



**Universidad**  
Zaragoza

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

# Jane Austen's Influence on Contemporary Romance Novels

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2024

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## **Abstract:**

This dissertation offers insights on how Jane Austen, both in an explicit, alluding to Austen's classics, and implicit way, using Austenian themes and the Regency era when choosing the novel's setting, has influenced contemporary novels. Jane Austen deals with themes such as love and marriage to gain wealth and social status, while making social commentaries through the use of irony and satire.

Contemporary authors have used her methods and have adapted her classics to explore similar themes under the lens of current societal norms. This way they are able to reflect current issues like gender identity, sexual orientation or financial distress by modifying Austen's critique of social structures. The exploration of personal identity allows the new generation to engage with Austen's works in a way that they can resonate with the characters and their experiences.

The essay also explores how Austen uses the female gaze to humanise women, so they are not merely seen as sexual objects for the male characters. By focusing the novels in the female perspective and experience, Austen provides the readers with an insight into the lives of women during the Regency era, diverging from the traditional male viewpoints that prevailed in Austen's literary periods. Contemporary authors have been influenced by Austen's main characters, such as Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Emma Woodhouse from *Emma* (1815), as both are depicted as strong women and their interests go deeper than finding a suitable partner.

Therefore, current writers like Brigid Coady and Julia Quinn have taken inspiration from how Jane Austen critiques society and how she navigates romantic relationships. Both authors are great examples of how Austen's classics can influence the way nowadays authors portray romantic novels, in this case by adapting Jane Austen's works into a modern setting or by making use of the so-called Austenian themes.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen; Brigid Coady; Julia Quinn; *Emma*; *Pride And Prejudice*; *Emma Ever After*; *The Viscount Who Loved Me*; Austenian Themes; Adaptation; Intertextuality; Female Gaze

### **Resumen:**

Este trabajo ofrece perspectivas sobre cómo Jane Austen, tanto de forma explícita, aludiendo a las obras de Austen, como de forma implícita, usando temas Austenianos y la época de la Regencia a la hora de escoger la ambientación de la novela, ha influenciado las novelas contemporáneas. Jane Austen trata temas como el amor y el matrimonio para obtener riqueza y estatus social, mientras que realiza comentarios sobre la sociedad a través de la ironía y la sátira.

Los autores contemporáneos han usado sus métodos y han adaptado sus clásicos para explorar temas similares desde el punto de vista de las normas sociales de la actualidad. De esta manera, son capaces de reflexionar en problemas actuales como la identidad de género, la orientación sexual o los problemas financieros, modificando la crítica que Austen hacía de las estructuras sociales. La exploración de la identidad personal permite a las nuevas

generaciones relacionarse con obras de Jane Austen y ser representados con sus personajes y experiencias.

El ensayo también muestra cómo Austen usa la female gaze para humanizar a la mujer, de esta forma no son percibidas como un mero objeto sexual por parte de los personajes masculinos. Poniendo el foco de las novelas en la perspectiva de la mujer y en su experiencia, Austen proporciona a los lectores con una visión de la vida de las mujeres durante la época de la Regencia, difiriendo de la visión tradicional de los hombres, la cual prevalecía durante el periodo literario de Jane Austen. Las autoras contemporáneas han sido influenciadas por los personajes principales de Austen, tales como Elizabeth Bennet en *Orgullo y Prejuicio* (1813) y Emma Woodhouse en *Emma* (1815), ambas mostrándose como mujeres fuertes cuyos intereses abarcan más allá que encontrar un marido.

Por ende, autores modernos como Brigid Coady y Julia Quinn han tomado inspiración de la crítica social de Jane Austen y en cómo ella explora las relaciones románticas. Ambas escritoras son buenos ejemplos de cómo los clásicos de Austen pueden ser gran influencia para las novelas románticas, en este caso adaptando las obras de Jane Austen en un entorno más moderno o usando los llamados temas Austenianos.

**Palabras clave:** Jane Austen; Brigid Coady; Julia Quinn; *Emma*; *Orgullo y Prejuicio*; *Emma Ever After*; *El Vizconde Que Me Amó*; Temas Austenianos; Adaptación; Intertextualidad; Female Gaze.

# **1. Introduction**

“My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding.  
All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour.”  
(Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*)

From 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgian England to the shelves of our own houses, Jane Austen's mark on romantic literature remains deeply noticeable. Austen, a writer whose works have transcended time and literary trends, is acclaimed for her social analysis, unforgettable characters, and complicated plots that explore the complexities of human emotions and social constraints. Despite being written in the context of Regency England, her novels continue to resonate with both contemporary readers and writers.

The constantly-evolving romance genre has taken great inspiration from Austen's themes of love, social class, and self-discovery which have been adapted to modern contexts. Therefore, this dissertation aims to explore Jane Austen's distinct influence on contemporary romance novels, examining how her narrative themes and characterization have been adapted for a new generation of readers.

Through a comparative analysis between Austen's original novels, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*, and contemporary fictions ranging from literary adaptations to thematic reinterpretations, the aim of this work is to interpret the persistence of the 'Austenian spirit' in modern romantic literature. The relevance of this study exhibits not only Austen's contribution to the understanding of romantic literature as a reflection of the evolution of social norms over time, but also the ways in which Classical literature can influence and shape contemporary narrative. Through this approach, a new perspective will be offered on

Austen's legacy, demonstrating that her works are not only a mirror of her time, but also as a blueprint for the future of the romance genre.

Methodologically, this study will employ comparative literary analysis, selecting significant examples of contemporary novels that demonstrate direct or indirect influence from Austen through intertextuality with her classic texts. The selection of contemporary works will be based on criteria such as the presence of Austenian thematic elements and popularity among readers, in order to cover a wide range of reinterpretations and adaptations. The dissertation will also cover how, based on genre theory, literature conforms to specific conventions and how works are categorised. It also helps to understand that genres are not static and that new ones can emerge, such as hybrid genres, so as to set readers expectations. A particular emphasis will be put on the use of the female gaze, analysing how it shapes its characters and influences the portrayal of relationships and societal roles, thereby enriching the narrative with a modern perspective on gender and identity.

## **2. Part One: Literary Adaptations**

### **2.1 What is a literary adaptation**

The term adaptation, which is partly a borrowing from the French *adaptation*, partly a borrowing from Latin *adaptāre*, is stated to be the process of changing in order to fit specified conditions (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The definition seems to explain how animals change to survive, which has little to do with literature, but if we use the given phrase to acquire a figurative meaning, it could be said that novels go through this adaptation process so that they can still be read by the current generations, surviving in a rapidly evolving cultural landscape. Just as animals adapt to their changing environment to ensure their survival, novels, especially those as timeless as Jane Austen's, experience a transformation that allows them to remain relevant with contemporary readers. This process of adaptation, when applied to literature, involves reshaping original narratives in the light of current affairs to align with modern values so that readers can see themselves and their contemporary world reflected in narratives that were originally written and imagined in different times and contexts. Consequently, adaptations act as a bridge which enables a dialogue between the original text and its modern audience.

Literary adaptation is not a new term, Jane Hutcheon (2006) claims that even during the Victorian Era (1837-1901) the Victorians had the habit of adapting everything; poems, novels, plays, operas, paintings, songs, even dances were constantly adapted from one medium to another and then back again. This convention has been used by contemporary writers in order to keep the essence of classic literature while current affairs are being dealt with in fiction. Allowing writers to adapt their favourite classic novels offers new perspectives while keeping the essence that made them widely known in the first place.



Therefore, the adaptation process demonstrates how stories can transcend time and cultural boundaries. It emphasises literature's role in shaping human experiences, ensuring that even works written centuries ago can continue to entertain and inspire new authors to create stories. Austen's novels, through their numerous adaptations into films, series, and modern retellings, are then a great example of this survival, as they continuously find new audiences and maintain their place in the literary canon not in spite of, but because of, their adaptations.

Plenty of authors and film directors<sup>1</sup> have taken great influence on Jane Austen's stories, so that the plots are adjusted to fit contemporary fiction while keeping its Austenian essence. For instance, Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) has been used as inspiration to create the acclaimed 1996 film *Clueless*, directed by Amy Heckerling. Its plot deals with Cher Horowitz, a young and rich teenage girl whose life revolves around matchmaking her teachers so that she can boost her grades in debate class. Anna Despotopoulou (2006) claims that Heckerling's movie is more focused on reflecting modern concerns about identity and social behaviour, while Austen's *Emma* navigates the complexities of class and manners based on the rigid structure of 19<sup>th</sup> century English society. Both *Emma* and *Clueless* share the essential narrative centred around social climbing and matchmaking, exhibiting that the social quest for personal growth is an universal theme transcending time and setting.

Heckerling cleverly uses the high school as a microcosm of society, where the dynamics of popularity and superficiality mirror the hierarchy of Austen's time. By doing so, she draws a parallel between Emma's matchmaking adversities and Cher's well-intentioned

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Fielding, author of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001); Curtis Sittenfeld, author of *Eligible* (2016); Amy Heckerling, director of *Clueless* (1995); Whit Stillman director of *Love & Friendship* (2016).

but often misguided attempts at improving others' love lives, so that the timeless nature of human imprudences and the pursuit of foolish ideals is illustrated.

By updating the setting to a 1990s American high school, Heckerling also shows current issues that nowadays are faced by society such as materialism and the influence of media on youth, which is a resemblance of Austen's commentary on the role of status and economic security in romantic relationships. Thus, *Clueless* not only adapts Austen's story to a new era but also revitalises its themes, making them accessible and relevant to a new audience while maintaining the critical, observational humour that characterises the Austenian's works.

On the other hand, the well-known novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) has also been the object of adaptations. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009) by Seth Grahame-Smith might be one of the most notorious remodelings. Classified as a horror novel, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* does include some main elements from the classic such as the Regency setting, its characters, and the central plot lines which adheres closely to Jane Austen's original narrative. However, the novel is also considered a mash-up<sup>2</sup> because it integrates the traditional elements of Austen's work with the unconventional addition of zombie fiction. Despite its blend of historical romance and horrifying zombies, the novel maintains the essential themes of societal expectations on women and the complexities of relationships.

Through the battles against the creatures, this adaptation also explores the resilience and combat skills of its characters, particularly the Bennet sisters, who are portrayed not only

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<sup>2</sup> "Work of fiction which combines a pre-existing literature text, often a classic work of fiction, with another genre, usually horror genre, into a single narrative." (*About: Mashup Novel*, n.d.)

as polite young women but also as skilled warriors. This contrast between the women's delicate manners and violent battles provides a unique lens of the original themes of the novel. It emphasises the characters' strengths and virtues in a more literal and physical way, linking their struggle against societal restrictions with their fight for survival against the zombie threat. This approach, while maintaining a thread of Austen's disapproval of early 19<sup>th</sup> century British norms, invites the modern audience to reconsider the roles and expectations of women during the Regency period, reflecting on how these strictures can be metaphorically like fighting a mindless zombie horde. Consequently, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* adds a layer of thrill to the classic tale, making it accessible and entertaining to an audience that might not find Austen's work entertaining.

However, this radical departure from the traditional elements of Austen's work might not sit well with all readers. Traditional Austen fans may find the inclusion of zombies and the shift towards horror and action genres to be disrespectful to the original text. The emphasis on physical combat and survival scenarios can overshadow the character development and complex relationships that are key in Austen's work. Additionally, the mash-up may appear too modern to readers who value the historical accuracy of the original novels. Furthermore, in my view the novel adaptation's tone, which fluctuates between satirical humour and dramatic horror, can be confusing for readers unsure of how seriously to take the content. This ambiguity can make it difficult for audiences to fully immerse themselves in the story, as they may be uncertain whether to interpret scenes as comedic or horrific, and this would lead to them having to adjust their expectations continuously. They must navigate the historical authenticity and the fantastical elements of horror, which can disrupt their immersion in the story.

It is essential to understand the difference between an adaptation, which in this case *Clueless* is the prime example, and a mash-up, like *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies*, as their intended audiences are different; an adaptation may stick closer to the theme while a mash-up may diverge significantly. Borham-Puyal's article notes that, "The mash-up integrates violence, action, and monsters in the original texts, parodies, and exposes the workings of gender constructions both in the hypotexts<sup>3</sup> and in these new adventures" (2018: 1314), while an adaptation is a re-telling of an old story. Linda Hutcheon states that literature is not a one-stage art form, that it is as Goodman calls 'two-stage' (1968: 114), and other artists, other creators, are needed to bring it to life (2007).

Derived from these mentioned ideas, scholars use genre theory as a basis to disclose that genres are stable but not unchanging, and that they might share characteristics over time but they will never be the same, as two situations can be similar but not equal (Dean, 2008). Therefore, it can be stated that although some people might find that a mash-up does not really focus on either horror or romance fully, the blending of themes allows one to comment on a wider range of themes. This highlights the notion of genres evolving over time, so to demonstrate that by mixing the conventions of different genres, something original and engaging could emerge.

Thus, both the film *Clueless*, being a conventional adaptation, and *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies*, which blends the Regency setting with a zombie apocalypse, represent unique contemporary approaches to Jane Austen's classics. These, however, illustrate different methods: *Clueless* was brought to the big screen, therefore illustrating the story visually and introducing it to a different temporal context, whereas *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies* blends

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<sup>3</sup> *Hypotext* is an earlier text which serves as the source of a subsequent piece of literature

genres within the literary structure to create a story that maintains part of the classic plot while adding something entirely new. Regardless of the difference in format between the two, these works fit perfectly with the previously mentioned concept of adaptation, which are similar to the Victorian practice of reinterpreting works. This demonstrates the flexibility and lasting appeal of quality storytelling, regardless of its original context.

## 2.2 *Emma* (1815) & *Emma Ever After* (2018)

In the light of contemporary adaptations of Austen's classics, Brigid Coady must be mentioned. Brigid Coady is an English writer who is passionate about Austen's work, which shows on various of her fictions such as the novel *Persuading Austen* (2017), work which could be claimed to be a modern version of the Jane Austen's last novel *Persuasion* (1817), or *Emma Ever After* (2018), an adaptation of *Emma* (1815) which are the two novels to be compared.

Coady's novel *Emma Ever After*, provides a fresh interpretation of Jane Austen's original masterpiece, *Emma*. Coady efficiently modernises the setting and dialogue while preserving the essence of Austen's narrative, displaying how timeless themes of love, social status, and personal growth can be reimagined for 21<sup>th</sup> Century readers. Through this modern retelling, she explores contemporary issues such as the impact of digital communication on relationships and the new dynamics in gender roles. Her adaptation not only pays homage to Austen's work but also invites readers to reflect on how the pursuit of happiness and understanding in relationships transcends the boundaries of time.

It is important to keep in mind that Coady's story is not only an adaptation of the already mentioned novel by Jane Austen, but it is also considered a fanfiction, as the author has added characters or plots that might resonate with the younger generation of readers so as

to make the plot engaging to them. Coady's adaptation extends the life of Austen's story into the realm of pop culture, which incorporates modern issues that echo today's societal challenges and values into the narrative. Bronwyn T. Williams mentions in the article "Bad Ideas About Writing" (2017) that some common misconceptions or narrow views about what constitutes "good writing" can negatively impact both how writing is taught and how it is practised by writers. Williams argues that adapting literary works, much like Brigid Coady does with *Emma* by Jane Austen in *Emma Ever After*, can be a powerful educational tool. By remixing classic literature with elements of modern culture, educators can challenge students' preconceptions about writing and encourage them to engage creatively with texts (2017: 195-196).

Furthermore, Williams's insights could be applied to how *Emma Ever After* serves as an example of using fan fiction as a method to broaden the scope of educational content to include more diverse perspectives and illustrate the relevance of classic literature in contemporary settings (2017: 197). By incorporating pop culture elements, the adaptation invites readers to explore the intersections between their everyday experiences and the literary themes presented by Austen, encouraging a deeper appreciation and understanding of both.

In this context, *Emma Ever After* not only entertains but also educates, making it a valuable resource for teaching critical thinking, creativity, and the importance of contextualising literary analysis. Williams's study supports the idea that writing, much like any form of art, is not static but rather a fluid and adaptable medium that evolves with its cultural context (2017: 195). This evolution allows writing to remain relevant and accessible to new generations of readers and writers. By examining how texts can be transformed to reflect contemporary values and realities, students can learn to appreciate the diversity of literary forms and the

potential of writing to address a wide range of human experiences, which is what professor Henry Jenkins meant by “(...) there is something empowering about what fans do with those texts in the process of assimilating them to the particulars of their lives. Fandom celebrates not exceptional texts but rather exceptional readings” (1992: 284).

Furthermore, Williams's perspective encourages educators to utilise adaptations like *Emma Ever After* or other forms of popular culture to motivate students to practise, write, and read, as this would motivate them to do the same with other forms of writing (2017: 200). In my opinion, this methodology not only enhances students' engagement with the material but also empowers them to see themselves as active participants by making their own creative contributions. By doing this, they can find their own unique ways of expressing themselves, and might even encourage others to see literature as something lively and relevant to modern life rather than old and unchanging.

Incorporating the appeal of pop culture, Brigid Coady's *Emma Ever After* cleverly integrates a fan fiction component that resonates deeply with fans of the popular boy band One Direction. Although the names of the band and its members are altered in the story, the descriptions of the characters are distinctly detailed, allowing fans to draw parallels between the fictional band Breach Of The Peace and the real-life One Direction. For example, Ed Selley is meant to be Harry Styles and Will Poulson is Louis Tomlinson. Readers are able to create this connection through their names as Edward is Styles's second name and William is Tomlinson's second name. Besides, the author gives detailed descriptions of the boys' physical appearance, such as Ed's deep voice, curls, and dimples, even him being a bit of a ladies' man. While Will's higher voice and sharp gaze is mentioned. (Coady, 2018: Chapter 8)

On top of that, Coady also mentions the great relationship between the two boys, which for the real-life singers turned out to be the dead end of their relationship as it was believed that the care they had for each other was romantic. Coady takes this real-life scenario and blends within the narrative by saying that “it seemed as though they were always together even in real life. Even on stage. It was sweet, two boys who didn’t have a problem with affection.” (Coady, 2018: Chapter 8)

Moreover, Emma’s job in Public Relations (PR) mirrors her role as a matchmaker in Jane Austen's original. This modern twist is not only a clever parallel but also ties in significantly with the real-life media coverage surrounding One Direction, where speculation about personal relationships often made headlines.

Henry Jenkins states that “Fans, like other consumers of popular culture, read intertextually as well as textually and their pleasure comes through the particular juxtapositions that they create between specific program content and other cultural materials” (1992: 37), this explains that the usage of explicit intertextuality by mentioning members of real boy bands and mass culture allows readers to explore parallels between historical themes, such as matchmaking in the Regency Era, and contemporary issues, like public perception of famous artists, which creates a modern twist on traditional narratives.

By doing so, Coady not only pays homage to Austen's work, but also invites a dialogue about the role of media in shaping modern relationships, much like Austen commented on the societal norms of her time; for example, social connections typically began with morning calls at the homes of those in High Society, and displays of emotion



were seen as impolite (Kloester, 2005: Chapter 8). Coady, on the other hand, shows in her novel how public relations are described as manipulators of the media (Grunig and Kim, 2021: 280), much like Emma in Austen's story was the puppeteer of others' relationships. Grunig states that many public relations practitioners believe that they could control their public and the messages received by them, as well as controlling and persuading the public to change their attitudes and behaviours (2009: 15), which is then related to Coady's main character and her job in PR.

In Coady's novel, Emma has specific strategies to boost her clients' status when matchmaking them. Among these schemes, Emma created specific ship names, like 'Phooke' or 'Bril' which were created from the names Phil and Brooke, and constructed idyllic stories regardless of the information being a complete fraud (Coady, 2018: Chapter 1). Besides, Emma would always create these perfect couples based on how their status would benefit from it. For example, Emma creates a scheme to promote the band's reputation since Ed's made-up romance with famous singer Frankie Quick would make a big impact outside the group's fandom (Coady, 2018: Chapter 19). However, back in the Regency Era people tried to find a suitable partner so that they would not only benefit from their economic status but also from their social rank. In Austen's Emma, this particular case is shown rather explicitly as the main character tries to match Harriet Smith with Mr. Elton as he has a higher social status, and if they got married, the woman would benefit from it. Austen illustrates this idea when Harriet blushed and smiled and the thought of Mr. Elton was cheering for her (Austen, 1815: Chapter 4). As a result, Coady offers a criticism of our contemporary 'matchmaking',

which is described by Gillis as a “collective process aimed at making things right economically, socially, and psychologically, as well as legally.” (1985)

An important phenomenon that must be mentioned is that Coady also uses explicit intertextuality to Austen’s work *Pride and Prejudice* in Chapter 4, which creates a bridge between the two authors that is easy to perceive. For instance, “Emma wasn't a hundred percent sure he hadn't deliberately buggered up the blind gossip she'd planted about Will Elliot and Annie Elliot on the *Pride and Prejudice* shoot.” (Coady, 2018: Chapter 4)

By doing so, Coady pays tribute to Austen’s influence and how her stories shape nowadays’ stories and cultural identities. Coady's mention of *Pride and Prejudice* within the narrative is another great example of explicit intertextuality, showing that elements of one text are deliberately incorporated into another. This is then a direct connection of Coady's work to Jane Austen’s novel, allowing readers to recognize and reflect upon the original source. The quote mentioning *Pride and Prejudice* is then considered to have a metafictional purpose, as it alludes to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to remind the readers of the fictional nature. This way anyone who reads the novel can analyse the story’s construction and create a bridge between the *Emma Ever After* and its Austenian roots. The reference effectively acknowledges the text as part of a larger literary tradition, thereby enriching its thematic and narrative depth through its historical and literary roots, which is what Professor Patricia Waugh means when saying that “by studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity” (1984: 5). The excerpt might suggest that, as well as in Austen’s time, social interactions are controlled by culturally constructed narratives which are constantly altered by social media. This idea is explored by Agadjanian et al. (2023: 1) as

they investigate the impact of social media on the perceived credibility of news, discussing how exposure to dubious information can lead to general scepticism about all news presented on the internet.

Something which also differs from Jane Austen's *Emma* plot is the integration element of modern social issues, as the novel addresses biphobia and LGBT representation, which are not present in Austen's original. This inclusion represents a significant adaptation, as it not only modernises the narrative, but also makes it relevant to today's social discussions. Despite this LGBT representation being present in the fanfiction, some people argue that in instances the novels stereotype this group to the extent where they might even be fetishized. It is said by the LGBT community that trans and queer characters are only accepted when they are fetishized, and that any objections by queer people are often ignored and are seen as ungrateful for not accepting the support they are given, even if it is somewhat harmful to have their identities (McInroy et al., 2021). Additionally, it could even be stated that the novel uses queerbaiting<sup>4</sup> to a certain extent, as people might argue that using the image of artists like Harry Styles is harmful. This is due to the fact that he has never publicly labelled his sexuality, which then remains rather ambiguous. He then has crafted an image that works in his favour, as this has led to a devoted queer fanbase who present him as a queer icon while he does not face the consequences of being openly gay or bisexual (Myers and Down, 2022). Besides, the main character, Emma, shows biphobic attitudes and while there is a slight female representation in the novel. These two factors could be seen as

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<sup>4</sup> Technique in which creators hint at a same-sex relationship, but this is never depicted explicitly.

limitations, indicating areas where the adaptation could potentially enhance its portrayal of diversity and character complexity.

As it has been shown, *Emma Ever After* serves as a tribute to Austen's *Emma* while it also reflects on how far society has come in terms of social interaction, and how much remains the same at the core of human connection and manipulation. The timeless relevance of Austen's narratives and keen observations continue to inspire authors to explore the so-called Austenian themes, which include love, morality, and social status, among others, encouraging a deeper examination of the ways in which these topics are intertwined with personal identity and cultural norms in contemporary settings.

### **3. Part Two: Theme related novels**

#### **3.1 Austenian Themes**

Romance novels have shown a shift in trend that is notable when comparing contemporary stories and the classics. Although this could mean that the themes they deal with have nothing in common with those novels written in the past, this is a false statement. Plenty of authors from the 20<sup>th</sup> century are finding joy in writing romance based in the context of Regency England, for example Julia Quinn, whose name has made headlines due to her novels making the leap to TV, emerged as a literary force. She revitalised the Regency romance genre with a contemporary approach while using the main themes that are typically related to the genre: courtship, marriage, social status, and personal integrity.

Pamela Regis (2003) states that the love trend comes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the romance novel emerged as a dominant genre in English literature during a time of significant social transformation concerning courtship and marriage practices. The genre historically intersected with three broad social trends: the rise of affective individualism, the growing importance of companionate marriage, and the implications of English law on married women (Regis, 2003: 56). Authors from both past and present eras have confronted these issues, reflecting them in the courtship and engaging stories of their heroines, demonstrating the enduring relevance and adaptability of romance novels in addressing evolving social concerns. Through this lens, the works of authors like Quinn not only pay homage to the basis of the genre, but also demonstrate its continuing evolution by introducing modern perspectives and challenges, thus ensuring the genre's relevance and appeal across generations by simplifying or sophisticating the original (Wright, 1975: 421-422).

Notably, some of the authors from the past have had a great impact on how contemporary romance novels based on the Regency era are crafted and appreciated today, among them, Jane Austen. As it has been commented earlier, her work deals with the complexities of courtship, marriage, and social hierarchies that continue to captivate readers. This shows how Austen's examination of themes such as the impact of social class on personal relationships and the pursuit of honour offers timeless insights into human behaviour and the structures of society. It seems clear then, that Jane Austen's exploration of the already mentioned topics provides a foundation upon which contemporary authors like Julia Quinn build their narratives. According to the analysis in *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research* by Dr. Sudhir Kumar (2022), Austen's novels are profoundly rooted in

the experiences and societal norms of Regency England, focusing on middle-class people. These settings and character types provide the stage for Austen's deep study of human nature and social dynamics, particularly in the context of marriage and courtship.

Dr. Kumar also emphasises that Austen's work predominantly revolves around the theme of love and marriage within an acquisitive society, focusing on the importance of companionate marriage and the impact of English laws on married women (2022). Despite the peaceful surface of her narratives, Austen manages to denounce the societal norms that restrict individual freedoms, particularly for women. Like it has been already stated, this detailed understanding of Austen's thematic concerns illustrates her subtle yet harsh criticism of the societal structures of her time, which continues to resonate in modern adaptations of her work. Contemporary authors adapt her insights to reflect modern values and societal changes while maintaining the integrity of the Regency setting. For instance, in works like those by Julia Quinn, we see a similar focus on societal norms and individual desires, but with an updated approach that resonates with today's readers who navigate a world that is quite different yet similar to Austen's.

As mentioned before, marriage is one of Austen's main topics, depicted not merely as seeking for a romantic partner but as a relationship with economic and social implications. Austen carefully criticised the rigid gender expectations of her time, advocating for women's autonomy and personal choice through her wise heroines. Then, Austen links marriage and gender closely with her view on love, which she sets against practical and social expectations.

She supports true affection and argues that real love should go beyond financial reasons or family pressures.

Moreover, Austen assigns an important role to education as it shapes one's character and societal prospects. This particular theme can be easily spotted in the following quote from *Pride and Prejudice* through the main character, Elizabeth Bennet, as she tells her sister Jane that she shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade themselves, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness. (Austen, 1852: 95)

This extract shows Lizzy's strong morals as she perceives Mr. Collins as a man who lacks intellect and moral depth, and her friend Charlotte Lucas as not having a proper way of thinking. This is due to her friend viewing marriage as a necessary economic security while Elizabeth sees it as a compromise of integrity. Her insistence on principle over practicality is a stance shaped by her education, which values integrity and personal happiness over social and economic gain. This theme is closely tied to the dances of courtship, which provides significant tension in her narratives. Through these social events, Austen's characters navigate a complex web of hints and hidden intentions, highlighting how they behave in a way that's intended to impress or influence others, rather than acting naturally.

The dynamics within families further are also quite important as they enrich Austen's themes, illustrating how familial support and comfort are often accompanied by obligations and economic burdens that deeply affect personal choices and freedoms. Additionally, Austen addresses the theme of property ownership, which reflects and influences power dynamics

within the society, impacting gender dynamics and marital choices. Her criticism of the materialism that is so persistent in social relations remains relevant throughout her novels. This concern is interlinked with the existent social pressures that force characters to conform to societal norms, moulding their identities and influencing their decisions, which often leads to profound internal and external conflicts. As depicted in Chapter 19 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Collins' proposes to Elizabeth Bennet since the marriage would benefit her family and herself: “(...) My situation in life, my connections with the family of de Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour (...) it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications.”(Austen, 1853:77)

This is then followed by her best friend Charlotte Lucas's acceptance for economic security, that exemplifies Austen's critical view on marriage as a strategic necessity rather than a romantic choice. Charlotte's decision to marry Mr. Collins—a man previously rejected by Elizabeth— shows the economic pressures faced by women during the Regency period, illustrating how societal norms often dictated personal decisions to the detriment of personal happiness and integrity. These ideas are shown in the following quote in which Charlotte expresses to Elizabeth the motives behind accepting Mr. Collins marriage proposal: “(...)I am not romantic, you know; I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connection, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.” (Austen, 1853: 89)



Finally, Austen also explores how manners and etiquette are used not just as social luxuries but as strategic tools. Her characters use them to climb the social ladder, hide or show their true feelings, and reveal either their honesty or dishonesty. This detailed portrayal of Regency society, with its intricate network of social norms, still impacts modern stories. These rules are employed not merely to fit in with societal expectations but also as mechanisms for achieving specific personal objectives. Characters often use polite behaviour and proper etiquette to appear more attractive and socially desirable, which can lead to better marriage prospects and, consequently, financial security. For example, characters like Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* use exaggerated respectfulness and adherence to social norms to enhance their social standing and favour with wealthier patrons, such as Lady Catherine de Bourgh: “My dear Miss Elizabeth, I have the highest opinion in the world in your excellent judgement in all matters within the scope of your understanding; but permit me to say, that there must be a wide difference between the established forms of ceremony amongst the laity, and those which regulate the clergy; for, give me leave to observe that I consider the clerical office as equal in point of dignity with the highest rank in the kingdom—provided that a proper humility of behaviour is at the same time maintained.” (Austen 1853: 69)

However, these tools are not solely for gaining wealth or social status. Austen cleverly shows that they can also be used for personal happiness and fulfilment. Characters who skillfully navigate social conventions can sometimes manipulate situations to their advantage, achieving personal goals that go beyond material gains. For instance, Elizabeth Bennet uses her wit and mastery of conversation to challenge societal norms and attract Mr. Darcy, who values her intelligence and assertiveness—traits that set her apart in a society that often values subservience in women.

Moreover, Austen uses etiquette and manners to reveal the moral character of her characters. Those who adhere to these social rules only superficially are often portrayed as insincere or corrupt, while those who balance politeness with genuine kindness and honesty are depicted more favourably. Thus, Austen's use of social conventions can also show one's character and integrity as well as to discuss the ongoing complexities of human relationships and the pressures of fitting into society.

### 3.2 *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) & *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (2000)

As mentioned in the last section, Austenian themes have had great impact on plenty of authors, one of which is Julia Quinn, the author of the Bridgerton series. In order to dig deeply into the influence these had on Quinn's work, the second novel from the Bridgerton series *The Viscount Who Loved Me* (2000) will be compared to Austen's best-known work, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), in how characters and love are depicted through the female gaze in books based on the Regency Era.

*The Viscount Who Loved Me* tells the story of Anthony Bridgerton, the eldest son of the family, who finally decides that it is time to find a wife and carry on with the family line. He decides to court Edwina, Kate Sheffield's younger half-sister, an intelligent young woman considered to be the most beautiful debutante of the current season. The only obstacle between the two is Kate, who wants her sister to marry for love and not for convenience (Quinn, 2000). Likewise, *Pride and Prejudice* is centred in the life of Elizabeth Bennet, the second oldest of the family. Her family needs at least one of the daughters to marry rich, as

they will not inherit the family's assets since their cousin Mr. Collin will be the recipient of the possessions (Austen, 1813).

Both novels share a principal theme, the dichotomy between love and hate. If these two works were to be put in a trope<sup>5</sup>, they would fit perfectly in the enemies to lovers category. The narrative of two people who hate each other but over time they realise their feelings go deeper is one of the readers' favourite categories when it comes to romance books. Although they are not precisely written for women, they are in fact written by women and are about women so that the reader is able to see the world through their eyes, therefore we are able to explore a universe filtered through the female perspective, this is the so-called female gaze. Laura Mulvey describes the male gaze as positioning women so that their desire is subjected to their image and them standing as signifiers of a man's other, so that they can live their obsessions and keep them as an image of a silent woman without meaning (1975: 804). From this definition appears its opposite, the already mentioned female gaze; a term coined by feminist that aims to create a space where the women's perspective is taken into consideration and the universe presented is shaped by their perception. What makes the biggest difference between the two definitions, besides one using the man's point of view and the other focusing on the woman, is the sexualisation of the opposite gender.

With regard to the male gaze, the woman is considered as a mere object of the men's desires, whereas the female gaze does not consider man as so, they are rather the facilitators of the heroine's growth and development.

When writing a novel based in the Regency Era, such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *The Viscount Who Loved Me*, the author focus on the female gaze so that they are able to embody the perfect masculinity while also showing how the main character, typically a woman, is able to become her best version without underestimate the male companion. (Malone, 2010)

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<sup>5</sup> Common or overused theme or device, a *cliché*.

As noted earlier, both *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Viscount Who Loved Me* feature love as a key theme. In Austen's work, marriage would be beneficial for the whole family as they are bound to lose their properties. Consequently, one of the daughters ought to marry rich so that the family is not in financial burden. However, in Quinn's novel, the Bridgerton family is not in need of finding suitors for any of the children as they possess great fortune. On the contrary, it is needed to continue their family legacy.

Regardless of differing in their motives, the two novels show how love emerges out of the blue for their main characters as they interact with Mr. Darcy in Jane Austen's classic, and with Kate Sheffield in Julia Quinn's work. Then, both novels show a tug-of-war between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, and Anthony Bridgerton and Kate Sheffield, since both male characters show prejudice when interacting with the women; Mr Darcy due to Elizabeth's lower social status and Anthony based on his expectations on what his wife should be like. Their preconceived notions are challenged as they start to get to know each other, Kate shows great strength and intelligence and Elizabeth shows great wit and morals, qualities that ultimately captivate Anthony and Darcy, respectively. These findings lead both men to confront their own prejudices and to reevaluate their initial beliefs. As Anthony and Darcy grow more familiar with Kate and Elizabeth, they begin to admire these qualities. This process, besides softening their pride, creates a profound respect and deep affection for their counterparts. Consequently, their relationships go from societal acquaintances to meaningful connections, underscoring the idea that true love can only come from looking beyond the surface so we can appreciate the genuine virtues of another person. Once again, the female gaze of the authors creates a male character that rather than regard women as a sexual being, they are able to conceive them as an equal. Mr. Darcy and Anthony Bennet are both passionate, sensitive, and full of emotion, but also mentally and physically formidable. "Listen to me, (...) I desire you. I burn for you. I can't sleep at night for wanting you. Even

when I didn't *like* you, I lusted for you. It's the most maddening, beguiling, damnable thing (...) you are the most beautiful and desirable woman in England, and if everyone else doesn't see that, then they're all bloody fools." (Julia Quinn, *The Viscount Who Loved Me*)

This is then the authors creating a specific type of man that is based on the women's needs and wants, and a woman that is capable of entering a marriage where they are seen as counterparts (Malone, 2010) as it is seen in Darcy's confession to Elizabeth "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." (Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*)

## **4. Conclusion**

Jane Austen's influence when writing romance novels seems evident as in some instances contemporary authors use Austen's notorious characters to create their own, therefore acquiring distinctive personalities and echoing Austen's origins of the Regency Era. This way authors are able to pay tribute to Jane Austen while they create their own narratives based on the period of time of their choosing. Authors like Julia Quinn or Brigid Coady are then great examples of this method, as one of them focuses on the Regency Era while giving it her own twist so to create an original and appeal narrative to the current readers, while Brigid Coady perfectly adapts Austen's classics and their well known characters into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century while exploring themes related to those used by the original author.

We are also able to explore how certain groups of people are taken into consideration to satisfy the readers' needs. In *Emma Ever After*, Coady takes great effort to represent pop culture, so that younger readers are able to connect with the story easier. Not only that but she also creates characters that are part of the LGBT collective, which in some cases might be controversial as they seem to be more of a bait for this group to read the story rather than to represent this part of society.

On the other hand, Quinn is able to use the female gaze to depict her characters and to narrate her work so that women are not objectified by men. Julia Quinn creates intelligent and strong women, just like Jane Austen did, who are more than capable of thinking for herself and who have their own opinion about social and political matters. Her male characters are filtered through the female perspective who personify the perfect masculinity. They show great sensibility to help women grow and they never regard women as sexual objects, which can be related to the idea that men Austen and Quinn's works are not considered sexual subjects as they are merely used for women's development.

Therefore, Jane Austen helps new authors explore love as the main theme regardless of the era they are based in, to talk about societal issues while using satire and irony . This timeless approach allows authors to not only entertain but also foster thought and critique societal norms. Austen's style inspires authors to blend romantic narratives with observations of social dynamics and personal aspirations, enabling a deep analysis of human purposes and interactions. Contemporary adaptations adapt Austen's techniques to spotlight current issues such as gender politics, class disparities, and cultural conflicts, thereby making the stories relevant and resonant for modern audiences. This way modern authors can create novels that offer insights that are as critical as they are engaging. This usage of Austen's work shows the adaptability of her themes and the appeal of her narrative style, which continues to influence the literary world. Through this legacy, Austen's work not only lasts but evolves, which encourages writers and readers to question the social constructs of their own period of time just as she did with hers.

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