

Jane Austen's solid times and Karen Joy Fowler's liquid times through Zygmunt Bauman's ideas

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JANE AUSTEN'S SOLID TIMES AND KAREN JOY FOWLER'S LIQUID TIMES THROUGH ZYGMUNT BAUMAN'S IDEAS

OS TEMPOS SÓLIDOS DE JANE AUSTEN E OS TEMPOS LÍQUIDOS DE KAREN JOY FOWLER ATRAVÉS DAS IDEIAS DE ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

Luciane Oliveira Müller¹

RESUMO: Mudanças fazem parte da evolução humana. Cada sociedade experiencia mudanças em termos de estrutura, relações humanas, comportamentos. O sociologista Zygmunt Bauman criou duas metáforas: sólida e líquida (representando passado e presente) com a intenção de analisar tais mudanças, e ele aplica a metodologia da comparação para explicá-las. Uma vez que a literatura é uma ferramenta eficiente para analisar estruturas culturais e relações humanas este trabalho apresenta uma leitura dos tempos sólidos de Jane Austen e dos tempos líquidos de Karen Joy Fowler através das ideias de Zygmunt Bauman com a intenção de entender tais mudanças e como elas afetam as relações humanas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sólido e Líquido; Jane Austen; Karen Joy Fowler; Zygmunt Bauman.

ABSTRACT: Changes are part of human evolution. Each society undergoes changes in terms of structure, human relations, behavior. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman created two metaphors: solid and liquid (representing past and present) in order to analyze those changes, and he applies the methodology of comparison to explain them. Since literature is an efficient tool to analyze cultural structures and human relations this work presents a reading of Jane Austen's solid times and Karen Joy Fowler's liquid times through the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman with the intention of understanding these changes and how they affect human relations.

KEYWORDS: Solid and Liquid; Jane Austen; Karen Joy Fowler; Zygmunt Bauman.

1. Introduction

“Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long”.
Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*

Every society undergoes constant changes in values, structure, attitudes, behavior and style. Changes have always happened throughout history. However, what is different in the twentieth-first century is the fact that those changes are more visible. Novelties are spread in a speed never seen before. In the past, when something happened in a given place, a country for instance, it took some time for the other countries to get to know about it, or be affected by it. There was a greater distance separating the action and the reaction. Nowadays, with the advent of the Internet and

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cyber time, we get to know what is happening around the world instantly, and the consequences are also instantaneous. Therefore, ‘velocity’ is one of the determinant characteristics of our world, and one of the elements studied by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his pursuit to understand our time and our present condition in the world. In this sense, this work intends to understand our contemporary times through a reading of Bauman’s concepts and ideas, and also some pieces of literary examples presented by Jane Austen’s novels and Karen Joy Fowler’s novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Bauman’s thoughts, as well as some of his concepts, will be used as a valuable support in the development of certain ideas, as a bridge that connects the somewhat distant fictional universes of Jane Austen and Karen Joy Fowler. Bauman’s first contribution comes through the concepts of “solid” and “liquid” times. Whenever I refer to solid times, I am talking about Austen’s portrayal of 18th-century rural England and the kind of society and world view it represents. As to the expression liquid times, it invites us into Fowler’s present-day sunny California – which can be extended to represent in many ways the globalized postmodern world her readers also inhabit.

2. Understanding Bauman’s ideas

“Family connections were always worth preserving, good company always worth seeking”.

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

We human beings have this peculiarity: on the one hand, we cannot be constantly in company, we need some time to be alone and organize ourselves; on the other hand, we cannot stand a long period without the contact of the other people. We need company, we need to relate. The ways in which we conduct our relations, and the value we attribute to them, come from a mixture involving our natural tendencies and the circumstances and values of the society we live in. As Austen pointed in the excerpt above, family connections and good company should always be preserved. Almost two hundred years after these words were written, this theme is still dear to some authors and theoreticians. Austen wrote these words from within a time when several values were different from ours. Personal relations were stronger, and there is a negative and positive point to this. On the one hand, the grip of society over individual wish was fierce and could be oppressive; on the other hand, communal life might grant one the feeling of belonging and of being important to others. Many of the problems Austen’s characters have to deal with come from the fact that they cannot move as freely as they would, due to the emotional, social, moral and familial ties that involved them. Karen Joy Fowler’s characters, similarly to Austen’s, are also being apprenticed to the task of dealing with personal bonds, but in a different kind of environment. They inhabit the 21st century, and this difference in time and space works as a counterpart to the way things happen in Austen’s fiction. In Bauman’s terms, Austen’s world is solid, whereas Fowler’s is liquid. As a consequence, the characters that inhabit these different environments act and react based on different codes of behavior.

Zygmunt Bauman² was a notable sociologist and theoretician born in Poland in 1925. He traveled around the world delivering lectures, and published at least one book per year. In his youth Bauman studied sociology and philosophy, becoming a lecturer at the University of Warsaw, where he remained until 1968. Then, he moved to England where he established a family and a career. In 1990 he became an emeritus professor at the University of Leeds. In 2010 this institution launched The Bauman Institute within its School of Sociology and Social Policy in his honor. Bauman's expertise was the study of contemporary society, and he concentrated his attention on aspects related to consumerism, globalization, and ethics. For him, society was reaching a new stage, turning into a new form, acquiring a new shape. To exemplify such changes, he used the metaphor 'liquid' modernity substituting for a former 'solid' modernity. Solid elements are expected to be stable and durable, which is very different from liquid elements, whose form constantly change so as to adapt to the vessel that contains them. Bauman observed that, as reality changes, the concepts and values that relate to it also change, to the point that former solid and stable concepts and values have melted in the new globalized times. I take here, as an example, marriage as a social institution. In the times of solid modernity (here represented by Austen's universe), marriage was a very serious legal, religious, monetary and personal issue, very difficult to dissolve. Divorce was an exception, hardly granted, and a stain to all members of the family it affected. In the time of liquid modernity, however (as shown in Fowler's fiction), there are a number of alternatives to marriage, as well as a number of alternative modes of living within a family.

As well as in the case mentioned above, which relates to marriage and family as social institutions, several other things are different in liquid modern society, respecting thought, attitudes, and opinions. That said, most of the terms that I use in this work related to contemporary human relations are borrowed from Bauman, especially when it comes to issues related to morals and ethics, family connections, fear and happiness. Some of the books in which Bauman investigates those circumstances are – *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (1994), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Liquid Love* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Times* (2007), and *The Art of Life* (2008).

As happens with all theories, Bauman's model respecting liquid and solid modernity has gathered its supporters and detractors. Those who adhere to this nomenclature do so because they find it useful to highlight some aspects of the issues they mean to discuss. This is my case. Those who find fault in it, however, tend to blame Bauman for his nostalgia of the way things were in the past, meaning that when he compares the 21st century liquid society with the solid one that preceded it, the comparison is detrimental to the former. Having read several of his books, I do not take things this way. Whenever I think, or write, I do so from a determined point of perception. Perhaps because Bauman came from a Jewish family, and experienced all the circumstances involving Nazism in Europe, and World War II, he was well aware of the problems that can derive from extreme nationalism, which is one of the pillars of solid times. Conversely, as a philosopher, he was keen to warn us against the excesses on the opposite side, such as the discarding of the previous code of ethics before a substitutive code has been proposed. In short, for the sake of this work, Bauman's theories are to be used as nomenclature that helps me establish a dialogue between

² When this work was written, Zygmunt Bauman was still alive and producing his texts. As his ideas were of great contribution to this work, this article will be a symbolic homage to him who was a great scholar.

Fowler and Austen's fictional worlds. As much as possible, my intention is to avoid a discussion about which time – past or present – is better or worse to be inhabited. The idea I partake is that in both there are positive and negative elements, all included in the same package. Solid society possessed a sort of organization whose shape is better established, rules that were easily grasped, rewards and punishment clearly stated. This applies to the rules of the game in Austen's novels. Liquid society, on the other hand, offers more possibilities of action and choice. Because it is fluid and slippery, the rules of the game keep changing while the game is being played. These features can be identified in Fowler's novel.

The definition for the term "Solid" offered by Bauman comprises the following range of meaning: "durable"; "stable"; "strong"; "fixed". These characteristics possess a positive and a negative side. On the one hand something which is considered stable and fixed might offer a sensation of security and stability. On the other hand stability and long duration can offer a sensation of imprisonment and/or repression. For the sake of this work, all of them are accepted to exemplify the solid society presented in Austen's fiction. With an eye to the example that I mentioned above about the institution of marriage, let us see how these definitions of something solid apply. Marriage is an institution which originates the founding nucleus of society which is the family. As Lawrence Stone proposes when he talks about the past, or – using Bauman's terms – the solid society: "for most people in England, therefore, marriage was an indissoluble union, breakable only by death" (STONE, 1990, p. 34). If so, the terms 'strong' and 'fixed' are the ones that better characterize the solidity of this institution. Also, in those times, marriage was seen and treated as a capital business: when couples got married, they were well aware of the financial and political aspects of the enterprise. As with any other kind of business, it was expected that the institution might last long, and for this to happen it needed to have a strong basis. Following the same trail, something solid does not mean something perfect or excellent: it means something you can rely on. These aspects are clearly identified in Austen's novels. Most of the marriages we find there have this mark of long duration, of something definitive as Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* says to Henry Tilney: "people that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together" (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 124). It must be one of the reasons why divorce was never mentioned in an Austen's novel. Moreover, Austen's marriages present this notion of business and here I can cite some examples: Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas' marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, Robert Ferrars and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Elton and Mrs. Elton in *Emma* to mention but a few. In all these marriages presented above the main motif to their union is practical, they need someone to share a house and pay the bills. Love, which is one of the requirements for a marriage nowadays, was never mentioned by those characters.

As for the term "Liquid" Bauman presents the following definitions: elements which are unstable and change their form constantly so as to adapt to the vessel that contains them. Since flexibility and instability represents Fowler's liquid society, and marriage was the example used to represent Austen's solid society, let us follow the same idea. In Fowler's liquid world things 'flow freely', which means, there is nothing to bar their flow. As such, a marriage can initiate as well as end without difficulties as Fowler's character Bernadette exemplifies with her several marriage experiences.

In general, Bauman uses the methodology of comparison to explain his ideas about solid and liquid times. Thus, I applied the same methodology in this work I compared Austen's and Fowler's worlds in order to understand these liquid and solid

societies presented by Bauman. In the case involving Austen and Fowler – except for some twists in the plots of the former that might defy common life statistics – both create fictional worlds that operate precisely in the same way the worlds their authors inhabit work. For these reasons, I mean to use – as Bauman does – the technique of contrast to highlight what one society has and the other lacks, and vice versa.

Accordingly, in *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (1994), Bauman states that the old millenary binary relation involving State and Church has ended, as such, in its place we have a new binary relation comprising Bureaucracy and Consumerism. The morals and ethics of the former solid system represented by State and Church no longer apply in liquid society. In this sense, Bauman is concerned about the danger of present-day lack of moral and ethical standards, for we are undergoing a period of testing. Each previous set of values is being reevaluated, and reestablished, so that eventually a new code may replace the one that has been discarded. The anxiety provoked by this state of suspension can be taken as one of the reasons why Jane Austen's critical fortune has raised to unprecedented heights in the two last decades, as her fictional universe poses a simple and clear set of moral and ethical norms. In Austen's first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, John Dashwood is universally repudiated because of the way he disowns his half-sisters and step mother, leaving them totally helpless, even though he has promised his dying father he would look after them. As the British author and biographer Paula Byrne puts it in an essay about Austen named "Manners",

Austen's novels were written on this spectrum: she was always interested in 'character of mind'; she anatomized the 'general way of life', the morals and habits, of the English middling classes of her time; and she was exasperated by – and made comic capital out of – excessively ceremonious behaviour and over – studied civility (BYRNE, 2005, p. 297).

In Byrne's words, Austen demonstrates great interest in the way people behave in society. Equally, Bauman understands the necessity of a set of rules so that people can live in society and shows his apprehension to the dangerous phase we are going through now. In this sense, he worries about the enfeeblement of the superior powerful force connected with the ideas of God or State, which compels men to follow moral rules. To be moral, in Bauman's terms, means to act according to reason. For him, "in a moral world, only the voice of reason should be heard", in this way emotion should be treated with caution (BAUMAN, 1994, p. 4). Likewise, Bauman proposes that in the modern shapes of our society reason shares space with emotion and the possible consequences of this cohabitation are shifts between order and chaos (BAUMAN, 1994, p. 4). Consequently, he states that "where reason does not rule 'everything may happen', and thus the whole situation is hopelessly beyond control" (BAUMAN, 1994, p. 4). When we transfer this thought to Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, we witness Marianne losing her reason when she falls in love with Willoughby, damaging her reputation because of her exaggerated manifestation of emotion towards him. A contemporary reader may disagree about the subtleties of Austen's society, but to that society reputation is something very important for a woman. Without an irreproachable conduct a woman could not find a suitable husband which would save her future.

In liquid society the former code of morality is losing its space. For the lack of a new code, we become exposed to possible atrocities performed by people who seem not even to be aware that they are transgressing the rules. In Fowler's novel, I can cite one example of this: as a young girl, Jocelyn was abused by an older guy, because she

disturbed the friendship of his young brother and his young brother's best friend. In this case, it is possible to assert that his attitude is more emotional than rational. Sometimes this kind of attitude happens, however it cannot turn into a rule, otherwise it opens space for disorder. Bauman says that "we seem to require now an entirely new brand of ethics" (BAUMAN, 1994, p. 37), in a society that is melting in form and losing its shape. We need to find a way to redefine moral and ethical standards in order to avoid social chaos. Here I am presenting just fictional examples, but in real life we can find a lot more similar to these ones.

In *Liquid Modernity*, Bauman (2000) deals in the velocity that characterizes the changes that took place in some structures, values, traditions. Obviously, changes have always existed, they mark the evolution of our species and our history; what is unprecedented is the increasing speed in which these changes occur. For Bauman, the substance which could more easily adapt to this phenomenon is the 'liquid' substance. Bauman draws on the word 'fluidity', one of the characteristics of what is liquid. He sees that "as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era" (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 2). Fluidity differentiates liquids from solids. Accordingly, solids have a fixed shape, therefore they are stable; whereas liquids do not possess a single form, they are shaped according to the recipients where they are put into. In this sense, they are prone to constant change. If fluidity is the term chosen by Bauman to characterize the liquid society, 'bonding' is chosen to summarize the solid society (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 2). In this liquid context, ruled by instability and uncertainty, the term Bauman uses to represent human relations is disengagement. In the liquid setting the flow of time is greatly important, because, "fluids travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', 'flood', 'spray', 'drip', 'seep', 'ooze'; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through other still" (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 2). In so doing, Bauman states that modernity undergoes a process of 'liquidity', through the dissolution of some solid (formerly sacred) traditions. Among the first two solids sacred to melt or, as Bauman puts it, which were profaned are traditional loyalties represented by family and ethics (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 2-3). Bauman's views can immediately be identified in Austen's and Fowler's narratives. All of Austen's stories are about female characters searching for a suitable marriage in order not to disappoint their families, which means stability for them for the rest of their lives, and a guarantee that they will not prove burdensome to their family or social group. A strong sense of moral, and of belonging, is identified along these narratives. In Fowler's story, the fuel of the narrative is a book club, which was mainly created because of a divorce. In Fowler's novel it is possible to identify a wider range of human relationships: we have single people, divorced people, engaged, and disengaged, heterosexual and homosexual. Most of them do not seem to regard marriage as something essential to their lives, as happens in Austen's world.

Moreover, Bauman states the word that best characterizes the solid modernity is engagement, which is directly opposed to disengagement, the word that characterizes liquid modernity (BAUMAN, 2000). For Bauman, "being modern came to mean, as it means, being unable to stop and even less able to stand still" because if we stop we lose opportunities (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 28). In this sense, we undergo an endless pursuit of fulfillment: "achievements lose their attraction and satisfying potential at the moment of their attainment, if not before" (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 28). That is to say, individuals who grow up in this process of fluidity may not find satisfaction with their attainments and tend to live under the sensation of incompleteness and longing for something they miss

but cannot identify what that is. Many characters in Fowler seem to feel that way, and recur to Austen as an aid against depression. Bauman analyzes this sensation of incompleteness in the work *Liquid Love*.

In *Liquid Love*, Bauman (2003) investigates the ways in which liquidity affects human relations. In the past, relationships were shaped differently. Bonds were expected to be stable and last long. This way they were called: relation, kinship or partnership. Marriage was associated with the idea of ‘till death do us part’, which was something reassuring in cases of successful connections, and tragic in cases of unsuccessful connections. Nowadays, on the other hand, long-lasting relationships are becoming rare. We have a preponderance of short-term involvements between disengaged persons, something similar to the period of validity of a product in a market. The terms which represent this new configuration are ‘disengagement’, ‘network’ and ‘connection’. Influenced by our globalized society of consumerism, quality has been surpassed by quantity. The motto is: life is short: enjoy life, otherwise, time and better opportunities will be lost. An example of this syndrome is represented by the character Bernadette in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. She is in her sixties, has been married several times, and keeps searching for something. In her own words, she is “letting herself go” (Fowler, 2004, p. 2).

In the last two chapters of *Liquid Love*, Bauman (2003) raises a discussion about a problem people who live in big cities face now: people tend to live alone among strangers. This coexistence brings to light a new feeling: fear. As Bauman says, in the twenty-first century, especially right after the 11th September attacks, human beings meet difficulties in loving their neighbors because they do not know who these neighbors are, nor if they can be trusted. This is one of the differences between Austen’s and Fowler’s fictional universes. Austen’s stories are set in the countryside, whereas Fowler’s setting is urban. Life in Austen’s communities may be sometimes boring, or oppressive, but people know one another, and feel safe. However, Fowler’s characters seem to be aware of the fact that they inhabit a hostile environment, where fear is intensely present, and have developed strategies to deal with that. They will not easily trust another person. Bauman deals with this feeling of fear and loneliness in two books, *Liquid Life* and *Liquid Times*.

In *Liquid Life*, Bauman (2005) resumes some concepts presented in his previous books such as instability presented in *Liquid Modernity* and in *Liquid Love*. He also introduces some aspects that will be approached in other books such as the pursuit of happiness in *The Art of Life*. Initially, he states that “‘liquid life’ and ‘liquid modernity’ are intimately connected” (BAUMAN, 2005 p.1), and future predictions become more risky and misleading in this context. In this sense, Bauman sees “liquid life as a succession of new beginnings” (BAUMAN, 2005, p. 2). This means that everything happens with a certain speed. Marriage, for instance, in this context, is a relationship that can begin and end many times, as Bernadette shows in Fowler’s novel. Likewise, Bauman argues that “liquid life is consuming life”; if so, this might mean that everything which loses its commercial value soon becomes waste in this new setting of life. For him, consuming life “is marked and measured by the difference between ‘up to date’ and ‘out of date’, or rather between today’s commodities and those of yesterday that are still ‘up to date’ and thus on shop shelves” (BAUMAN, 2005, p. 24). To exemplify this I am going to use Fowler’s story: when Sylvia ends her marriage, she feels out of date. She feels discarded and replaced by a young girl after a marriage of 32 years. In a liquid context an individual must be always up to date in order to avoid not

being discarded. A context which changes constantly seems not to offer space for something durable as the scenery of Fowler's novel.

If in *Liquid Life* Bauman starts to raise some issues which originates fear, in *Liquid Times* fear is the main theme. In this book Bauman (2007) observes that he does not intend to answer all the questions he raises; his intention is to trigger a discussion about the social problems society is facing instead. Initially, he reviews some issues presented in his previous books such as the speed in which things change, the divorce of power and politics, and the feebleness of human bonds. In advance, Bauman puts forth his understanding of the challenges that individuals undergo now. He proposes that "society' is increasingly viewed and treated as 'network' rather than a 'structure'" (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 3). Within this network, Bauman says, individuals acquired freedom to choose what they want to do with their lives. However, along with this freedom comes a sensation of insecurity, because in this new frame choosers are expected to bear the consequences of their choices in full (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 4). This insecurity brings to light a sensation of fear which Bauman sees as the most sinister of the demons nesting in the open societies of our time. He also proposes that we seem not to be in control anymore, whether singly, severally or collectively and to make things still worse we lack the tools that would allow politics to be lifted to the level where power has already settled (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 26). To exemplify this I can mention Corine and Allegra's relationship in Fowler's novel. Allegra experienced a situation which taught her how difficult it is to trust people. She tells Corine some pieces of secret stories of her past and Corine turns Allegra's stories into a book without even asking for permission.

Bauman's last book to be explored in this work is *The Art of Life*. In it he deals in what may be considered one of the most important aspects of human lives, the pursuit of happiness. Bauman (2008) proposes that happiness depends on the mixture of two complex issues: security and freedom, something difficult to reach. Because when we have one we lack the other. The most important point highlighted by him in this work is that happiness is something personal; each person has his or her understanding of happiness. Therefore, it is impossible to develop a formula for happiness. For some people happiness means to have money or prestige; for others, it means to be with someone they love. In this sense, happiness is something as unique as one's DNA. When Fowler and Austen deal with this pursuit of happiness in their stories we clearly perceive the difference between them. For example, Austen's characters are in search of a marriage which would bring them stability. Yet, Fowler's characters search for solutions for their personal frustration by reading Austen's stories.

In order to explore a little more fully those notions of solid times proposed by Bauman, let's plunge into the past, more precisely, into Austen's universe and see some examples of solid notions spread in her time.

2.1 "The Past is a Foreign Country"

The title to this section comes from the first sentence in the novel *The Go-Between* (1953), by the English author L. P. Hartley: "The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there" (HARTLEY, 2011, p. 1). I interpret this sentence as meaning that we tend to concentrate on the good moments of the past that we keep registered in our memory (we erase the bad ones as much as possible); to the same

degree that we concentrate on the dangers and risks of the present, so as to evade them. As a consequence, we develop a feeling of nostalgia regarding the past, and a feeling of anxiety in the present, so as to avoid problems in the future. In this sense, Austenland becomes twice as safe, because it belongs not only in the world of the past, but also in the world of fiction. We can revisit/reread Mr. Darcy's Pemberley or Anne Elliot's Bath as often as we wish and they will keep reassuringly the same. But Hartley's sentence in *The Go-Between* warns us that, in our actual lives, if we revisit a place (or a person) that has been important at some point in the past, we may feel like foreigners arriving at an unknown territory. Austen's rural England, like the Rio de Janeiro of Machado de Assis, are considerably changed. There are even those who argue if they have ever been the way we read them now. Interestingly, the past tends to be seen and cherished as something better than the time and place we live in. When we think about the past we tend to create an imaginary perfect place in our minds. And this place, similar to a foreign country, seems to be different and difficult to reach. As a matter of fact, our perception of the past can be accessed through history which is recorded in books, pictures and memories. Most of the times, when we think about the past we tend to forget that in the past problems also happened in this way we erase the bad memories and think only about the good ones. As the excerpt above shows, past memories promote a sensation of something pleasurable which warms our imagination. However, similar to the past, which possesses some sad stories and facts, not all foreign countries are appealing. There are some places which are beautiful, well-developed and charming; however, there are others that are poor, dangerous and sometimes even ugly.

The past I am referring to in this work is the one presented by Jane Austen in her six novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. This is a predominantly female universe that shows the stories of some women from different generations that have to find a way to adapt to the challenges posed by that given society. Among them we find different kinds of women: strong, weak, happy, sad, intelligent, determined, or proud. As the scholar Hazel Jones puts it "Jane Austen presents us with fallible women, who learn from their mistakes, because this is how experience is gained" (JONES, 2009, p. 4). By doing this, Austen opens space to the appearance of some contemporary criticism which seems to think that Austen presents in her novels characters, attitudes and values which might possibly be found in her own context. By analyzing those fictional representations we can have an idea of how that society works.

Some aspects of life might prove hard in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, especially for women. It was a period of difficulties, because of the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, which were happening in Europe. Also as Hazel Jones puts it, women's "present and future economic security lay in male hands – fathers', brothers', husbands'" (JONES, 2009, p. 2). Their options were few for the female members of rural gentry: either they married, or became a burden to their family, or descended socially and went for a job as a teacher or a governess. The other possibilities were unmentionable. Marriage was the best solution to their predicament. Accomplished young women had a better chance to find good matches. Actually, that society did not give women many opportunities for personal development as we have in our society of the twenty-first century. Nowadays, many women are economically and personally independent. By far, the best option to women in the solid society is to get married, and to accomplish that, it is necessary to fulfill some requirements. First of all, the concept of a marriage at those times was different from the one we witness in the

twenty-first century. Secondly, in society people did not act as freely as we do nowadays. People, especially women, should act according to some codes of conduct. And those codes were spread through books. There were even some specific ones named conduct books which gave women guidelines to act accordingly. To exemplify those conduct books it is possible to cite James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1767) and D. John Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters* (1808). It is possible to say that Jane Austen was well-acquainted with them. In *Mansfield Park*, for example, she presents a scene in chapter V when Mary Crawford and Edmund were talking about how women should behave when formally presented to society.

Furthermore, to marry or become a governess, women need to be accomplished, which means to know how to manage the household, play the piano, sew, write, read, draw, and sing. However, at those times as G. M. Trevelyan observes in his book *English Social History*, "women's education was sadly to seek", the first instruction initiates at home, "the ladies learnt from their mothers to read, write, sew and manage the household" (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 274). Jane Austen also started her education at home, and then, when she was seven, she went to a boarding school with her older sister Cassandra. The same happens with the Brontë's sisters. But to live in such institutions was not safe, many girls got sick and died during their staying at those places. The English biographer and journalist Claire Tomalin in her book *Jane Austen: A Life* lists some aspects of Austen's life from her birth to her death. Tomalin draws essentially on aspects related to education and entertainment. She seems to agree with Trevelyan in respect to education:

boarding schools for girls were not hard to find in the 1780s, not least because keeping a school was one of the very few ways in which a woman could hope to earn a respectable living; but accounts of what went on in them make depressing, and sometimes horrifying, reading (TOMALIN, 1999, p. 37).

That said, Tomalin presents some difficulties which girls face when they went to those institutions, such as lack of sufficient food to survive and lack of safe accommodations, "pupils were fed on the principle 'eat the bread and smell the cheese', and all made to sleep in the drawing room [...] "sharing a bed was more common than not" (TOMALIN, 1999, p. 37). Tomalin says that "children were often half starved by their schoolmistress because they were struggling against poverty themselves" (TOMALIN, 1999, p. 37). This way, it is possible to understand why Trevelyan and Tomalin approach the sad side of seeking for an education in the English society of the eighteenth century. Most girls put their lives into risk in those boarding schools; starvation allied to bad accommodations were quite dangerous in times of scanty medical resources and the spread of typhus epidemics. Tomalin tells us that Austen got ill when she was in a boarding school and only survived because her mother had found it out in time. The Brontës did not have the same luck, and lost two girls among their six children (GASKELL, 1997). These girls were studying in a school for daughters of the clergy (both Rev. Austen and Rev. Brontë were clergymen). Accordingly, either to become an accomplished woman to find a suitable marriage or to access a position of governess is not something easy. Also, the possibility of becoming a governess is not seen as something agreeable or appealing. In Austen's novel *Emma*, the character Jane Fairfax fears the very possibility of becoming one. Each time Mrs. Elton mentions a

possible position of governess for Jane in one of her friend's house, Jane comes up with an excuse and changes the subject.

Trevelyan suggests that there is a trade aspect in marriage in the English society of those times. Women could be seen as a sort of merchandise in that society. If a woman meant to marry, her family should have some means to bargain: "in the upper and middle classes, husbands were often found for girls on the principle of frank barter" (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 275). These women would have a better chance to marry if they were young, beautiful, educated (which they called "accomplished") and if their families could offer something in return, as a dowry. This subject is at the main core of Jane Austen's novels. There we can identify some circumstances of different women, some with more, some with less possibilities or necessity of finding a match. At that time, marriage was still regarded more like business, trade, or political alliance than as a romantic personal relation. In this sense, the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were very complex times, because they superpose the previous notion of two families getting united by common interests with the new notion of love and individual choice. Therefore, an Austen heroine should not only find a husband to suit the interests of her family, but also manage to fall in love with him. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie Bennett is disappointed when her friend Charlotte decides to marry Rev. Collins – with whom she is not in love – for practical reasons, in the way things were done in the past. Lizzie, the protagonist, has herself some problems in falling in love with Mr. Darcy, but finally manages to do so (after she visits his wonderful manor house), so that the novel has both the socially acceptable and the romantically expected happy endings. Trevelyan also proposes that,

Since almost everyone regarded it as a grave misfortune to remain single, women did not account it a universal grievance that their hands should often be disposed by others. They were no doubt usually consulted as to their destiny, much or little according to character and circumstance. Swift, in writing 'to a very young lady on her marriage', speaks of 'the person your father and mother have chosen for your husband', and almost immediately adds, 'yours was a match of prudence and common good liking, without any mixture of the ridiculous passion' of romantic love. And this description would probably have covered a vast proportion of the 'arranged' marriages of the day (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 276).

Trevelyan observes that romantic love is seen, in Swift's words, as a 'ridiculous passion'. This does not mean, however, that it did not exist in English solid society. Indeed, even in Austen's fiction there are some romantic couples who elope in order to live their love story. Actually, such type of occurrence was not uncommon:

But since the 'ridiculous passion' often asserted itself, runaway matches were common enough, as in the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. And even without that desperate expedient, an ever-increasing proportion of ordinary marriages were the outcome of mutual affection. Divorce was almost unknown. It was obtainable only through Church courts, and then only if followed by a special Act of Parliament; not more than six divorces were thus legalized during the twelve years of Queen Anne (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 276).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, young Lydia Bennet elopes with the soldier George Wickham. The same happens in *Mansfield Park* when the older daughter of Sir Thomas

Bertram who is already married, Maria Bertram elopes with Henry Crawford. In *Sense and Sensibility* Robert Ferrars elopes with his brother's fiancée Lucy Steele. Colonel Brandon's first love did the same, and had circumstances been different something similar might have happened to Marianne. But the only characters that actually do such things are the secondary characters in the stories. An Austen protagonist would never fall that way, they would rather remain single.

Morals and manners are clearly identified topics in the core of Austen's novels; furthermore, they become the target of many scholars when exploring Austen's works. Martin Price, for instance, in her article "Manners, Morals and Jane Austen" says:

It is in manners that Jane Austen's world exhibits great density, for manners are concrete, complex orderings, both personal and institutional. They are a language of gestures, for words too become gestures when they are used to sustain rapport; most of our social ties are established in "speech acts" or "performative utterances" (PRICE, 1975, p. 266).

In this essay, Price analyzes the way Austen introduces her characters and how this introduction lead us readers to evaluate such characters, as well as see how they deal with the conventions in that society. In general, Jane Austen uses the secondary characters to do non-standard things so that they can be analyzed and criticized.

Considering everything that was tackled here about past and present, values and relationships, fiction and reality it is possible to conclude that each time has its importance and contribution as well as its weakness. The good point when we analyze the past is that we are far from it, and can see it in a broader sense, however, the negative point in terms of the present is that we are experiencing it now, and it is difficult to come to a conclusion of what is good or bad.

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