminates the extent to which she concerns herself with the inner workings of Frederick’s mind, such as his thoughts, beliefs, and judgments, particularly regarding her and Louisa. Her emphasis on deciphering his opinions implies she still carries strong feelings for him.

During a weekend getaway at her parent's cottage, Rebecca insists on jumping a bridge, despite Mark and Jude's attempts to change her mind. Her resoluteness results in a leg injury. In this modern injury scene, Fielding again imitates a specific set of circumstances derived from Austen's *Persuasion*. Just as Frederick advised Louisa against leaping down the flight of stairs, Mark warns Rebecca against jumping the bridge. In both scenarios, the females refuse to yield to their male companions' concerns:

'But the water's very low,' said Mark.

'No, no. I'm good at this, I'm very brave.'

'I really don't think you should, Rebecca,' said Jude.

'I have made up my mind. I am resolute.'

'Rebecca!' he said. 'I really don't think...'

'It's all right. I trust my own judgment.' (*Edge of Reason*, 207)

Rebecca's insistence on "trusting her own judgment" and ignoring Mark's cautions makes her appear irrational. Fielding initially contrasted Bridget and Rebecca in the eavesdropping scene, suggesting Rebecca's strength (unwavering will) was Bridget's weakness, since Bridget repeatedly allowed her singleton friends to undermine her relationship with Mark. Because Mark appreciated Rebecca's resolve in the first scene, we inferred he also preferred Rebecca. Fielding reverses this construal in the injury scene, contrasting Rebecca's weakness with Bridget's strength. The reversal shows Mark elevating Bridget's pragmatic character over Rebecca's imprudent one, praising her after she called the doctor, "Well done...You were great, back there" (210).

Because Fielding portrays Rebecca as unreasonable in the second scene, readers no longer perceive her as a threat to Mark and Bridget's reunion, the ultimate goal of the marriage plot. The injury scene's specific narrative purpose involves removing Rebecca as an obstacle to their relationship. The conversation Bridget overheard in the woods earlier remains at the

forefront of her brain after the accident: “My mind was turning round and round the conversation I’d overheard behind the hedge” (*Edge of Reason*, 211). Bridget’s statement, like Anne’s, suggests she still cares about Mark’s impression of her, especially relative to his opinions about Rebecca. She remains curious about whether Rebecca’s stunt altered Mark’s views of either woman. Bridget’s inability to forget the eavesdropped conversation, and her desire to discern Mark’s opinion of her, implies she still carries feelings for him, giving readers hope the pair will reunite.

### **Accessing Bridget and Elizabeth’s Minds: Fielding and Austen’s Narrative Strategies**

Although *Pride and Prejudice*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Persuasion*, and *The Edge of Reason* share similar plots and narrative structures, Fielding’s sentence structures, language, and voice differ significantly from Austen’s. According to Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, a fundamental work about the origins of the novel, Austen became a significant literary figure because she “brought together the divergent” narrative strategies former authors “had imposed on the novel” (297). Watt contends by inventing free indirect discourse, which combines the strengths of famous fiction writers such as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson and attempts to eliminate the weaknesses, Austen “create[d] the most successful solution to...general narrative problems” (297, 296). Although Defoe and Richardson employed “the participatory narrator,” Austen did not adopt that type of narration because she wanted her narrators to possess a “detached attitude,” granting the author “freedom” to “comment” on characters and situations (296). In Austen’s works the narrator monitors and evaluates the protagonist’s choices. By adopting the “confessed author” narrative style, like Henry Fielding, Austen was able to analyze “her characters and their states of mind” in an unobtrusive way (297).

As a result, Austen was not only able to offer readers subtle “editorial comment,” but she was also able to provide readers “psychological closeness to the subjective world of the characters” (297). The benefits of this narrative style are apparent in *Pride and Prejudice*, since “the story is substantially told through” Elizabeth’s perspective, enabling the reader to “identify” with her (297). Yet the narrator, who “acts as a dispassionate analyst,” “qualifie[s]” Elizabeth’s subjective viewpoint, allowing the reader to maintain “critical awareness” (297). In other words, Austen’s narrative approach offers readers an objective narrator’s mindset and intimacy with the main character.

Because Austen employs free indirect discourse, the narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* at times agrees with Elizabeth and enters Elizabeth’s thoughts, but in other instances stands outside of Elizabeth and judges her. Readers penetrate a character’s mind and catch glimmers of that character’s inwardness; then the narrator intervenes, granting external objectivity. Because Helen Fielding uses a diary and only employs the first person point of view, similar to Richardson’s epistolary format, some may argue readers cannot see Bridget from an objective angle. Austen and Fielding approach narrative intervention differently, and Bridget may not possess the kind of monitor Elizabeth has. As a result, Bridget may make nonsensical assertions, such as viewing Magda as a luxurious, pampered housewife, and lack an ironic voice to point to her faulty judgments.

A more generous reading of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, however, suggests Helen Fielding does not need to rely on free indirect discourse in order to monitor her main female character. Fielding attempts to make Bridget’s vices apparent to readers, although not known necessarily to Bridget. Fielding’s strategy allows the reader to function as the monitor, eliminating the need for a narrator to serve as “dispassionate analyst.” By employing dramatic irony, Fielding creates a similar but different version of Austen’s narrative style. Readers are not only able to access the protagonist’s thoughts and feelings, but also are equipped to evaluate the character. Dramatic

irony produces “incongruity” because “the significance of a character’s speech or actions is revealed to the audience but unknown to the character concerned” (OED). By adopting dramatic irony as tool, Fielding makes Bridget’s faulty judgments obvious to the reader, and as a result, she delegates the reader to the monitor role.

In the first diary, Fielding portrays Bridget’s obsession with her weight as exaggerated. Bridget documents and comments on her slight fluctuations in weight excessively; the reader then picks up on her irrationality and objectively evaluates her. In her Sunday, January 1<sup>st</sup> diary entry, Bridget weighs 129 pounds, but she excuses the weight gain as acceptable because it occurred “post Christmas” (*Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 7). In her next entry on Tuesday, January 3<sup>rd</sup>, Bridget weighs 130 pounds, and she worries about her “terrifying slide into obesity—why? why?” (15). On Wednesday, January 4<sup>th</sup>, Bridget weighs 131 pounds, and she labels her slight increase in weight as a “state of emergency” (17). Bridget elaborates on her fears, worrying “fat has been stored in capsule form over Christmas and is being slowly released under skin” (17). In sum, over the course of a mere four days and three diary entries, Bridget gains two pounds, a typical ebb and flow, yet she melodramatically laments her quick “slide into obesity.” The weight example shows how Fielding successfully employs dramatic irony. The reader understands Bridget blows her weight fluctuations out of proportion; given her average height, weighing 130 pounds does not qualify as a “state of emergency.” Bridget, however, remains blind to the absurdity of her concerns. Her obsession with weight performs a certain function; readers are supposed to laugh at Bridget and see where she goes too far. By highlighting the comical extremes of Bridget’s obsession, Helen Fielding allows the reader to become Bridget’s monitor and discern her faulty judgments. Although Bridget’s preoccupation with weight appears comical, it raises questions about the rise of eating disorders in the late twentieth century, a concern more relevant to women living in Bridget’s time than in the nineteenth century. Preoccupation with weight calls into mind

the role of women and their self-perceptions, and Bridget's personal struggle casts her as a three dimensional, round character.

Dramatic irony encourages the reader to evaluate Bridget, suggesting she does not need to include an outside narrator to perform that monitor role. Fielding also employs dramatic irony during Bridget's conversation with Magda, where Bridget misreads Magda and glosses over her marital woes and husband's infidelity. The reader, unlike Bridget, listens to Magda address how "hard" she works "looking after a toddler and a baby all day" and understands the frustration she feels when perceived as a "ghastly Harvey-Nichols obsessed lady" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 113). On the other hand, as noted earlier, Bridget fixates on her own emotions, feeling humiliated about being "ridiculed as an unmarried freak," rather than listening to Magda express her dissatisfaction about her home life (114). Dramatic irony pushes readers to examine Bridget through a detached lens and take on the evaluator role. Whereas the narrator points to several of Elizabeth's misjudgments in *Pride and Prejudice*, readers perform that role in *Bridget Jones's Diary* because dramatic irony allows Bridget's faulty thinking to be fully apparent.

Just as Jane Austen and Helen Fielding adopt different narrative approaches, they also implement different types of language. The vernacular language in Helen Fielding's novel at times lacks formal grammar and incorporates many colloquialisms; this casual tone causes some to categorize the novel as low literature and to emphasize its lack of elegance, especially in comparison to Austen's works. Bridget uses shorthand in many of her diary entries, leaving out pronouns, articles, and verbs. Although Bridget adopts shorthand, Fielding alerts readers that Bridget knows proper grammar; she works at a publishing house and later at a television studio, careers only available to educated women. By employing a diary shorthand writing style, Helen Fielding shows her main objective does not involve elegant prose. The diary shorthand offers intimacy rather than formality, suggesting Fielding deliberately simplifies her prose to increase closeness between Bridget and the readers.

In the aforementioned scene when Bridget laments her family's scandal and yearns for Mark, she also writes in shorthand: "So wish Mark Darcy would ring. Was obviously completely put off by culinary disasters and criminal element in family, but too polite to show it at time. Paddling-pool bonding evidently pales into insignificance alongside theft of parents' savings by naughty Bridget's nasty mummy" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 242). In the second sentence, Bridget fails to include the subject, "He," and leaves off the article "the" before "culinary disasters." She also misses the subject and the verb "he was" in the second part of the compound sentence. In the next sentence, she forgets to include the pronoun "our" before "paddling-pool time," leaves off the article "the" before "theft," forgets the possessive pronoun "his" before "parents," and refers to herself in the third person. By taking out these grammatical pieces, Fielding enables Bridget's diary to resemble a more modern version of free indirect discourse because it admits readers into her mind and see her in the process of analyzing herself, such as her self-deprecation. Shorthand allows readers to know Bridget more intimately, or at least tricks us into thinking we know her on a personal level. This diary entry also functions as a substitute for conversing about her thoughts and feelings directly with others, such as her friends or with Mark Darcy, like Defoe's epistolary format. In sum, Fielding "emulates" Austen by also "present[ing] the interior state of [her] female character" (Ferriss, 75).

In her entry, Bridget also calls attention to her mother's emphasis on Bridget and Mark's short-lived connection as children. Mrs. Jones comically exaggerates the importance of Mark and Bridget's one-time only "paddling pool bonding" play-date as children, continually bringing it up, thus suggesting they share a lifelong bond, even decades later as adults. At the New Year's party, Mrs. Jones pushes the two together, telling Bridget, "Of course you remember the Darcys, darling. They came over when we lived in Buckingham and you and Mark played in the paddling pool!" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 11). In Bridget's entry where she writes about Mark forgetting "paddling pool bonding" in light of the current scandal, Bridget temporarily adopts her mother's

point of view; on the surface she appears upset he overlooked their childhood bond and seems to place excessive importance on that one event. As the reader becomes attuned to Bridget's sarcastic tone in this entry, however, Fielding illuminates Bridget actually pokes fun of her mother, especially Mrs. Jones's emphasis on that minor experience. Bridget's sarcastic tone helps Fielding show the reader Bridget, unlike her mother, understands that Mark's parents' financial future holds more significance than a play-date from many years ago. Bridget's sarcasm demonstrates her ability to read her mother, similar to Elizabeth's ability to read Mrs. Bennet and Lydia. Sarcasm may be perceived as a slightly lower form of irony, but also allows one to convey extreme astuteness. Austen remains famous for her irony. Helen Fielding echoes Jane Austen by giving Bridget a sarcastic tone, which Bridget uses to point out her mother's irrationality. Fielding, in a slightly simplified manner, pays homage to Austen's usage of irony.

When Austen depicts Elizabeth in the same lamentable situation, Elizabeth articulates her thoughts more elegantly and formally: "...for at any rate, there seemed a gulf impassable between them...She wanted to hear from him, when there seemed the least chance of gaining intelligence. She was convinced that she could have been happy with him; when it was no longer likely they should meet" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 236). Austen includes the correct grammar pieces, including all pronouns, articles, subjects, and verbs. In Fielding's shorthand style, Austen's passage would be read as, "Seemed a gulf impassable between them...Wanted to hear from him, where seemed least chance of gaining intelligence. Was convinced that she could have been happy with him, when no longer likely should meet." This exercise illustrates how Austen would sound if she implemented Fielding's shorthand, resembling an entry that could have been found on a page in Lizzy Bennet's own diary. By transposing Austen's words into diary format, one can see how Elizabeth takes a moment to reflect on how circumstances in her life stand at that instant; she then assesses the lens through which she currently looks at matters. In this shorthand diary entry, Elizabeth analyzes herself, evaluating her feelings, frustrations, hopes, and desires. Throughout

Bridget's diary, particularly in the paddling-pool scene, Bridget takes a step back and engages in a similar type of self-analysis. Ultimately, diary shorthand allows readers to glean Bridget's thoughts and free indirect discourse lets readers access Lizzy's viewpoints. Austen and Fielding employ separate stylistic strategies, diary shorthand or free indirect discourse, to achieve the same end: allowing us to know Bridget and Lizzy's private thoughts.

### **Round or Flat?: Cultural Differences in Characterization**

Fielding wrote *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the late twentieth century, while Austen penned *Pride and Prejudice* during the early nineteenth century; cultural attitude towards characterization shifted across the centuries. Society's attitude concerning characters grew more empathetic over time. Nineteenth century culture focused on striving for perfection. Many of Jane Austen's heroines possess crucial flaws, but they eventually grow aware of their weaknesses and conquer them: Elizabeth Bennet tends to immediately judge people and struggles to overcome her inclination to embrace such harsh first impressions, while Catherine Morland navigates the world with a fictional lens, unable to distinguish between the motives of characters in books and the motives of living people. Both these protagonists develop an awareness of their shortcomings and ultimately overcome them. Jane Austen suggests a character can change in her quest to perfect herself, leading to literary critic E. M. Forster's assertion in *Aspects of the Novel* that Jane Austen's characters are "never two dimensional. All her characters are round, or capable of rotundity" (51). Forster elaborates on how to differentiate between flat and round characters in his well-known book: "The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round" (54).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, the storyline hinges on Mr. Darcy's transformation from arrogant, taciturn interloper to gentlemanly hero. Mr. Darcy "surprises us," developing from the prideful man who finds Elizabeth "not handsome enough" to "tempt" him and evolving into a compassionate individual concerned with others' needs (*Pride and Prejudice*, 7). Mr. Darcy credits Elizabeth for helping to raise his awareness of his faults and aiding him in overcoming them: "my parents...almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing...to think meanly of all the rest of the world...to think meanly of their sense and worth compared to mine own...Such I was, from eight to eight and twenty; and such I might have been but for you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth" (282). Mr. Darcy acknowledges his selfishness and condescension were his weaknesses for twenty years. The words "such I might have been but for you," however, suggest a transformation in identity occurred and imply Darcy recently conquered his flaws. Jane Austen "never stooped to caricature" with Mr. Darcy (Forster, 52). She crafted a round character who convinces readers we also possess the power to better ourselves.

According to Forster, round characters must be capable of changing, like Mr. Darcy. By following this strict definition, one may assume Bridget is a flat character, given the same Bridget appears on the last page of the novel as the first page. Yet Bridget constantly tries to make herself a better person. Fielding frames *Bridget Jones's Diary* around New Year's resolutions. The first two pages of Bridget's diary begin with lists of what she "will" and "will not" do that year, demonstrating her desire to improve herself, but the final page ends with Bridget noting her overall lack of progress. While Bridget tries to lose weight, quit smoking, exercise more, and foster healthy romantic relationships, she notes she fails at almost all of these her resolutions, demonstrating she does not succeed in changing. For example, she begins the year vowing to "quit smoking," yet ends up smoking 5,227 cigarettes (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 271). She also resolved to "drink no more than 14 alcohol units per week," but calculates in December she drank

3,836 alcoholic beverages, making “poor” progress (271). In sum, she only kept one New Year’s resolution, her goal to have a healthy relationship.

If we read Bridget through Forster’s lens, then perhaps we cannot label her a round character because she fails at her attempts to “surprise” herself, achieving only one of her thirty-three New Year’s resolutions. On the other hand, Forster’s conception of round and flat characters remains culturally situated. Austen’s novels corresponded with a “period [of] increasing perfectionism” and the rise in “moral psychology” in the nineteenth century (Miller, 124, 123). The modern author of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* asks us to question Forster’s thesis. If we argue against Forster’s definition, we do not have to read Bridget as a flat character because she does not change. We can read Bridget as a complex modern woman who experiences inner turmoil, but remains unable to effect the changes she wishes to make. In *The Edge of Reason*, Bridget feels unsure of correct dating etiquette, writing, “Am so confused. Whole dating world is like hideous game of bluff and double bluff” (92). While she desperately tries to “stick to” the dating world’s “set of rules,” she cannot help but fall back on her clingy and obsessive tendencies, like calling \*1471, Britain’s version of \*69, to see whether any of her crushes called her (*Edge of Reason*, 92; *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, 111). As much as Bridget knows she should not call the number so frequently, because the lack of recent incoming calls depresses her, she cannot break the habit. She experiences difficulty executing the improvements in her life she desires to make. Despite this inability to change, her self-perception grows and the internal conflicts she experiences indicate a complexity and roundness to her character.

By the late twentieth century, the cultural attitude toward characters transformed, allowing characters to accept their weaknesses. According to Miller, “Austen’s moral perfectionism” enticed “readers and writers to cultivate their best selves through identification” (139). Her “novels were understood under a thoroughly perfectionist dispensation,” and her narrators served “as a voice of perfectionism” (124, 90). In other words, Austen’s novels pushed

readers also to want to better themselves, like many of her characters. While Austen's works address perfectionism, Bridget's failure in achieving her resolutions suggests Fielding supports the twenty-first century theory that we should accept, embrace, and love those qualities about ourselves that remain constant, such as our weight. Austen appeals to readers because she tells us we are capable of changing, and Fielding's novel offers a more realistic message, because she suggests no matter how much we may desire to, we may not be able to change.

### **Revocable Mistakes and Happily-Ever-After Endings**

While Bridget remains unable to change her disposition or habits, Fielding permits her to revoke several of her mistakes. Her ability to correct her missteps allows both novels to end happily. In *The Edge of Reason*, Bridget falls prey to her singleton friends' opinions of Mark and relies on their advice to gauge the meaning of his telephone messages. Jude and Shaz coach Bridget through a phone conversation with Mark, and they drunkenly put words in her mouth. Bridget insults him and prematurely ends their relationship. Yet Bridget notices her blunder and feels regret: "Suddenly I had an awful feeling that I had made the most terrible mistake" (*The Edge of Reason*, 107). After making this "terrible mistake," Bridget later has a chance to repair the situation, throwing away her self-help books in Mark's presence to prove she no longer will let others destroy her romantic relationships (224). At that moment, Bridget's old flame Daniel Cleaver appears for a date; by returning to the man who treated her unfairly and pushing away the one who loves her, she errs again. Yet Bridget rectifies this mistake by forcing Daniel to leave and later telling Mark's parents woman's love is most constant, suggesting she still cares about Mark. Mark and Bridget reunite at the end of the novel, proof of Bridget's ability to fix her blunders.

In Austen's *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot regrets allowing Lady Russell to persuade her against Frederick, aware her life would have been better if she married Frederick when he first proposed. She reflects, "she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement than she had been in the sacrifice of it" (*Persuasion*, 28). While Anne's mistake resulted in more severe consequences than Bridget's—an 8-year separation from her romantic partner as opposed to Bridget and Mark's separation of a few months—she, like Bridget, possesses the ability to redress her errors. Anne acts in a pragmatic and kind manner toward Louisa when she is injured, making Frederick fall in love with her a second time. Anne stresses the constancy of woman's love in Frederick's presence and insinuates she still loves him, leading Frederick to write her a letter. As Miller argues, *Persuasion* suggests "our past can be changed or its effects...undone" because Anne "is allowed to undo her past, her refusal of Wentworth, and elicit a second proposal" (135). By allowing their characters to address and repair their former mistakes, Fielding and Austen relinquish their characters from permanent consequences and allow them to find happiness and love.

## Chapter 2

### Truth, Tragedy, and a Touch of Austen: Resonances of Austen in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

#### Austen as a Narrative Frame

Jane Austen inspired literary author Ian McEwan during the early stages of crafting his award-winning novel, *Atonement*. McEwan told a *New York Times* reporter it was “[his] Jane Austen novel,” and elaborates that “*Northanger Abbey* was on [his] mind” during the writing process (Gussow). *Northanger Abbey* was Austen’s second to last novel and published in 1818 after her death. McEwan signals his framing of *Atonement* in terms of Austen with an epigraph from *Northanger Abbey*, which describes Henry Tilney opening Catherine’s eyes to her faulty judgments. McEwan’s epigraph affects one’s reading of the rest of the novel, as literary critic Juliette Wells asserts, because the Austen quotation “encourages readers” not only to “apply Henry Tilney’s words to *Atonement*,” but also to “identify parallels” across McEwan and Austen’s works (101). *Atonement* ends with an epilogue where Briony, the female protagonist, celebrates her 77<sup>th</sup> birthday with her extended family at the former Tallis Estate, which was recently turned into the Tilney Hotel, a reference to Henry Tilney, Catherine’s eventual husband.

McEwan pays homage to Austen by crafting a female protagonist who shares many of the same qualities and flaws as Austen’s heroines, including Catherine Morland. McEwan discusses Catherine’s appeal and the connection between her and Briony: “I loved the idea of Catherine Morland, being so turned by gothic novels. She gets everything wonderfully wrong, and is shamed...There is some relationship between her and Briony” (Gussow). Briony can also be read as the descendent of Jane Austen’s other heroines, such as Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and*

*Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse from *Emma*. All four of these characters fit the archetype of a young woman coming of age who thinks she knows what she is doing, but ends up misreading situations, resulting in faulty judgments and dreadful mistakes. *Atonement*, however, eschews Austen's comedic elements for a more dramatic emphasis. Briony truly must atone, and McEwan poses the question of whether Briony even can fully make amends. In his twenty-first century novel, Briony's errors are irrevocable, forcing her to face a lifetime of repercussions from actions made as a thirteen-year-old. Because Jane Austen's novels are comedies, on the other hand, Catherine, Emma, and Elizabeth eventually change their ways without long-term consequences; the entanglements and conflicts are neatly resolved in the end.

### **Catherine and Briony: Fictional Lenses**

Since both Briony and Catherine navigate their respective worlds through fictional perspectives, misreading the events unfolding around them in terms of literature they have read, both *Atonement* and *Northanger Abbey* are populated with words like "imagination" and "story." Briony also possesses an authorial perspective she has begun to develop from writing plays, thus influencing her interpretations of the world and people around her. Catherine and Briony are both naïve girls coming of age and struggling to navigate the adult world and understand adult motivations. But Austen and McEwan diverge in how they reconcile these characters with their worlds. Austen provides her heroine a chance to learn from her innocently made mistakes without facing long-term consequences, whereas McEwan does not offer his heroine such a possibility. A choice Briony makes, even in her age of innocence, leaves permanent, indelible scars.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney perceives Catherine's naïveté on several occasions after she exposes glimmers of her speculative mind and attempts to figure out the thoughts of

others. At a ball, Catherine tries to decipher Captain Tilney's motive for asking Isabella to dance, since he knows she is engaged and determined not to dance. Moreover, Catherine perceives Isabella to be a steadfast, lovable friend instead of a cunning, self-interested woman. Catherine speculates on their mindsets, telling Henry, "I suppose he saw Isabella sitting down, and fancied she might wish for a partner; but he is quite mistaken, for she would not dance upon any account in the world" (*Northanger Abbey*, 124). Henry, unlike Catherine, does not observe goodness in everyone but rather understands Isabella and his brother's capacity to act selfishly. He teases Catherine, "How very little trouble it can give you to understand the motive of other people's actions" and continues to poke fun at how her innocence blinds her to complex adult natures and aims (124). Once Isabella contradicts her earlier promise by accepting Captain Tilney's offer to dance, Catherine is "astonished," but Henry says, "I cannot take surprise to myself on that head" (125). The ball scene demonstrates that Catherine misreads Captain Tilney and Isabella's intentions, and Henry notices her struggle to accurately understand the situation. As a result, he attempts to act as her guide and correct her before she makes too many blunders.

Henry Tilney must aid Catherine because Austen portrays mothers as hopelessly absent or disastrous parents in all of her novels. Mrs. Woodhouse and Mrs. Elliot are dead, Mrs. Morland remains at home caring for her other children while Catherine ventures to Bath with a self-absorbed family friend, and Mrs. Bennet complicates matters for her daughters through her impropriety. Austen does not limit her critique of parents to mothers. Mr. Woodhouse remains absorbed in his own worries and physical ailments, disliking hearing others criticize or advise Emma, who, in his mind, knows best. As a result of his lack of interference as a parent, he passively allows Emma to make several major mistakes. Likewise, Mr. Bennet ridicules his wife in front of their five daughters, and such mockery contributes to their lack of respect for her. He also fosters Elizabeth's inflated pride and trust in her own judgment by repeatedly commenting on her cleverness. Deresiewicz also observed Mr. Bennet's poor parental guidance: "[Elizabeth]

was so much cleverer than everyone she knew except her father—who was always telling her how clever she was—that she imagined that everything she believed must be true” (*A Jane Austen Education*, 49). Because he reinforced Elizabeth’s trust in her beliefs by constantly complimenting her astuteness, Mr. Bennet encouraged her faulty judgments rather than correcting them. Like Austen, McEwan shows hopeless parents exist even in distinguished families. Physically absent Mr. Tallis resides at his office in London, while bedridden Mrs. Tallis focuses on her own shoddy childhood and is not truly present for Briony. Briony’s older brother, Leon, stays absorbed in his simple, ignorant happiness. Although the parents in Austen’s novels are depicted as deficient, Austen plants other adults in the paths of young adolescents to show them they are wrong. These Henry Tilney and Mr. Knightley figures intervene and provide the parental guidance otherwise lacking in the young heroines’ lives. Austen reminds readers that her heroines are all young, under the age of twenty-one—Catherine is 17, Elizabeth and Emma are 20, and Marianne Dashwood is 16. By highlighting her heroines’ youthfulness, Austen prompts readers to remember they are still children, like Briony, and need adults to step in and guide them. McEwan, however, does not provide Briony with a parental figure, like Henry Tilney, to aid her.

Both *Atonement* and *Northanger Abbey* depict the heroines witnessing scenes they then misinterpret because of their youthful ignorance. For example, Catherine’s innocence causes her to view Captain Tilney and Isabella’s improper antics at the ball from a different angle than the more worldly and mature Henry Tilney. Likewise, Briony’s innocence causes her to view Robbie and Cecilia’s romantic encounter from a unique perspective; she incorrectly construes consensual sex as a brutal attack. Briony and Catherine share an inability to reconcile contradictions, further highlighting their lack of advanced thought. When Catherine has trouble grasping contradictions—such as when Isabella promised not to dance with a partner other than her finance but later danced with another man anyway—she displays her child-like mind. Austen again highlights Catherine’s difficulty at resolving contradictions when Mr. Thorpe makes claims he

later negates. The narrator describes Catherine's bewildered reaction: "She knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing" (*Northanger Abbey*, 60). By emphasizing Catherine's struggle at settling discrepancies, Austen suggests Catherine's means of navigating the world lies on the simplistic side of the continuum, more aligned with a child's inexperienced outlook than an adult's familiarity with complexities. Briony shares Catherine's simplicity, also struggling to understand competing feelings. After reading Robbie's note to Cecilia, containing the vulgar "c" word, Briony encounters roadblocks when attempting to reconcile divergent emotions, thinking "even harder [than writing about the incident] was...the confusion of feeling contradictory things" (McEwan, 109).

Catherine provides Henry and the reader with several glimpses revealing how often she confounds reality with storylines from mystery novels. When Catherine is on a walk with the Tilneys in Bath, she remarks that "[she] never look[s] at [the Beechen Cliff] without thinking of the South France," surprising Henry and forcing her to explain that she has not traveled "abroad" to France but "only has read about it" (*Northanger Abbey*, 99). Catherine elaborates on the power reading has to redirect her mindset: "It always puts me in the mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through in 'The Mysteries of Udolpho'" (99). Moreover, on their ride to the abbey, Catherine asks Henry if it is a "fine old place, just like what one reads about?" (147). Catherine's lighthearted question not only calls attention to her curious nature, but also shows how she presumes real life is "just like what one reads about," equating fantasy with reality. Henry teases her, crafting a faux-murder mystery, and then he jokes, "Are you prepared to encounter all the horrors such as 'what one reads about' may produce?—Have you a stout heart?—Nerves fit for sliding panels and tapestry?" (147). Henry's teasing shows he understands books have a hold over Catherine's imagination and that she has trouble distinguishing reality from fiction. The scene in the carriage shows Catherine goes to Northanger Abbey expecting to find mystery and suggests she will not stop until she finds it. This teasing exchange between

Catherine and Henry also demonstrates how susceptible she is to the power of suggestion; she lets Henry's words influence her reception of *Northanger Abbey*. Finally, this passage foreshadows events that later arise when her imagination runs too far.

Catherine continues to look at the world around her through her fictional lens. She cleaves to this lens even in the face of hard evidence, such as when the mysterious manuscript she discovers in a locked chest of drawers just contains shopping receipts. Catherine takes random signs, such as a portrait of Mr. Tilney's wife hanging in his daughter's room as opposed to in his, as proofs. She construes what merely may have been the daughter's preference for the painting as a sign of the father's guilt, thinking, "A portrait—very like—of a departed wife, not valued by her husband!—He must have been dreadfully cruel to her!...She had often read about such characters" (*Northanger Abbey*, 170). Austen points out how Catherine's perception of General Tilney is guided by characters she has read about, showing how Catherine navigates this strange, unfamiliar adult world through mystery novels. Having read about similar scenarios in books perpetuates Catherine's certainty of the General's role in his late wife's death, so even the General's kind actions "could not shake the doubts of the well-read Catherine" (171). The Tallis family, like Catherine, also overlooks the most solid pieces of evidence in favor of feelings and prejudices. In *Atonement*, the Tallis family should have dropped the entire case against Robbie when he brings back the twins, since his rescue of them indicates he spent the past several hours searching across town for the boys and, as a result, would not have had the opportunity to rape Lola. Both McEwan and Austen, however, highlight how otherwise intelligent people overlook the solid, tangible proofs.

As with *Pride and Prejudice*, the free indirect discourse in *Northanger Abbey* allows readers to enter Catherine's head and see how far from reality her thoughts eventually reach. Free indirect discourse enables the narrator to act as a monitor, drawing attention to Catherine's faulty judgments. Austen applies her signature irony by deeming Catherine "well read," since her

familiarity with reading mysteries actually hinders her ability to read people in real life. As the book progresses, Catherine delves deeper into fantasy and relies more on her imagination, reaching the point where she no longer even believes a body in a vault could serve as tangible proof of the General's innocence. Austen again employs irony and satire to poke fun of her heroine's faulty judgments: "Catherine had read too much not to be perfectly aware of the ease with which a waxen figure might be introduced, and a suppositious funeral carried on" (*Northanger Abbey*, 180). According to Deresiewicz, "[Austen] was not against Udolpho and its kin; she was only against the way people misread them" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 114). Through her irony and narrative interventions, Austen illuminates how Catherine "misread" Udolpho. Catherine reads General Tilney in terms of books, suggesting she shares a similarity with Bridget Jones, who also reads real life human beings, like Mark Darcy, in terms of literature, leading to incorrect presumptions.

After discovering Catherine lurking in a passage, trying to uncover further proof of his father's guilt, Henry solemnly tells Catherine he lacks words to describe the horrific situation. He is taken aback by how she jumps to conclusions and urges her to examine the "dreadful nature of the suspicions [she] entertained": "What have you been judging from...Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you...Dear Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?" (*Northanger Abbey*, 186). Rather than "judging from" "her own sense of the probable" or "her own observations," Catherine had been "judging from" her knowledge of mystery novels. In fact, Catherine thought she was attune to "what was passing around [her]," as shown by her emphasis on reading signs like Miss Tilney's absence when her mother died as tangible proofs. But Henry's comments show how her fascination with mysteries led her inaccurately to judge the General and the late Mrs. Tilney's death. As Deresiewicz notes, "The only thing separating Catherine from the truth was her mind" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 102). Henry Tilney echoes Deresiewicz's assessment of

Catherine, pointing out that the truth lies in front of her, and she would be able to access it if she would just “consult” “[her] own observations,” rather than referencing books. By creating a situation where Henry can enlighten Catherine about her problematic conceptions, Austen provides Catherine with a chance to learn from her mistakes.

Like Catherine, Briony’s mind was the only thing separating her from the truth. In the carriage ride to the abbey, Austen draws attention to Henry Tilney’s friendly manner of teasing Catherine, and McEwan demonstrates a similar teasing between Robbie and Briony during their swimming lessons, revealing a lighthearted brother-sister relationship. She “jumped from the bank into his arms with a scream,” and they laughed together as he taught her to tread water and try the breaststroke against the strong current. Robbie acted like an older brother in this important scene, advising Briony while also amusing her. Later at Dunkirk, Robbie attempts “to understand” Briony’s “child mind” (McEwan, 215). When he tries to decipher her motive for accusing him of being Lola’s rapist, Robbie realizes Briony’s mind distanced her from the truth. Because 77-year-old Briony reveals she wrote the entire story, Robbie’s attempts to understand Briony as a child are actually Briony’s endeavors to imagine Robbie’s attempts to understand Briony as a child. Robbie discusses his hatred of Briony during his reflections in Dunkirk, acknowledging that though “she was a child at the time, he did not forgive her” because of the “lasting damage” her actions generated (220). Briony fully depicts Robbie’s resentment, showing him dwell on his hatred of her as he suffered through the war in Dunkirk. Through her representation of Robbie’s mindset, elderly Briony suggests Robbie focused on his hatred of her more than on the Germans or horrific war crimes, highlighting the magnitude of her crime. Briony paints a devastating picture of herself, and the reader must use this representation of her when grappling over whether to forgive Briony.

While Robbie performed the roles of a surrogate older brother and mentor, he did not act as Briony’s “Henry Tilney figure” when she was a child. Catherine’s humiliating mistake, and

Henry's guidance, supplies her with the opportunity to engage in self-analysis, building adult-like critical thinking skills and evolving as a person. Deresiewicz notes Henry's role in guiding Catherine, writing she had "a very elaborate theory that bears no relationship to what's actually going on in front of [her]" but "Henry challenged [her]" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 103). Being challenged forces Catherine to examine her flawed thought processes, enabling her to develop her rationality and learn to exercise more caution in the future. Because Catherine had her fictional lens torn away from her when she was confronted, she has an opportunity to change and correct her wrongs. Thus, because of Henry's admonishment, Catherine is able to recognize the magnitude of her miscalculation, growing "grievously humbled" (*Northanger Abbey*, 187). Catherine realizes "Henry's address" "thoroughly opened her eyes" (187). Once "awakened" from her "visions," she perceives "her imagination had dared to take" "liberties" with General Tilney's "character" (187). She reflects on the role her mind played in creating and then fostering such ill-formed conclusions:

Nothing could shortly be clearer, than that it had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and every thing forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the abbey, had been craving to be frightened. She remembered with what feelings she had prepared for a knowledge of Northanger. She saw that infatuation had been created, the mischief settled long before her quitting Bath. (187-188)

Catherine's acknowledgement that her suspicions were in fact "self-created delusions" propelled by her "imagination," which she was determined to "bend to one purpose," demonstrates she finally recognizes her faulty judgments stemmed from her expectations rather than reality. She saw what she wanted to see; she created the "infatuation" and "forced" "every thing" she encountered in the abbey to align with her obsession. Henry's address also enables Catherine to

see the role mystery books played in distorting her understanding of reality: "...it seemed as if the whole might be traced to the influence of that sort of reading which she had there indulged. Charming as were all Mrs. Radcliffe's works...it was not in them perhaps that human nature...was to be looked for" (188). Catherine realizes one must be able to distinguish between reality and fiction; she must resist the temptation to conflate them. She now understands she can no longer reference mysteries and other fiction as a way to navigate her own world, revealing her growing self-awareness.

Briony also forces her mind to "bend" to a certain "purpose." She yearns to grow up, write like a mature author, and enter the adult world. Briony's desire affects her interpretations of events, just as Catherine's wish to be frightened influenced how she read different situations. In *Atonement*, the narrator speculates "what [Briony] saw" when she came across Lola later that night "must have been shaped in part by what she already knew" (McEwan, 115). Briony witnessed tension between Cecilia and Robbie earlier when they quarreled by the fountain, and the note she intercepted between the two of them later that afternoon contained shocking vulgarity. Finally, before dinner, she observed Cecilia and Robbie in a heated, sexual moment in the library. All three of these moments "shaped" Briony's perception of the puzzling events later that night (115). Elements of these past perceptions are incomplete, and thus they activate Briony's imagination. She fills in the gaps of knowledge with her imagination, tainting her interpretation of what she believed was rape.

After observing the tension between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain and feeling defeated from the failure of her Arabella play, Briony convinces herself she must write something more adult and, to accomplish her goal, she must "wait until something significant happened" (McEwan, 72). Like Catherine, Briony had an "infatuation" take root in her mind. But it is her craving to grow up and write a mature story rooted in real events that, ironically, causes her imagination to take certain creative liberties. Briony's incomplete knowledge of Robbie and

Cecilia's recent sexual involvement, and her imagination's urge to fill in the gaps, exacerbates her mistake. Briony even notes "everything fitted; the terrible present fulfilled the recent past" (158). The words "fit" and "bend" have similar meanings, suggesting Briony, like Catherine, forces "every thing" she encounters to align with her intentions. At the time, Briony's purpose was to expose Robbie as a "maniac" and to protect her sister; claiming Robbie was the rapist she believed him to be supported this objective. While "it was too dark" actually to see Robbie, Briony insists she "saw him" (159). Yet at the same time she acknowledges that "the understanding that what she knew was not literally...based on the visible" (159). Briony has an abstract, romantic vision of what classifies as truth, arguing that "the truth was in symmetry, which was...founded in common sense...Less like seeing, more like knowing" (159).

In *Atonement*, the moment where the policeman question Briony in her living room raises questions about the association between class and crime, suggesting Briony's crime is also society's crime. The adults willingly believe Briony and accept her statements without probing deeper because of Robbie's class status; the family immediately believes their young, upper-class daughter over an educated, mature young man who comes from a lower class. When Robbie was a young boy, Jack Tallis took him under his wing, turning Robbie into his protégé and allowing him into the family as a surrogate son. Jack believes the accusations against Robbie, a young man he financially and emotionally supported for years, without solid, tangible evidence. Despite mentoring Robbie for over twenty years, Jack severs all ties with Robbie, suddenly dropping him from his agenda and future plans. Likewise, Austen's *Mansfield Park* addresses similar class issues. While the Bertram family does not accuse Fanny of crime, they act differently towards her because of her lower rank. Fanny's uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, treats her poorly after she rejects Henry Crawford's marriage proposal. He says her actions imply a lack of gratitude for the family's support over the years and suggest she desires to be dependent on their kindness permanently. While Robbie and Fanny are part of their respective families, the Tallis and Bertram

families view the two as interlopers because of their class. Because they see Robbie as an outsider, the Tallis family and police privilege the story of an upper class young girl over an educated man from a lower class. McEwan demonstrates how society shares responsibility for Briony's crime; society reinforced assumptions about the class system by supporting, not questioning, Briony's claims.

Catherine's expectations and "craving" to be frightened overpower her doubts, like the packet of receipts she uncovered her first night at Northanger. Similarly, Briony ignored her reservations and "moments of unease": "Her doubts could be neutralized only by plunging in deeper. By clinging tightly to what she believed she knew" (McEwan, 160). The word "believe" plays a key role. Briony does not live in black and white world; rather, she resides in a world comprised of shades of gray. She becomes upset when the officers imply "either she saw, or she did not see. There lay nothing in between" (160). For Briony, what she "believed she knew" and "felt" are stronger proofs than what was "visible." Her mind forces her beliefs and feelings to mold to her purpose: "everything connected" with "her own discovery...her story, the one that was writing itself around her" (156). Briony's desire to grow up and write a profound story, a wish articulated earlier that day, is fulfilled later that night when she sensed the beginning of her adult life coming to fruition. Such immediate gratification of her wish suggests Briony's interpretation of the rape was "shaped" by her desire, just as Catherine's desire to encounter danger influenced her observations at Northanger.

Briony's responsibility of informing the police case brings her to the "center stage," allowing her to be "listened to" and "deferred to" (McEwan, 162). Earlier that day Briony sat "wait[ing] on the bridge...until...real events...dispelled her insignificance" (72). Inhabiting the role of "sole witness" enables Briony to "dispel" her own "insignificance." Briony projects herself into this story, casting her brother Leon as a true hero and slotting other family members and acquaintances into different roles. The more deeply she immerses herself into the story and

envisions herself as a character acting in it, the more she appears to be performing the role she thought expected of her. She “had become a participant in the drama of life beyond the nursery” (150). As the narrator notes, her convictions became entangled with her newfound self-importance: “her vital role fueled her certainty” (163). Catherine, likewise, imagined herself as a pivotal character searching for clues and responsible for detecting the truth. McEwan’s diction, such as “roles,” “drama,” and “center stage,” forms a lexicon reminiscent of plays and performances. Her manner of speech shows how much Briony filters real life through stories and sees herself as an actor in the drama.

Briony stands by her convictions because she lacks a parental figure to challenge her. Her family members, particularly her mother, deferred to her about what happened the night of the rape, fueling her beliefs. Ironically, when Mrs. Tallis finally enters the picture and becomes involved with familial problems, everything goes awry, highlighting her limited parenting skills. Briony could have used a Henry Tilney figure, reminding her to “consult her own observations of what is going on around her.” If McEwan placed an adult in Briony’s wayward path, then she would have been encouraged to reference reality and observable proofs, as opposed to “common sense” and feelings. For Briony, common sense intertwines with stories, fantasies, and what “fits,” rather than what is visibly apparent. Like Catherine, Briony lets her imagination and fantasies infiltrate her perception of reality. As a result, her knowledge of roles in romantic stories and fantasies, such as the necessity of having a villain and a hero, influence Briony more than what she sees in front of her.

When Briony is in her seventies, Robbie and Cecilia are deceased. Yet Briony re-writes the story, bringing Cecilia and Robbie back from the dead. In the “Two Figures by a Fountain” story Briony had previously written as a young adult, she took out the pieces she was unable to confront. The version of *Atonement* Briony shares with readers at the end differs from the story portrayed in the “Two Figures by a Fountain” manuscript she submitted earlier. While the letter

Briony receives from the editor sparks her epiphany, making her aware of her crime, it takes her whole adult life to figure out how she can tell the truth. Briony's entire authorial struggle as an adult centers around discovering she can write an ending different from reality. As an older woman, Briony tackles the difficult issues, changing the story so her actions are truthfully depicted, or perhaps even more magnified.

When adult Briony crafts a new ending for her story, she has 19-year-old Briony visit Robbie and Cecilia at their apartment in London. By resurrecting Cecilia and Robbie from the dead, Briony is able to insert them into her life-story and make them take on Henry Tilney's parental role. Cecilia presents Briony with the difficult truth, telling her a "change of heart won't be good enough" (McEwan, 316). Briony's sister offered an "unfamiliar perspective," providing a "confirmation of her crime [that] was terrible to hear" (318). Briony "had never thought of herself as a liar. How strange, and how clear it must seem to Cecilia. It was obvious, and irrefutable" (318). Like Henry, Cecilia teaches Briony that her mind distanced her from a directly observable reality. Robbie addresses the implications of Briony's lie, sharing with her the torment he experienced in prison and on the battlefield, where he witnessed "soldiers dying in the field" and "left to die on the roads" (322-323). The ending elderly Briony imagines provides her with what she needed all along: an adult to tell her she was wrong. The closet her father comes to fulfilling the Henry Tilney role occurs when he sends her the notice of Lola's wedding; yet he still does not tell her she ruined her sister's life. Her idea is fantastical because she imagines them lecturing her in their London apartment; Briony essentially becomes her own Henry Tilney Figure, since she fashions Robbie and Cecilia's characters. The adulthood version of Briony has to become Henry Tilney because her mother, father, and brother failed so miserably at it. Austen was generous enough to help her characters by providing them with Henry Tilney figures, whereas McEwan forces Briony to struggle on her own.

Catherine and Briony both try to find their way through adult worlds by relying on stories and projecting themselves and others as characters in stories. Briony's stories convince her Robbie is a villain, as Catherine's stories persuade her the General is a murderer. Unlike Catherine, however, Briony's mistakes are irrevocable. Henry Tilney's parental address sparked Catherine's moment of epiphany, giving her a chance to learn from her follies and exercise more caution in future circumstances. Unfortunately for Briony, no one intervenes, so she must face lasting consequences.

### **Emma and Briony: Good Intentions, Unforeseen Outcomes**

In *Emma*, the last work Austen published while alive, in 1815, the title character finds “great amusement” in matchmaking, intending to create lifelong happiness for both Harriet and Mr. Elton after her self-proclaimed success of bringing together her governess, Miss Taylor, and their neighbor Mr. Weston (*Emma*, 10). Emma's misreading of signals sent between Harriet, Mr. Elton, and herself leads to unforeseen consequences. While Emma intends to help Harriet by introducing her to acquaintances of higher status and a more refined style of living, her plan backfires when Harriet perceives herself equal to Emma and desires the esteemed hero Mr. Knightley as her husband. Although Emma initially means well, her influence on Harriet creates profound negative effects. Harriet loses her ties to the Martin family, nearly missing out on her chance to marry farmer Mr. Martin, her only prospective match because of her unknown parentage. Moreover, Emma encourages lofty expectations in Harriet, so Harriet experiences difficulty when forced to readjust to her former, less sophisticated lifestyle.

Emma, like Catherine, misjudges the characters of several acquaintances. In the midst of her matchmaking scheme, we see Emma misunderstanding Mr. Elton's intentions, thinking to herself after he departs from Hartfield one day, “Well, this is most strange!...What a strange thing

love is! he can see ready wit in Harriet, but will not dine alone for her” (*Emma*, 88). Her notice of Mr. Elton’s peculiar behavior, such as observing his actions seemingly contradict his feelings, provides an opportunity an objective person could have used to analyze Mr. Elton’s inconsistent behavior. An outsider not blinded by preconceived notions may have questioned whether Mr. Elton’s attentions were intended for Emma. Emma, however, was “too eager and busy in her own previous conceptions and views to hear him impartially, or see him with clear vision” (88). She misses the message others, like family friend Mr. Knightley and brother-in-law Mr. John Knightley, perceived. Emma’s fixed ideas blind her to reality and exacerbate her miscalculation. In other words, Emma’s real-life observations have difficulty overriding her deeply embedded beliefs, leading her to gloss over any suggestion to contrary.

Emma’s imagination cast Harriet and Mr. Elton as lovers, and her determination to play matchmaker leads her to misinterpret Mr. Elton’s hints. Her gaps in understanding result in an explosive situation where Mr. Elton proposes to a shocked and indignant Emma. Emma then reflects back on Mr. Knightley’s warnings, “blush[ing] to think about how much truer a knowledge of his character had been there shewn than any she had reached herself” (*Emma*, 107). Retrospectively, a humiliated Emma realizes she misinterpreted Mr. Elton’s intentions. She soon has to crush Harriet’s hopes by telling her about the incident with Mr. Elton. Deresiewicz notes Emma’s “supreme confidence in her own judgment” caused her to “screw up” (*A Jane Austen Education*, 32). Emma’s trust in her judgment, which was fostered by her hopeless father who always told her she was right and others were wrong, overrides her doubts. While Emma “screws up,” her good intentions mark her as a redeemable character: “[Emma’s] heart was in the right place—that was what ultimately made me forgive her, and, finally, what saved her—but her busy brain had led her astray (*A Jane Austen Education*, 14). Like Catherine and Briony, Emma’s mind separates her from reality. Luckily for Emma, however, Mr. Knightley advises Emma when “her busy brain [leads] her astray,” becoming her parental figure.

When Briony acts as an interloper in the lives of others, such as between her sister and Robbie, her “heart was in the right place.” Briony meant well and desired to protect her sister, yet her inaccurate perception of events causes harm she did not foresee, much like Emma. As a child, Briony is driven into action by a strong sense of duty and loyalty to her sister, “casting herself as her sister’s protector” (McEwan, 116). After she intercepts and reads the letter from Robbie, Briony “...immediately sense[s] the danger contained by such crudity,” feeling his letter “threatened the order of the household” (117). “[Knowing] that unless she helped her sister, they would all suffer,” Briony intervened (117). Briony’s concerns indicate her actions were motivated by a desire to help rather than harm. Even when she retrieves the crude letter and brings it to the adults, an act forever changing all of the other characters’ opinions of Robbie, Briony’s love for her sister and sense of justice propel her onward. When Briony “pulled open another drawer” while searching for the letter, she thought to herself, “It was right...that she was there for her [sister], thinking clearly on her behalf” (McEwan 166). Ironically, Briony’s actions, propelled by loyalty to her sister and to keep peace in the household, actually have the opposite effect; her sister suffers when separated from Robbie. As a result, all familial bonds to dissolve, shattering “the order of the household.” When nineteen-year-old Briony takes the day off from her nursing duties and travels to Cecilia’s apartment to atone, she encounters Cecilia and Robbie’s anger and resentment, later reflecting, “She hadn’t intended to mislead, she hadn’t acted out of malice” (318). In sum, like Emma, Briony has good intentions, but her actions still destroy the lives and relationships of others.

### **Elizabeth and Briony: Letters as a Means of Self-Evaluation**

In a pivotal scene from *Pride and Prejudice*, after Elizabeth rejects Mr. Darcy’s proposal, she receives a letter from him that explains Wickham’s mercenary past, as well as his motives for

separating Elizabeth's sister, Jane, from his friend, Mr. Bingley. While the letter at first infuriates Elizabeth, the "effect of a second perusal" "was" "widely different" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 159). The letter functions as a catalyst, awakening Elizabeth to her faulty judgments. The letter provides Elizabeth with a moment not only to evaluate the characters of Wickham and Darcy, but also to analyze herself; "[Elizabeth] learned the truth by the letter" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 59). Ultimately, Austen indicates that a letter can ignite a moment of self-evaluation for the reader.

When Elizabeth grows enraged at the manner in which Darcy first proposes to her, acknowledging such actions are in spite of "his scruples" about the "inferiority of her connections," she proclaims, "My opinion of you was decided. Your character was unfolded in the recital which I received many months ago from Mr. Wickham" (*Pride and Prejudice*, 147-148). The letter, however, points out her mistake in believing Wickham's false claims. While Elizabeth's views had been "decided" only a day ago, after reading the letter again she reflects, "how differently did every thing now appear in which he was concerned!" (158). Elizabeth illustrates she can accurately read a letter, even if she has trouble reading a person. As we enter Elizabeth's mind, we see her thought process unravel and catch glimpses of her struggling to grasp the errors she had made. She grew "struck" by the "impropriety of [Wickham's] communications to a stranger," "wonder[ing] how it had escaped her before" (158). After receiving the letter, Elizabeth realizes "vanity...has been blinded her folly" (158). Because she was "pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other," she allowed "ignorance to drive reason away" (158). Austen's letter emphasizes the danger of allowing one's emotions to direct one's judgment; Austen asks us "to question our instincts and emotions" and "replace [our emotions] with reason...with logic, with evidence, with objectivity...which stands outside us" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 69). Elizabeth's self-evaluation drives her to realize she let

emotions—pleasure stemming from Mr. Wickham’s flattery and hurt from Mr. Darcy’s insult—to override her reason.

After exploring the various moments where she formed judgments against Darcy and for Wickham, Elizabeth “grew absolutely ashamed of herself.—Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. ‘How despicably I acted! I, who have prided myself on my discernment...Till this moment, I never knew myself’” (*Pride and Prejudice*, 159). In this moment where Austen shows readers Elizabeth’s innermost thoughts, we see how the letter operates as a means for Elizabeth not only to evaluate Wickham and Darcy’s characters, but also to examine her own. Austen suggests the letter is important because it enables Elizabeth to engage in self-analysis, rapidly beginning to “know herself” and her own faults.

When young adult Briony submits her manuscript “Two Figures by a Fountain,” a semi-autobiographical story, to a magazine publisher, she receives a rejection letter from the editor. This letter performs a similar function as the letter Darcy sends to Elizabeth: it provides her with a moment to engage in self-evaluation, highlighting the magnitude of her crime. The editor wrote Briony that her story called for further development, conflict, and tension. The letter specifically recognized the child’s youthful ignorance as point she should expand upon, since it could strike a match to ignite the adults’ relationship. Even though the editor was not aware of the specific details of Briony’s childhood, or that the young girl represented Briony, the editor’s recommendations and keen analysis divine the truth and open Briony’s eyes. The editor, CC, says the author portrays the young girl’s “fundamental lack of grasp of the situation” and “the resolve in her that follows” (McEwan, 295). While the editor gleaned from the story that the child felt “a sense of initiation into grow-in up mysteries,” she notes the author misses the power the child holds (295). She writes, “So much might unfold from what you have...If this girl has so fully misunderstood or been so wholly baffled by the strange little scene unfolded before her, how

might it affect the lives of the two adults? Might she come between them in a disastrous fashion?” (295). While as a child Briony firmly believed she understood the events occurring around her, the letter underscores that she did not fully grasp the situation. The letter also demonstrates to Briony how her yearning to grow-up affected her construal of Robbie and Cecilia’s encounters.

Although Briony had perceived herself as a crucial agent in the situation during her childhood and had perceived her instrumental role in positive terms, this letter forces her to face the treachery her agency caused. “Correspondence” can be associated with the act of letter writing, or it can mean the moment in which things correspond or align. Put analogously, for Briony, the correspondence from the editor finally pushes her to understand the situation in a light that corresponds with reality and what actually happened. As a child, Briony perceived the situation mostly in terms of how it affected her life, moving her from the realm of girlhood to adulthood. The letter provides young adult Briony an opportunity to evaluate herself, leading to an epiphany: “She thought of her letter...She had come to see that, without intending to, it delivered a significant personal indictment. Might she come between them in some disastrous fashion? Yes, indeed...Everything she did not want to confront was also missing from her novellas—and was necessary to it” (McEwan, 302). The letter forces her to face uncomfortable truths, such as her own role in dividing her sister and Robbie. “Indictment” can be connected to an accusation, charge, or blame, and the letter compels Briony to come to terms with her crime. Deresiewicz also uses the word “indictment” to describe Elizabeth’s belief that “till” the “moment” she read Darcy’s letter “[she] never knew [herself].” The manner of speech, particularly the word “indictment,” suggests an important connection looms between the letters and feelings of responsibility. The authors indicate the letters provided the two a rare chance to analyze themselves and their actions.

Although the letters in both novels enable the two protagonists to analyze their past faulty judgments, the point at which Elizabeth and Briony received their letters plays a major role

in their future outcomes. Elizabeth receives the letter shortly after her mistake and has time to correct her behavior, while Briony's letter arrives years later, after Robbie has already served his punishment. Briony's childhood actions are indelible, in part, because *Atonement* is not a comedy. Tragedies and comedies have different outcomes in terms of whether there is a possibility to learn from one's mistakes. Deresiewicz writes, "*Pride and Prejudice* was a comedy, after all, not a tragedy, as stories about young people, who have time to correct their mistakes, usually are" (*A Jane Austen Education*, 50). McEwan distinguishes Briony's situation from those Austen's heroines encounter because she is the only one who cannot alter her mistakes; thus she is the only one who has to atone.

Briony faced a high price, such as the destruction of her relationship with her sister and the ruin of the future she had formerly envisioned for herself. Unlike Elizabeth, who has "time to correct her mistakes" and is still able to have a happy ending with Mr. Darcy, there is a sense of finality to Briony's situation. In spite of her good intentions and desire to help Robbie years later, she recognizes the irrevocable nature of her crime: "But the words that had convicted him had been her very own, read out loud on her behalf in the Assize Court. The sentence had already been served. The debt was paid. The verdict stood" (McEwan, 307). Because Elizabeth receives the letter from Mr. Darcy relatively quickly after she rejected his first proposal, she has the power to change her behavior and make up for her errors. Ultimately, McEwan uses Jane Austen's character archetypes to explore the consequences arising from our irrevocable mistakes.

## Conclusion

### Always Austen: Crossing the Centuries

Jane Austen's legacy continues to endure in a variety of ways, even two centuries after she made her debut as a novelist with the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811. While the nature of novels has changed over time, Austen still remains at the center of many different books, ranging from literary fiction to pop culture works. Modern authors continue to traffic in her ideas. Comedy of manners will always hold a place in literature, and her character archetypes will never die because they speak to human nature.

Many of Austen's predecessors shaped their characters around the molds she originally fashioned; her archetypes create a unifying web, linking writers and novels that would otherwise rotate along separate orbits. She can be viewed as the female Shakespeare, as writers and film directors continually find new ways to discuss and adapt her works. Northrop Frye defines archetypes as "communicable symbols," "connecting one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience" (99). Archetypes hold an important "relationship to the rest of the literature"; they "cannot remain" within a particular work but have to be "absorbed into our imaginative experience" and "expand over many works" (100). Austen's character archetypes connect different books and different writers across centuries and across genres, from Eliot's masterpiece *Middlemarch*, to Fielding's comedic *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *The Edge of Reason*, to McEwan's tragic *Atonement*. From the surface, these novels do not share a lot in common; by closely examining their characters and ideas, however, each can be construed as a nod to Austen. Ultimately, Austen blends together pop culture and literary fields, male and female writers, and tragedies and comedies.

Austen endures in the literary canon and contemporary society, in part, because of her archetypal characters. William Deresiewicz closes his celebration of *Pride and Prejudice*'s bicentennial by stressing the eternal status Austen's Elizabeth and Darcy acquired: "Set off the fireworks. Darcy and Elizabeth forever" ("Happy Two-Hundredth Birthday"). Their timelessness as characters stems from becoming "nearly mythological...[like] Achilles or Medea" ("Happy Two-Hundredth Birthday"). Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, explains the process of turning a person into a mythical figure, which requires the individual to become a representative of others, modeling behaviors for society. Campbell writes, "When a person becomes a model for other's lives, he has moved into the sphere of being mythologized" (15). Darcy and Elizabeth model for readers the type of people we desire to be, so we imitate their behaviors and recreate them in our minds and our works, thus mythologizing them. Bridget Jones envisions Darcy and Elizabeth as models, writing in her diary, "Darcy and Elizabeth...are my chosen representatives in the field of...courtship" (*Bridget Jones's Diary*, 215). Because of their representative and mythological status, they become seminal figures, both in pop culture and the literary field.

Virginia Woolf's 1924 essay on character, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," stresses how "great novelists," such as Austen, "brought us to see whatever they wish us to see through some character" (103). Woolf elaborates, "If you think of the novels which seem to you great novels...[including] *Pride and Prejudice*...you do at once think of some character who has seemed to you so real...that it has the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes" (103). Character, in other words, gives rise and opens our eyes to important concerns about human nature and the world at large. As a great novelist, Austen "brought us to see whatever [she] wish[ed] through some character" (103). Austen's strong characterization possesses the power to alter our thoughts about the people and world around us. By creating an array of characters who come alive on the page, who endear themselves to us, and who we feel empathy for, Austen grants her readers the opportunity to view weighty concepts—

such as love, family, childhood, parenting, the class system, daily life in country towns, social norms, gender issues, and economic issues—from different lenses. Austen's three-dimensional characters persist because they broadened our understanding of the novel and the world, widening our range of knowledge and diversifying our literary experience. In sum, humanity owes a debt of gratitude to Austen for introducing timeless figures into our world and for shaping the novel, particularly the marriage plot, as we know it.

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*Teaching Assistant, CAS 084S (Gender and Communication)*, Fall 2010

College of the Liberal Arts, University Park, Pennsylvania

- Held office hours and review sessions in order to further help students learn the material
- Assisted in grading, clerical duties; provided class coverage in the instructor's absence
- Created review sheets and answered student e-mails on behalf of the instructor

Clerical Experience

*Intern*, Summer 2012

Fox Rothschild, LLP, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

- Assisted attorneys, paralegals, and legal administrative assistants in clerical duties, such as proofreading, transcribing dictation, facilitating communication between parties, preparing evidence for trial, calculating and analyzing data, organizing client materials

**Professional Presentations**

- “Ron Maxwell’s Legacy for Tutors Teaching Tutors.” National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Miami, Florida. November 4, 2011.
- “A Grammar of Peer Tutoring: How Tutoring Courses Affect Writing Center Cohesion.” National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Chicago, Illinois. November 2, 2012.
- “Convers[at]ions in the Writing Center: Turning Ideas and Identities.” National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. Chicago, Illinois. November 3, 2012.