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Department of Humanities

Women – The Lowest Class?
A Marxist Critical Analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride
and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*

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1. Introduction

Jane Austen lived at a time, and in a world, which was governed by strict social standards and where class and social standing was of immense importance. Great Britain was also, in the late 18th and early 19th century, strongly patriarchal, something which obviously had a severe effect on the women who lived at the time. The female protagonists in all of Austen's novels deal with these issues in more or less obvious ways. This was a time when women had to marry to secure their future; the professions and the universities were not open to them. A woman of middle or higher class should strive to marry well, which meant marry a man with a good income, something which Austen satires in the famous first line of *Pride and Prejudice*¹ (1813): "[i]t is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (5). Love was by many considered secondary, if considered at all. Marriage was to many women little more than a necessary evil; a way to get by in the world. It was a harsh world for women and it was worse the lower they were on the social ladder.

This essay will use a Marxist critical approach to look at two of Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*² (1817), to determine whether they support the traditional female roles of their time or if these two novels could in fact be said to, in some ways, oppose the patriarchal class society of its time and promote a more independent and emancipated role for women. Famous English novelist Anthony Trollope declared of Austen's novels that "[t]hroughout all her works, a sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue is ever being taught" (1870³) is this true? A particularly close look will be taken at the two female protagonists, Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* and Anne Elliot from *Persuasion*, to see how they handle situations relating to class and patriarchy with their rather different backgrounds.

Furthermore, with an influence from Marxist Feminist theory, or Materialist Feminist theory as it is more commonly known, Anne Elliot and Elizabeth Bennet's position as women in a world which believed in the superiority of men will be examined. The main reason for choosing *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* is the different backgrounds of the two protagonists. Elizabeth Bennet is the daughter of a gentleman and a woman of lower birth. Her maternal uncles are in trade and in the law; something not looked upon with kind eyes by the upper classes. Anne Elliot is the daughter of Sir Walter Elliot, a baronet who thinks very highly of class and rank in general and his own rank in particular. Furthermore, *Pride and Prejudice* was the second novel Austen wrote whilst *Persuasion* was her sixth and last finished novel. Has this affected the novels and their characters, and if so, in what way? These differences, as well as obvious similarities, between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, will make the foundation for the discussion on these two texts.

This essay begins with a discussion of Marxist criticism and the theories and ideas that are its base. Materialist Feminist criticism is then explored and explained. The analysis of the novels, which follows, is split into three parts. The first part is an analysis of what must be described as the very core of Marxist theory, namely money and class. How are situations relating to money and class handled in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*? What are the differences between the two novels in regards to how they view money and class? How did the society and the ideology of Austen's time affect the women who lived in it with regard to money and class? There is also an analysis of how the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are described, or as the case may be, *not* described. Furthermore, a closer look will be taken of the aristocracy, the social group that was at the top of the social hierarchy at the time. The second part is an analysis of what opportunities the women in these two novels have: what can they expect from life in regard to education and occupation? What choices and what opportunities do the two female protagonists really have: what are their economic and social conditions and what are their options? The analysis in this section is based on Materialist Feminism as well as more traditional Marxist theory. Finally, in keeping with Materialist Feminism, the third part explores the social pressures which the women, foremost the protagonists, are subjected to. In this section independence and

marriage are the two main issues. Following these three analytic sections is the final discussion where we turn back to the original question in this essay: do these two narratives support the traditional female roles of their time or could they in fact be said to oppose the patriarchal class society of the time and promote a more independent and emancipated role for women? In other words, do these two novels fully support the ideology of their time?

2. Marxist Theory

Marxism's main concern is class. "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles" (*The Communist Manifesto*, 1). In 1848, 31 years after the death of Jane Austen, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels released the *The Communist Manifesto*, which quickly became a very influential political text. Much of it is taken up by a discussion on the *bourgeoisie* (the ruling class, who own the means of production) and the *proletariat* (the working class). This was the first major text published by Marx and Engels, later to be followed by several more. Both Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels made important comments about culture and society in their works. However, it would be more correct to think of Marxist *criticism* as a twentieth-century phenomenon. Like most major philosophies or schools of thought, Marxism has with time split up into several different factions. This essay will be based primarily in the writing of two critics who might be termed 'New Left' Marxists, namely Terry Eagleton and Raymond Williams. The first major Marxist critic, Georg Lukács, will also be mentioned but most of the ideas and terminology used will be from the definitions of the two former. Furthermore, to gain a more thorough understanding of these two Austen novels, and particularly its female protagonists, some Materialist Feminist theory, will be included.

As previously mentioned Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels concentrated much of their work on the differences between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In Jane Austen's works the working class is conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, throughout her novels there are continuous class differences present, and the struggles between these different classes and the aspiration of *upward social mobility* is ever present. This is very natural according to Terry Eagleton, who states that: "[t]he social mentality of an age is conditioned by that age's social relations. This is nowhere quite as evident as in

the history of art and literature” (Eagleton, 5). In other words Jane Austen is describing the world as she sees it, and all the social class conflicts that the society of her time was subjected to.

In Marxist literary criticism there are several fundamental terms and ideas. The very core is the theory that a society consists of a *base* and a *superstructure*. The base is the economic structure of a society and the superstructure is the kind of state, the laws and the politics, that exist to legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of production. In other words, the superstructure's essential function is to legitimate the power of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. Art and literature are part of the superstructure. The superstructure ensures that the situation in which one social class has power over the others is seen as the natural state of being, or rather not seen at all. Nevertheless, the correspondence between the base and the superstructure is not one-sided. “Literature may be part of the superstructure, but it is not merely the passive reflection of the economic base” (Eagleton, 8). Elements of the superstructure are constantly reacting back to the base and influencing it, and this is where art and literature play a very important part: “The materialist theory of history denies that art can *in itself* change the course of history; but it insists that art can be an active element in such change” (Eagleton, 9).

With the base and the superstructure there is also *ideology*. The Marxist definition of ideology is forms of social consciousness, such as political, religious, ethical and aesthetic, the function of which is, like the superstructure's, to legitimate the power of the ruling class. “Ideology is not in the first place a set of doctrines; it signifies the way men live out their roles in class-society, the values, ideas and images which tie them to their social functions and so prevent them from a true knowledge of society as a whole” (Eagleton, 15). As Karl Marx himself claimed: “[i]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (qtd. in Selden et al, 82). In other words ideology, similarly to the superstructure, permeates society to the extent that no one knows it is there and the ideological view is seen as the impartial truth.

Ideology is a belief-system, and in a class society those beliefs are founded on the assumption that the ruling class has a right to rule over the lower classes. As

Raymond Williams states: “[i]n a class society, all beliefs are founded on class position, and the systems of belief of all classes . . . are then in part or wholly false” (55). To a writer, the ideology of his or her time is extremely important and “the writer himself must possess a firmly established and vital ideology; he must see the world in its contradictory dynamics to be able to choose a hero in whose life the major opposing forces converge” (Lukács, 142). The base, superstructure and ideology thus form society and in a class society they act to keep the ruling class in power.

3. Materialist Feminism

Marxist Feminism is a theory that developed during the women's liberation movement. Today, however, it is more commonly termed Materialist Feminism. “The justification for using Materialist Feminism rather than Marxist Feminism is the alleged insufficiency of Marxist Theory for adequately explaining the oppression of women” (Gimenez, 1998⁴). In other words, the term Materialist Feminism is used to get a break away from the patriarchal worldview that many Marxists held. Materialist Feminism views the social and economical restrictions put upon women similarly to the Marxist view on the proletariat, and deals with women's place in patriarchy and capitalism. However, since both education and work are still more a man's world than a women's in many places, Marxism was found lacking when it came to describing a woman's place in that world.

Women are historically viewed as mere objects for reproduction of the species and their gender role in society has reflected that role. That role in society, depending on the circumstance, really is that of an economically impoverished slave. That state of bondage is more metaphorical because women are not always bound by shackles but simply by societal restrictions (MacNevin, 2007⁵).

Materialist Feminism will be useful when considering the situation of women at the time the novels were written. Women at Austen's time did not have many options when it came to work and education. Since the universities were not open to them they had to

substitute *accomplishments* for a proper education and while men could work for money a woman was expected to take care of the house, a type of unpaid labour. “In a society in which money determines value, women are a group who work outside the money economy. Their work is not worth money, is therefore valueless, is therefore not real work. And women themselves, who do this valueless work, can hardly be expected to be worth as much as men, who work for money” (Hennessey, 19). Women in the eighteenth century were in a difficult situation indeed, they could not own the means of production nor could they work in the production itself. Class for a woman is therefore not as self-evident nor as obvious as it is for a man. The different Marxist terms and ideas discussed earlier, as well as these Materialist Feminist ideas, will be used in this essay to analyse the two chosen Austen texts. Along with some more self-explanatory terms like *class privilege*, *social-class conflict* and upward social mobility they will constitute the basis for this analysis.

4. Money and Class

Money and class are two of the most central themes of Marxism, and they will to some extent infuse the entire analysis of these novels. In the early decades of the 19th century, people in British society were very concerned with money and class. This is something that both of the protagonists of these two novels have to deal with in a very real way. As mentioned in the introduction Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliott are two very different women. Nevertheless, they are both very strong women, more so than the traditional romantic heroine. However, their individual strengths differ to a great extent. The differences in their lives and circumstances obviously influence them considerably, but perhaps not to the most obvious effects. Elizabeth Bennet is a middle-class woman but acts and behaves more like a woman of the higher classes, while Anne Elliot is of higher station but does not promote the traditional values associated with the upper classes. Anne Elliot does not take advantage of the privileges of her class and her gentle and caring nature can only fully flourish when she steps away from the upper class snobbery indicative of the rest of her family. A good example of this is her friendship with Mrs. Smith as we shall see later. Money and class are huge issues in both families and consequently both novels explore these subjects thoroughly. The Bennet estate is

entailed away to the nearest male relative because the family lacks sons, and the five daughters will each have to marry a man with money who is able to support them. Mrs. Bennet's main purpose in life, therefore, is to try and throw her daughters into the paths of various rich men. Sir Walter Elliott has been living above his income and because of this he is forced to let his house, which is incidentally also entailed away to a male relative, and relocate to cheaper lodgings in Bath.

Both novels tell a similar story but in many ways these two women are facing the opposite scenario simply because they are in different places in the class hierarchy. In *Persuasion*, when Anne Elliott at the age of nineteen, eight years prior to the start of the novel, falls in love with, and accepts the proposal of Frederick Wentworth, she is persuaded by her father, who thinks the alliance a degrading one, and close family friend Lady Elliott, who is very concerned with class, to break off the engagement. "Anne Elliott . . . to throw herself away at nineteen . . . [to] a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him . . . to be snatched off by a stranger without alliance or fortune; or rather sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependence!" (*Persuasion*, 20). This had everything to do with class, she was persuaded by her upper-class family to turn Wentworth down, simply on the account of his inferior birth and lower class. When, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the immensely wealthy Mr. Darcy indeed finds himself "in want of a wife" and proposes to Elizabeth, she turns him down. She does so mainly because of the fact that he is continually expressing the low opinion he has of her situation in life and her class status in comparison with his. Mr. Darcy is less a victim of family pressure than Anne Elliot. Nevertheless, the ideology of his time forbids such a match. To Mr. Darcy this is a great obstacle indeed.

As the above shows both these women have class to blame for their unsuccessful love affairs, Elizabeth in the sense that Darcy resents the fact that she is from a lower class, which taints his feelings for her. Anne Elliott because class and money are the reasons why she is persuaded to end her engagement to Wentworth. Jane Austen certainly does present the reader with two very clear cases of social-class conflict and the problems that class inevitably provokes. There are resemblances between Anne Elliott and Mr. Darcy in that they both struggle against the wishes of

their families (in Darcy's case his only living older relative, his aunt Lady Catherine De Bourgh), in their love for someone of a lower class. Also, there is a certain similarity between Elizabeth Bennet and Frederick Wentworth, in that they both pull away from the upper class derision to go their own way, at least until a change is invoked.

Many Marxist critics believe that it is in the silences of a text that it speaks most strongly, in what is *not* being said; that is where the ideology is most strongly felt. "The text is, as it were, ideologically forbidden to say certain things" (Eagleton, 32). In trying to tell the truth his or her own way the author is therefore forced to reveal the limits of the ideology within which he or she writes. Jane Austen's silence on the working class first comes to mind in regards to this. This was, after all, a society where the working class was not of much worth to the upper class, other than as labourers or *hands*. The working class was alienated from higher society and treated like lesser-valued human beings. The fact that Austen is silent on this subject shows the views of the intended readers of her novels: the educated higher classes. Literacy was still, at this time, reserved for the privileged classes. The working class was not a part of their world, and should be kept separate, even in literature. "Social hierarchy was an unquestionable fact of life, democracy of any sort virtually unknown . . . by 1775 England had become 'a hierarchic society run by a hereditary oligarchy of nobles and squires, in which everyone, high or low, accepted distinctions of rank as part of the natural order as ordained by God'" (Halperin, 12). No one questioned the ideology and Jane Austen was, as Eagleton stated, forced to reveal the ideology in which she wrote.

To the upper classes in this hierarchic society outward manners were extremely important, something they were judged, and judged others, on. This is at all times very present in these two novels. This was a society more formal than what we are used to today. "There were more outward courtesy and ceremony of manner . . . the way one moved was a badge of one's social class . . . Manners were seen as a reflection of morals: one's outward decorum was likely to be carefully scrutinised . . . How to enter a room, how to go in to dinner, how to sit a horse, how to dance, how to draw or paint" (Halperin, 12). All those things, and much more were expected to be learnt from a very early age, especially by women. That was what it was to be accomplished. Accomplishments, and the idea of an accomplished woman will be discussed further in

relation to education.

As we already have seen to some extent, the similarities between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* are very striking. In regards to class and money there are strong similarities in that old money, and in particular old family titles and rank, are at times strongly ridiculed while many who have made their money from professions are seen as the ones with true class. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, the distinctions between new and old money are clearly marked. A good example of this is the two Bingley sisters from *Pride and Prejudice*: “[t]hey were of a respectable family in the north of England; a circumstance more deeply impressed on their memories than that their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade” (*P & P*, 16). They are described as being proud and conceited, conveniently forgetting how their own fortune was made and looking down on others who have made their fortune by trade. “They were rather handsome . . . had a fortune of twenty thousand pounds, were in the habit of spending more than they ought, and of associating with people of rank; and were therefore in every respect entitled to think well of themselves, and meanly of others” (*P & P*, 16). The snobbish, arrogant sisters look down on everyone of a lower class and value fashion, style and money above everything else. Caroline has her mind set on Mr. Darcy while Louisa has married a Mr. Hurst, a man “of more fashion than fortune” (*P & P*, 16) who is “an indolent man, who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards” (*P & P*, 32) which clearly shows her superficiality and lack of deeper values.

The Bennet sisters' uncles, one in trade near Cheapside in London, and one an attorney in Meryton, the small village where the Bennets live, are both ridiculed by the Bingley sisters because of their social station. However, when the reader is introduced to the Gardiners, the aunt and uncle from London, it becomes clear where the real sophistication lies. “Mr. Gardiner was a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as education. The Netherfield ladies would have had difficulty in believing that a man who lived by trade, and within view of his own warehouses, could have been so well bred and agreeable” (*P & P*, 118). That the Bingley sisters would have had great difficulty in believing how gentlemanlike this uncle is, as well as the elegance of his wife, is apparent when they do meet and they are seen to be slandering only the niece, Elizabeth Bennet. This is yet further proof of their

superficiality.

That Mr Gardiner, along with Mrs. Gardiner, “an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman” (*P & P*, 118) represents the working class is highly questionable. The fact that Mr. Gardiner owns his own warehouses makes him, even if he possibly started out as member of the proletariat, a bourgeoisie. However, unlike the aristocrats with their old money and good names, he is not depicted or described as someone who is looking down on people with less money than himself, and there is no question of the fact that he does indeed work: “Mr. Gardiner would be prevented by business from setting out till a fortnight later in July, and must be in London again within in a month” (*P & P*, 196). Mr. Gardiner's class status might not be easy to determine but most of the evidence indicates that he belongs to the bourgeoisie.

“Were we to examine the novels of the eighteenth century or the philosophy of the seventeenth century in Europe, we would recognize . . . that these writings arose at particular phases in the development of early capitalist society” (Selden et al, 83). This can be clearly seen in *Pride and Prejudice*. Regardless of how one wants to view Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner in respect to class it is obvious that *Pride and Prejudice* in many ways supports the capitalist society that was developing, and that the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are a good example of that. Perhaps the only major character that can in all honesty be said to be working class in *Pride and Prejudice* is George Wickham, the son of old Mr. Darcy's steward. He has no inheritance, but is left three thousand pounds by Darcy.

When Elizabeth Bennet develops feelings for Mr. Wickham she is told by Caroline Bingley that Wickham is no good and has used Darcy ill but “really considering his descent one could not expect much better” (*P & P*, 80). Elizabeth defends Wickham but in the end Caroline is found to be right, Wickham really is corrupt: he has squandered the money left him and has been living in an unseemly manner, seducing women and running up debt. However, that this should be a slander on the working class does not seem likely since this is a type of character that appears in all of Austen's novels, most notably Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Anne Elliot's cousin, Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*, Mr Crawford in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and Captain Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). All of whom, with the exception of

Wickham, are from the upper classes. Caroline's slight on Wickham is more readily believed to be a comment on the prejudices of the upper classes concerning those of lower decent.

Social class conflicts are numerous in *Pride and Prejudice* but the most prominent one is the one between Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy. Their class difference is the main reason why Darcy at first cannot see himself forming any serious attachment to Elizabeth. Nevertheless, he eventually falls in love with her but even then their different classes pose a great obstacle to him. When he proposes to her he does so in a manner which is highly offensive, slighting her situation in life: “could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connections? To congratulate myself on the hope of relations, whose conditions in life are so decidedly below my own?” (*P & P*, 159). Elizabeth resolutely turns him down and does not change her mind until after she has visited Pemberley, his great estate in Derbyshire. The timing of her change of heart has been criticised by many, including Sir Walter Scott, a great fan of Austen's work:

The lady . . . hurt at the contempt of her connections, which the lover does not even attempt to suppress, and prejudiced against him on other accounts, refuses the hand which he ungraciously offers, and does not perceive that she has done a foolish thing until she accidentally visits a very handsome seat and grounds belonging to her admirer (Sir Walter Scott, *The Quarterly Review*, October, 1815).

That Elizabeth's change of mind would be an example of upward social mobility is questionable though since she knew of Darcy's wealth and status from the beginning. Nevertheless, there can be no question that she is impressed by the estate: “[a]nd of this place,’ thought she ‘I might have been mistress! With these rooms I might now have been familiarly acquainted . . . and welcomed to them as visitors my uncle and aunt. - But no,” -recollecting herself, - “that could never be: my uncle and aunt would have been lost to me: I should not have been allowed to invite them” (*P & P*, 202). As can be seen from this quote Elizabeth was impressed by Pemberley but the next line makes it clear that Elizabeth is not sorry that she turned down Darcy's marriage proposal. “This

was a lucky recollection – it saved her from something like regret” (*P & P*, 202). In fact it is the change in Darcy's behaviour, visibly present in his gracious behaviour to said aunt and uncle, which makes Elizabeth start to feel the first stirrings of something like regret. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Elizabeth does give money and class a higher importance than her counterpart in *Persuasion*.

Persuasion was the last novel Austen wrote and she is more openly dismissive of rank and class in this novel than she was in her earlier work. Old money and rank are even more strongly ridiculed here than in *Pride and Prejudice*. The character in whom this is most strongly seen is Sir Walter Elliot, Anne Elliot's father. The opening lines of the novel give him away as one of the most ridiculous characters in British literature. “Sir Walter Elliott, of Kellynch Hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one . . . he could read his own history with an interest which never failed” (*Persuasion*, 3). Sir Walter is described to have been a remarkably handsome man in his youth, and is still, at fifty-four, a fine man. His appearance, along with his baronetcy, have made him incredibly vain. “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation” (*Persuasion*, 4). He keeps several mirrors in most rooms in the house and is delighted both with his looks and his title which are the two most important things in his life. Looks and titles are also the only things he values in other people: “[h]e considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliott, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion” (*Persuasion*, 4). As these quotes show, his main devotion in life is himself, his looks and his baronetcy. Apart from Anne, all the characters of the higher classes in this novel are in one way or another conceited, arrogant and self-absorbed.

Lady Russell, the Elliott's neighbour and close friend, is not ridiculous like Sir Walter but she is certainly arrogant and she places too strong a belief in rank, which often blinds her to the folly at times connected to it and likewise to the merits of people of lower rank. Lady Russell being “the widow of only a knight . . . gave the dignity of a baronet all its due” (*Persuasion*, 9). She is Anne's closest friend but her class prejudice has blinded her even to Sir Walter extreme folly. The widower Sir Walter is found to

not have been able to take care of his finances after the death of his wife and Lady Russell is then by Anne asked for advice. Lady Russell was of “strict integrity herself, with a delicate sense of honour; but she was as desirous of saving Sir Walter's feelings, as solicitous for the credit of the family, as aristocratic in her ideas of what was due to them, as anybody of sense and honesty could well be” (*Persuasion*, 9). Therefore Lady Russell does not suggest such changes in lifestyle as she knows would really be necessary to turn the Elliott's economy back around.

In both novels it is the members of the aristocracy that own most of the land and the means of production but they are starting to have to give way to the bourgeoisie, who have worked themselves up and gained their status through commerce. In either case, with both the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, the owners of the means of production are men; few women are owners of much at all. Both the Bennet's and the Elliott's estates are entailed away to the nearest male relative because of the fact that the children in both families are exclusively daughters. True, there are some women who have some inheritance left to them, for example Mr. Darcy's sister, Georgiana, who has a fortune of thirty thousand pounds. However, given the fact that her brother's income is claimed to exceed ten thousand pounds a year it shows what an awkward situation a woman was in at the time.

5. Education and Occupation

A woman's choices when it came to education and occupation were in the early nineteenth century incredibly limited. However, many women were starting to hope for more emancipated female role in society. “All great art is socially progressive in the sense that... it realizes the vital 'world-historical' forces of an epoch which makes for change and growth” (Eagleton, 27). To understand the themes and characters in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* a closer look at the world and the time, in which these novels were written, is necessary. *Pride and Prejudice* was originally written as an epistolary novel during the last years of the 18th Century but then rewritten twelve years later and published in 1813. *Persuasion* was written 1815-1816 and published posthumously in 1818. Both these novels are a product of their time, which in many ways indeed was a time of change. Mary Wollstonecraft released *A Vindication of the*

Rights of Woman at the end of the 18th century, which argues that women are not inferior to men, only that they lack the education that men are given. Also the industrialisation which had begun in the middle of the 18th century was changing the face of Great Britain, and the lives of its inhabitants. The industrialisation, like its workers, is curiously absent from Austen's novels but Wollstonecraft's ideas seem to have influenced her work. In *Persuasion*, when Captain Harville debates the question of women's fickleness with Anne Elliott he tells her: "I do not think I ever opened a book in my life which had not something to say upon woman's inconstancy . . . But perhaps you will say, these were all written by men." to which Anne replies "perhaps I shall. - Yes, yes, if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher degree; the pen has been in their hands" (*Persuasion*, 183). This quote clearly demonstrates that Anne Elliott's view on the topic of education is similar to Wollstonecraft's, and is a slight on the patriarchal values that were so prominent at that time.

As previously mentioned it was at this time very important that women were accomplished, as it was the only form of education that was available to them, and apart from social manners they learned things like music, drawing and foreign languages. In *Pride and Prejudice* a bitter undertone is very present when the discussion of such accomplishments occur. Charles Bingley thus praises the accomplishments of women: "They all paint tables, cover screens and net purses. I scarcely know any one who cannot do all this" (*P & P*, 35). The accomplishments he lists are perhaps not the most useful ones and can easily be interpreted as more like a mockery of how women spend their time, although that of course was not what the amiable character had in mind. Similarly, when the Bennett girls visit their aunt and get tired of their insufferable cousin Mr Collins, they try desperately to find something else to engage their interest: "the girls, who could not listen to their cousin, and who had nothing to do but . . . examine their own indifferent imitations of china" (*P & P*, 65). To paint china in famous patterns was, just like painting tables, netting purses and cover screens, a common occupation for a woman at the time, and one that can easily be believed to seem rather meaningless to many women, especially compared to more

useful occupations where women were banned.

Independence for women was largely impossible at the time. However, in *Persuasion* there is the character of Sophia Croft, the sister of Wentworth, who is one of the strongest female characters in all of Austen's work. Like the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice*, better behaviour and finer sentiments are in *Persuasion* to be found in a different social group than the aristocracy. In *Persuasion* this is found in the navy. The wife of admiral Croft, Sophia Croft is a character that really stands out from the rest. She states quite simply that she has: “crossed the Atlantic four times, and have been once to the East Indies, and back again . . . besides being in different places about home - Cork, and Lisbon, and Gibraltar” (*Persuasion*, 54). Sophia Croft does not see this as something extraordinary, adding that “many women have done more” (*Persuasion*, 54). One can easily see in Sophia Croft a forerunner to feminism and hear another echo of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas. “In short, women in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization, and missed the useful fruit . . . Civilized women are . . . weakened by false refinement . . . All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion and feeling, when they should reason” (Wollstonecraft, 152). Women, like the rich are made useless by 'civilization'. Wollstonecraft's hypothesis that women are weakened by false refinements is shared by Mrs Croft. “I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days” (*Persuasion*, 54). Mrs. Croft in many ways presents Anne with a picture of what her life might have been like had she stood up for what she wanted to a greater extent.

6. Independence and Marriage

As we have now seen women's choices were very limited in regards to education and occupation. In regards to other opportunities they were hardly much better. Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* make the lack of opportunities for women at the time abundantly clear. In a family that unlike the Bennets and the Elliots had sons and no entailment on their estate, the daughters were, if unmarried, left to the grace and good will of their brothers. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the eldest daughter of the Bennet's

neighbours, Charlotte Lucas, seems at first to have such a future to look forward to. Charlotte Lucas is “a sensible, intelligent young woman, about twenty-seven” (*P & P*, 18) for whom time is running out. She is, by the standards of the time, becoming an old maid as it is starting to look like she will end up unmarried. Without income and education she does not have many options as to what to do with her life. As the eldest child in a family of many children, and the daughter of a father who has been knighted but does not have a large income, her options are limited indeed.

As Charlotte's options have grown thin so has her expectations of life, something made very clear when she states her wishes to Elizabeth: “I ask only a comfortable home” (*P & P*, 105). When the Bennet’s cousin, Mr. Collins comes to Meryton, an option opens up to her and she feels she has no choice but to take it, notwithstanding the negative sides of this opportunity. “Mr. Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society” (*P & P*, 61). Mr. Collins is one of the most stupid and ridiculous characters ever written. After being discouraged in his advances on Jane Bennet by her mother and disappointed by Elizabeth when she turns down his offer of marriage, he turns to Elizabeth's friend Charlotte Lucas: “The strangeness of Mr. Collins's making two offers of marriage within three days, was nothing in comparison of his now being accepted . . . Charlotte the wife of Mr. Collins, was a most humiliating picture” (*P & P*, 105).

Elizabeth's dismay at Charlotte's engagement speaks volumes. She herself is determined to marry for love. To her Charlotte marries for all the wrong reasons, none of them being love. She marries to secure her future, as she stated earlier, she wanted only a comfortable home. She marries a man who can give her nothing but a home and with whom it is impossible for her to be happy. “And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself . . . was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy in the lot she had chosen” (*P & P*, 105). In many ways women like Charlotte Lucas might be worse off than a woman of lower class since she really has no choice at all regarding her future. The jobs that were open to women, such as becoming a governess or a servant, would in all probability mean that she would lose her friends and her family because they would be ashamed of her having sunk so low. The earlier

Materialist feminist quote from MacNevin, where she claims that women are little more than impoverished slaves being bound by societal restrictions, certainly rings true in the case of Charlotte Lucas.

Charlotte Lucas's marriage is not the only marriage that is entered into for the wrong reasons. There is also the marriage between Wickham and Elizabeth's younger sister Lydia which is a prime example of marrying for financial gain. After running away with Lydia with no intention of marrying her, and thus destroying both her reputation and all possible future options for her, Wickham is bribed by Mr. Darcy into marrying her. Wickham has a choice, he could work for his own living but with his laziness and general lack of character he deems it a better option to marry a woman he does not love for the money. His punishment one can assume is to live the rest of his life with a woman with whom he might never be happy. A marriage to a man only for the sake of money was at many times the only thing that many women, like Charlotte Lucas, could hope for in life. Women were definitely worse off than the proletariat in that sense.

While *Pride and Prejudice* has a strong female character in Elizabeth Bennet, *Persuasion* has several. Anne, Mrs. Croft and Lady Russell are all strong women in their own different ways. There is also the character of Mrs. Smith. She is a widow three years older than Anne. She married young but her husband was extravagant and almost ruined them. Now, in addition to being rather poor she is sickly. "She had had difficulties of every sort to contend with, and in addition to these distresses, had been afflicted with a severe rheumatic fever, which . . . had made her for the present a cripple . . . living in a very humble way, unable even to afford herself the comfort of a servant, and of course almost excluded from society" (*Persuasion*, 118). Nevertheless, this decline in her health and reduction of her status has not affected her personality for the worse, if anything the reverse. "Anne found in Mrs. Smith the good sense and agreeable manners which she had almost ventured to depend on, and a disposition to converse and be cheerful beyond her expectation" (*Persuasion*, 118). Not only is Mrs. Smith a strong female character but she is also the embodiment of why the class society of the time was so hard on women.

Mrs. Smith was an upper class woman who married an upper class man, as was

expected of her. Her husband, however, was not a good man and squandered all of their money. She is now, because of this, excluded from society. She lives as a recluse in a horrible run down neighbourhood in Bath, where she has moved on the account of her health. The character of Mrs. Smith also helps establish more firmly the kindness and sweetness of Anne and to some extent also Lady Russell. When Anne first hears of Mrs. Smith's being in Bath she "lost no time in going . . . She mentioned nothing . . . at home. It would excite no proper interest there. She only consulted Lady Russell, who entered thoroughly into her sentiments" (*Persuasion*, 118). This clearly shows that Anne sees the importance of things other than rank and money. She values her friend for who she is even when she is shunned by society. This becomes even clearer at the end of the novel and those values make Anne a very atypical aristocrat.

7. Final Discussion and Conclusion

How can Marxist theory be used to reveal new insights into these two novels? First of all it has to be taken into account that there are two major problems when applying Marxist criticism to novels like these. The first problem is that Marxism is rather black and white. In Marxism we have the bourgeois and the proletariat, but the British class system of the 18th century was more complex than that. It is hard to find the proper place for a character like Elizabeth Bennet. She certainly does not belong to the proletariat, but does that automatically make her bourgeoisie? One could argue both for and against that. She does not have to work to support herself, neither do any of her close family members work. They have a large house and are able to keep servants. All this would certainly place her as a bourgeoisie. However, she does not own her house, she never will, nor will any of her sisters. After her father's death the house will pass to the nearest living male relative. Like the situation with Charlotte Lucas, she cannot work, it would disgrace her and she would probably lose most of her friends and family. As we have seen women were a class of their own at the time, and in many ways worse off than the men of the proletariat if they could not marry. To many women marriage was little more than prostitution to get a roof over their heads.

The second problem with Marxism in regards to these novels is that in many ways Austen is describing a world before capitalism. It was certainly on the rise at the

time and we can see that in the novels. But the dominant class is the aristocracy and not the bourgeoisie. However, Karl Marx described the superstructure thus: “upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and views of life” (Marx, 18th Brumaire). This would mean that the superstructure of Austen's time, like any time, is indeed something that can be analysed with a Marxist approach. This quote clearly demonstrates that by taking a Marxist influenced view we can gain new insights into these novels.

The conclusions we can draw from this is foremost that Jane Austen was, of course, writing within the ideology of her time. But was she teaching a “sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue” like Anthony Trollope claimed? I would argue that she was not, at least not to the extent that many had done before her. Austen was in fact, in many ways, opening up for a more independent and emancipated role for women. She was also opening up for a world where the higher classes are not better or of greater worth than the lower ones. As we have seen her two heroines are both strong and independent in their own ways, often to the detriment of those less so around them. “To walk three miles. . . above her ankles in dirt, and alone! . . . [i]t seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence” (*P & P*, 33). This statement, by Caroline Bingley about Elizabeth Bennet, shows that not only is Elizabeth strong and independent, but by being so she is mocked by those of a higher station in society, which indicates that her independence might be a threat to them.

The difference in how the different social class conflicts are portrayed in *Persuasion* compared to earlier novels by Austen might very possibly have something to do with the fact that *Persuasion* was the last novel she wrote. It is not hard to imagine or believe that, as Austen aged, she started seeing the difficulties and the problems that class inevitably brings more clearly. Comparing *Persuasion* to *Pride and Prejudice* there is quite a big difference, the biggest difference possibly being the marriages that the two different protagonists end up with. Elizabeth Bennet of course marries Mr. Darcy who is, after all, tall, handsome and rich. Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage is a joyous occasion that brings happiness not only to themselves but also to the people around them. They initially have some small troubles, for example Darcy's

aunt who does not at first approve of the match. However, the rest of their families are exceedingly happy for them both. She gets her fairy tale ending. Elizabeth Bennet also in many respects does what is expected of her by marrying a man of money and higher class. One could argue that Jane Austen would have been ideologically forbidden to end the novels in many other ways. She could hardly have written that Elizabeth Bennet scorned Darcy and went off to have a successful career as a businesswoman in London. Such a thing was not even conceivable. However, *Persuasion* does present the reader with a rather different ending, and it is an ending which shows that Austen had become more aware of the ideology in which she was writing and that this ideology was not something which she fully supported.

Captain Wentworth is more respected now compared to what he was when he first proposed eight years earlier but still, Anne Elliot marries a man that her father has expressly told her not to marry. Anne Elliot also refuses to marry her cousin Mr. Elliot. Her cousin, who is already very rich, will inherit the title of baronet as well as the Elliot estate. Both Lady Russell and Sir Elliot would have much preferred Anne to make such a match. In other words, Anne Elliot does not do what is expected of her. Her marriage is not that of a traditional romantic novel. Anne Elliot is still, of course, very happy to finally marry her Captain, but her relationship with her family taints her happiness: “to have no family to receive and estimate him properly; nothing of respectability, of harmony, of goodwill to offer in return for . . . the prompt welcome which met her in his brother and sisters . . . She had but two friends in the world to add to his list, Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith” (*Persuasion*, 198). It is crucial for the understanding of Anne's character to notice that she values Mrs. Smith, shunned by everyone else, above her father and sisters. To Anne Elliot rank, class and money are unimportant. She is unimpressed with her cousin's money and class even before she knows anything bad about him, very unlike Elizabeth Bennet's almost-regret when seeing Pemberley.

As Georg Lukács stated, the writer must see the world in its contradictory dynamics to be able to choose a hero in whose life the major opposing forces converge. In *Persuasion* Jane Austen does see, and write about, those contradictory dynamics more clearly than in her earlier works. Anne Elliot is not a picture of sweet womanly

virtue. Jane Austen's writing is based in the superstructure and ideology of her time, but diverges as much as it probably was possible for her to do while still having the novels published. The silences in *Pride and Prejudice* in regards to the proletariat, and the sarcastic remarks in regards to women's status are in *Persuasion* traded for a more open and direct criticism. While accomplishments vex Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot is sad and frustrated that women do not have the right to a proper education. Elizabeth Bennet is impressed by rank and money even if her admiration of such things is less than is expected of a woman in her position. Anne Elliot, the daughter of a baronet, is expected to value such things above all but does not value them in the least. Marxism's main concern is how class society makes some people inferior to others. Anne Elliot in the end refuses to play her part in this and makes her own destiny. Consequently, this is where the writing of Jane Austen really stops playing a part in the teaching of a sweet lesson of homely household womanly virtue.

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1 The edition used in this analysis is the 1996 Penguin Classics edition. *Pride and Prejudice* will henceforth be referred to as *P & P* when quoted.

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2 The edition used in this analysis is the 1993 Wordsworth Classics edition.

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3 From a lecture that Anthony Trollope gave in 1870 according to <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janeart.html> (29th of January 2010).

4

4 From an article by Martha E. Gimenez originally published in 1998. Found on <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/philosophy/Marxist-Materialist-Feminism.html> (15th of February 2010).

5 Article by Suzanne MacNevin, 2007, Found on <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/philosophy/Materialist-Feminism.html> (15th of February 2010).