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Dramatic Structure in Jane Austen's Novels

1.

When thinking about dramatic structure, what comes to mind? How does the structure of a novel compare, say, with the structure of a play, a painting, a symphony, a ballet? How do words compare with images, colours, sounds, movements? When applied to Austen, these questions revolve around the idea of her self-awareness as a creator of literature.

Thinking about Austen's self-awareness as an author leads to chicken-and-egg questions about how she absorbed influences and transformed them into literature. This makes for interesting speculation. What plays did she attend? What did she read? What was in her father's library? What was discussed when families and neighbours gathered around the fireplace at night?

Austen was a storyteller who influenced how the literary arts developed. She is often compared with another storyteller, Shakespeare, who influenced how the dramatic arts developed. Both have been studied, down the generations, as explorers of character and motivation, the power of dialogue and indirect speech, the nature of love, the embodiment of social mores, the heroine's capacity for self-awareness—her ability to change and grow—and the human condition. He wrote plays. She wrote novels. These are different forms of representational art, art that represents aspects of reality in ways that have lifelikeness (verisimilitude).

Jane wrote juvenilia during her teenage years. She

saved her juvenilia in three notebooks titled Volume the First, Volume the Second, and Volume the Third, to form a three-volume novel. Jane was proud of her juvenilia. This was unusual. Juvenilia are often associated with naivety, and few authors wish to be thought naïve. For example, Fanny Burney famously destroyed her juvenilia on her fifteenth birthday, as a rite of passage.

Critics are ambivalent about Jane's juvenilia. Chapman talked them down, as detracting from her stature as a mature novelist. Chesterton took a more positive view of their exuberant, offbeat, raucous comedy, calling them Rabelaisian and Dickensian, with echoes of Gargantua and Pickwick. They describe behaviours she could not write about as an adult, like biting off fingers.

As this precocious but talented young woman entered adulthood, she had to adopt a mature literary persona. So, do her novels conform to a theory of mimesis, a theory of art imitating nature or life?

2.

Aristotle prescribed the "proper construction" of plot in *Poetics* (335 BC).[1] If it is to present itself as a unified and beautiful whole, the plot must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, which must unfold chronologically. For example, a well-constructed Tragedy should contain:

- *hamartia*, a fatal flaw (or sin) leading to a downfall,
- *peripeteia*, a sudden reversal of fortune or change in circumstance,
- *anagnorisis*, the moment of critical discovery,
- *catharsis*, the cleansing or purging of strong or repressed emotions.

According to Aristotle, plots were *simple* if the hero's fortunes change without *peripeteia* or *anagnorisis*, and plots were *complex* if they involve one or the other or both. By this definition, Austen's plots are all complex because they contain each of these four elements.

At the beginning of each novel, Austen describes a fatal flaw, a sin (*hamartia*) which creates that novel's underlying disorder. After a series of dramatic events, order is re-established, at the end of each novel, often of the happily-ever-after kind, depending on how one defines and measures happily-ever-after.

Two thousand years after Aristotle, in *The Technique of Drama* (1863),[2] Freytag charted Aristotle's prescriptions for plot as a dramatic arc or pyramid:

- exposition
- rising action (or complication)
- climax (or turning point)
- falling action (or unravelling)
- catastrophe (denouement or resolution).

The climax is at the midpoint. Think of it as the middle of a five-act play, a turning point from the complication (rising action) to the unravelling (falling action). Do not confuse the climax with the moment of critical discovery (*anagnorisis*). If we do that, we create a non-symmetrical structure, perhaps an obtuse triangle or abstract shape.

By the Georgian period, Tragedy's catastrophe had become Classicism's denouement or resolution. Freytag's pyramid can be applied to Shakespeare's tragedies. It can also be applied to Austen's novels. This tells us something about Austen's uniqueness, compared with her literary contemporaries. She occupies a liminal space between Classicism and Romanticism.

To illustrate this, think about Radcliffe's gothic romance, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, which has no dramatic structure to speak of. It presents itself as a horizontal chain of incident, an extended exercise in mood, punctuated with travelogue descriptions of landscapes Radcliffe had never seen. There is useless fainting, pointless emotionalism, and gestures towards the Cult of Sensibility with its myth of the delicate female nervous system. Austen did not want to imitate this kind

of writing. Her novels are tighter.

The first drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were epistolary, written in the form of letters. When Austen realised the epistolary form did not suit her purposes, she chose a dramatic form then foreign to the novel. We do not know why she did this. But she did. And in doing this, the form of the literary novel was changed forever.

3.

The exposition of *Sense and Sensibility* is the reversal of fortune (*peripeteia*) of Mrs Dashwood and her daughters, caused by the fault or sin (*hamartia*) of disobeying the biblical injunction to care for widows and orphans. Once that disorder is exposed, the complication (rising action) revolves around the temperamental differences between two sisters. Elinor's affinity with sense (reason) allows her to conceal her feelings for Edward. She refuses to judge him, because she does not know all the facts about his circumstances, and because she places his good above her own. Marianne's affinity with sensibility (feeling) makes her wilful and leads her to develop a hedonistic passion for Willoughby, presented to her as a Romantic hero. Her world collapses when he does not fulfil her Romantic desires. The novel's climax (turning point) occurs at its midpoint, in London, during Marianne's nervous breakdown, where she admits to Elinor that she was never engaged to Willoughby. They surrender to their joint affliction. They must wait for nature to take its course, which Austen later describes as an "extraordinary fate".

The unravelling (falling action) continues to revolve around these sisters' temperamental differences. Colonel Brandon, a Knight in a flannel waistcoat, has been standing vigil in the background, waiting to be of service to his suffering Lady. He understands her because, while

he also has a Romantic temperament, he has learnt to channel it rationally. During the unravelling the reader learns the truth about Willoughby's seduction and abandonment of the Colonel's ward, Eliza Williams Jr, and Edward's entanglement with Lucy Steele, which fortuitously falls apart.

At the denouement (Resolution), Marianne marries Colonel Brandon. Their union represents feeling tempered by reason. Elinor marries Edward. Their union represents reason tempered by feeling. While Austen's later novels seem more Romantic—whatever that means—than the earlier ones, all her novels have the symmetry, balance, clarity and restraint associated with Classicism. This Classical architecture applies to each Austen novel.

4.

In *Pride and Prejudice* the exposition is the disordering economic dilemma of the Bennet family, because of the entail, and because Mr Bennet's *hamartia* is ineffective management of his family and estate. The complication (rising action) revolves around the misunderstanding and sexual tension between Elizabeth and Darcy. The climax (or turning point) occurs at the novel's midpoint, near the park at Rosings, the day after Elizabeth furiously refuses Darcy's proposal of marriage. On reading his letter, her *anagnorisis* (moment of critical discovery) is to recognise the truth of his prejudices and admit: "Till this moment I never knew myself." In this novel, but not the others, the climax and the *anagnorisis* coincide.

During the unravelling (falling action), Austen skilfully weaves three themes: first, the scandal of Lydia running away with Wickham; second, Elizabeth's impotence to do anything except returning to the purgatory of Longbourn and remaining loyal to her dysfunctional family; third, Darcy's atonement for his prejudices by rescuing Lydia and the whole Bennet family

and making himself acceptable to Elizabeth.

At the denouement (Resolution), Elizabeth marries Darcy and ascends to paradise on earth, Pemberley, where Austen applies a moral rationale to who is welcomed to visit and who is not. Mr Bennet is always welcome. Mrs Bennet is not. Lydia is welcome when Wickham is away. Wickham is not.

So, *Pride and Prejudice* has the same dramatic structure as *Sense and Sensibility.* Every Austen novel has the same structure. This creates a problem for those who believe her novels became more complex as she matured as an author. If her dramatic structure remains essentially the same—if the elements of plot prescribed by Aristotle are in each, if Freytag's pyramid can be charted for each—how is her developing literary maturity defined and measured?

5.

After *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen's climaxes continue to be found at each novel's midpoint, although they may not fit our idea of what a climax is (or should be). In *Mansfield Park* it is during the game of Speculation, with Sir Thomas's "little harangue" against Crawford's desire to purchase and improve Thornton Lacey. The unravelling begins after that and the denouement is a long way off. Fanny must still undergo many character-building trials.

In *Emma* it is the arrival of Mrs Elton. While Knightley remains single, the vicar's wife is de facto first lady of Highbury. Emma knows this would be a disaster. That role belongs to her, but she cannot simply arrogate it. She must stop second guessing everyone else's reality, get in touch with her own, and marry Knightley. These are the undercurrents on display at the Crown Ball. Her ultimate *anagnorisis* is a long way off.

In *Persuasion*, it is when Louisa falls from the Cobb in Lyme Regis, whereupon Anne must take charge, since

none of the men present—including Wentworth the putative hero—knows what to do, and all eyes suddenly turn to Anne.

In *Northanger Abbey*, it occurs at the end of Volume 1, when John Thorpe hints at marriage, which Catherine tactfully ignores because her *telos* is marriage to Henry: "the object of expectation, the future good". Her drama is how to avoid being side-tracked by the Thorpes or her Gothic fantasies. She must survive General Tilney.

6.

I now draw this presentation to a close. The subject is large and time is short. I have made three broad points. First, Austen adapted Aristotle's poetics for her own purposes. Second, Classicism grew out of Tragedy, as an exclusively Western form of art. Third, Austen occupies a liminal space between Classicism and Romanticism.

Austen wants us to consider what men and women are for. Do they have what Aristotle calls a *telos*, a goal or purpose, an orientation towards *eudaimonia*—human flourishing—a God or Good towards which their lives are directed? If they do, what does their *telos* look like? If they do not, what does life without *telos* look like? In other words: What is their quid pro quo about? Does it simply happen, or must they do something to make it happen?

Thinking about this in relation to literary maturity means comparing Austen's Juvenilia (where protagonists can bite off fingers) with the novels (where they cannot). It means comparing *Sense and Sensibility* with *Persuasion* and asking whether Anne Elliot's bildungsroman is more complex than Elinor and Marianne Dashwood's. If the answer is Yes, the question becomes: How?

Some of the answers are found at the eponymous White Hart, during one of Austen's signature complex scenes. There is superficial calm but strong emotions are flowing beneath the surface. The subject of Anne's

conversation with Harville, which Wentworth overhears, is female constancy in true love. Without a trace of irony, Anne tells Harville women do not forget the men they truly love as quickly as men forget the women they truly love. Wentworth is sitting near them, quietly writing a letter to Anne that will prove her wrong. Being proven wrong happens a lot in Austen's novels. Why?

Anne reminds Harville about male advantage in storytelling because education has been theirs to a higher degree, and the pen has been in their hands. Yet Wentworth is in the same room, writing a letter to her, and the pen that wrote this passage was firmly in Austen's hands. Whether that irony is any more complex than the ironies of the earlier novels is moot. We can go on debating that forever.

7.

An addendum.

Intriguingly, Margaret Atwood's first published novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969),[3] has the same dramatic structure as Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). If it is unwise to make too much of this—Austen and Atwood seem completely different—it is also unwise to ignore it.

Atwood understands Aristotelian dramaturgy. She was, after all, a postgraduate teacher of literature. The title of her unfinished doctoral dissertation was "Nature and Power in the English Metaphysical Romance of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries".

Atwood's protagonist is an eponymous echo of Austen's. Marianne and Marian are exploring the same question of identity—Who am I?—but in different contexts. Marianne's dilemma is Romantic. Marian's dilemma is Modern. In Austen's novel, the climax, or turning point from the complication to the unravelling

occurs in London, during Marianne's nervous breakdown, when she finally admits to Elinor she was never engaged to Willoughby. In Atwood's novel, it is when Marian, already suffering from an engagement-induced eating disorder, watches her fiancé cutting up a steak, during dinner at a restaurant, and sees it as an image of her identity as his wife.

At the end of *The Edible Woman*, Marian bakes a cake in the shape of a woman and eats it with relish, thus overcoming her eating disorder while making her fiancé disappear. Here Atwood has adapted the archaic practice of "sin eating" to serve her rhetorical purposes.

For Austen, Marianne's nervous breakdown is a result of not interpreting the world "correctly"; that is, misreading Willoughby in ways that suit her Romantic views but are disordered because to Austen they are wrong. For Atwood, Marian's eating disorder is a reaction against attempts to construct her identity, explicitly by Peter her fiancé, implicitly by society more generally.

In addition to the challenges presented by Peter, Marian reacts to the hypothetical challenges of another male character, Duncan. Both men are opposite aspects of what most women want. Peter is stable, consistent, successful, good sex. Duncan is unstable, inconsistent, unsuccessful, bad sex. Peter wants her to evolve into his idea of a perfect woman. Duncan does not want her to evolve into his idea of anything; his role in the story is to help her discover who she really is.

At the end of the novel, Duncan tells Marian the victimhood scenarios she has been imagining are false mental constructs. The only important thing is: "you're back to so-called reality, you're a consumer." The novel ends with Duncan consuming the remainder of the sin-eater cake Marian baked and partly consumed: "Thank you," he says, licking his lips. "It was delicious." Then he leaves.

[1] Aristotle. De Poetica (Poetics) (335 BC). The Basic Works of Aristotle. (Richard McKeon, editor). New York: The Modern Library, 2001. pp. 1454–1487.

[2] Gustave Freytag. Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art (1863). London: Forgotten Books, 2016.

[3] Margaret Atwood. The Edible Woman. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.