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Jane Austen Research Paper

Discerning the Attraction of Jane Austen's Literary Heroes

“In a British survey, women chose Darcy as the literary character they would most like to date” (Ruberto). Julie C., a moderator at the Web site Firthness.com who lives in the United Kingdom stated “Darcy is the utopian ideal man...I think it's the universality of the story that makes it as applicable today as it was when it was first written,” (Ruberto). Jane Austen is one of the most influential, inspirational, and world renowned authors whose works are still enjoyed, read, and loved in the 21st century, more than two hundred years after she published her books. She has helped pave the path for female writers through her intricate plots, charismatic characters, and awe inspiring scenery. The driving force behind her novels is her relatable and understandable heroines. The most famous of the main seven heroines from her six complete novels (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion*) is Elizabeth Bennet; she is passionate, obstinate, and possesses every will of character that a current woman aspires to have. The other heroines, such as Elinor Dashwood, Anne Elliot, and Fanny Price, are quiet in their demeanor and display truly lovely qualities that the women in the Regency period would have loved to express. Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood express attractive sensibility dispositions that endear them to the readers. The women are thoroughly explored, expertly portrayed and convey beautiful additions to the

surrounding plot. There is little doubt in why their stories are so fervently enjoyed throughout the past two hundred years.

The heroes that are portrayed in each story are less obviously understood in the terms of their attraction when relating to 21st century society. Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, Fitzwilliam Darcy, George Knightly, Henry Tilney, Edmund Bertram and Captain Frederick Wentworth are some of the most famous romantic heroes that prevail in English literature. They were considered “ideal gentlemen” of their time period, and are also loved and desired today.

Due to the elitism, hierarchy, and patriarchy reigning in the Regency era, the dominant aspects of these men and their monetary values would have contributed to their attraction; however, this does not explain why their popularity has not diminished due to changing views on societal standards, but has instead continued to grow in popularity. “Individual men and women behave more or less in conformance with the social permissions and prohibitions applied to all men and women, and it is easier for some to conform thus than for others” (Overmann). Mr. Darcy is one of the most loved characters of all time and women today swoon over him and love him as much as when *Pride and Prejudice* was first published, if not more than ever. The time-specific attraction of the classic Jane Austen heroes may not have application today, and their continued attraction that transcends societal pressures have mostly similar constructs. The attraction of the characters that has lasted and grown throughout the two hundred years since the original publication is primarily due to their affection towards the heroine’s family, their passionate speeches of true love, and relatively equal treatment of the heroine herself, perhaps in spite of the heroes’ era-dependent charms.

The concept of “attraction” and the characteristics that a person must possess in order to have the ability to attract others is widely varied, discussed in many mediums, and has shifted in

subtle ways throughout the many changes that society has faced. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is considered an expert device in definitions, and it details how words have altered in connotations over varying years and circumstances. Many of the definitions of “attraction” refer to the scientific aspect of the word, but the one that is most relevant to this context is the seventh listed definition. It states that attraction is “the action of drawing forth interest, affection, or sympathy; the power of so doing; attractive influence” (“attraction, n.”). The term attractive is defined at the sixth definition as “Having the quality of attracting attention, interest, affection, or other pleasurable emotion; interesting, engaging, pleasing, winning, alluring. (Now the most frequent use.)” (“attractive, adj. and n.”). These are the bases of connotations for the words “attraction” and “attractive” that are used when understanding the characteristics that the classic Jane Austen heroes and the aspects of their character description, actions and behaviors, and overarching decision making in relevance to the plot of the novel and treatment of the heroine.

Jane Austen’s first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, contains two heroines, Elinor and Marianne, and therefore, two heroes, Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon. Neither of these heroes are enormously popular within today’s media. It is unlikely for one to find decorative items with either of these men’s names knitted on them, because “Marianne's admirers and Elinor's partisans alike admit that Edward, who because of his secret engagement must remain a distant and shadowy figure, is flat and uninteresting” and “readers of both sexes generally bemoan Austen's pairing of Marianne in the conclusion with staid, middle-aged Colonel Brandon in his flannel waistcoats” (Morrison). However, it is possible that these men were never meant as attractive characters, even when they were first introduced within the Regency time period.

Edward Ferrars is described as “not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing” (“*Sense and Sensibility*” 53), which implies that he is not the typical,

eloquent, and rich hero that is usually encountered in order to rescue the heroine from her life of poverty. According to Muñoz-Reyes' article on what people find attractive according to facial features states that "facial fluctuating asymmetry, facial averageness, facial sexual dimorphism, and facial maturity" are important features when judging attractiveness of another person.

Edward Ferrars lacks classically handsome looks, which would not provide him with much popularity today. He may have experienced more popularity during the Regency period because of the difference in the importance of some attributes.

Colonel Brandon is also not described as handsome simply because he is much older than the heroines, and is therefore not considered as an acceptable love option for the beginning portion of the novel. He has an age difference of eighteen years with Marianne, and this is now understood as radical and extreme. However, this is an accepted and popular age difference between people in the Regency period. Men could only start married lives after they are established and own a living that can provide for an entire family, which sometimes means that the men are older than twenty-five when they decide that marriage is an acceptable undertaking.

Women must marry in order to have any financial stability after leaving her parent's house and living in dependency. A woman must move from the patriarchy of her father to that of her husband, and this is depicted through the average age of women, eighteen years younger than the man, when getting married in the Regency era. Colonel Brandon is considered attractive when his passion for Marianne shows, and when he displays genuine care over those he considers dear, such as his sister's daughter. These attributes give him more accreditation as a romantic Austen's hero and he is often more well-liked than Edward Ferrars, Elinor's love interest in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Even though Edward Ferrars is an Austen's hero and is thoroughly loved and respected when reading his personality through Elinor's smitten perspective, he is not someone that would stimulate much excitement today, where money and finances are not the only requirement for men in order to marry well. Elinor is attracted to him because of his love for reading and careful mannerisms that cause Elinor to believe that he is truly in love with her. However, Marianne, the more loved character between the two heroines (Morrison), protests that although Edward Ferrars is "very amiable" (*Sense and Sensibility* 55), his "eyes want all the spirit, that fire, which at once announce virtue and intelligence...he has no real taste" (*Sense and Sensibility* 55). This implies that passion and taste are the true measures of attraction for the Regency period, according to Marianne.

The definition of taste, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is "The sense of what is appropriate, harmonious, or beautiful; esp. discernment and appreciation of the beautiful in nature or art; spec. the faculty of perceiving and enjoying what is excellent in art, literature, and the like ("taste, n.1"). This is emphasized as an important characteristic for men to possess in many of Jane Austen's novels. Men with no taste usually have tactless personalities and are not able to converse correctly with women, or of people of a higher societal hierarchy.

Although Edward Ferrars may not display such taste, the elusive quality is a known characteristic of a few Austen heroes, and it is most typical used to contrast characters according to their social class. George Knightly, the love interest in *Emma*, is one of the richest, oldest, and most accomplished of all of the Austen heroes. His taste is always described as immaculate and Emma constantly compares every man she meets to his standard. Mr. Knightly is meant to characterize the ideal man, even more so than Mr. Darcy, the love interest of *Pride and*

Prejudice, because he is not only rich and accomplished but charming, caring, and loving regardless of flaws or faults.

There are some people who may view Mr. Knightly as “too stuffy for lively Emma” (Morrison), or too old for her due to their sixteen year age gap. However, he is one of the more genuinely kind heroes. This is shown through his treatment of characters besides Emma, and despite the fact that she is the main heroine. Mr. Knightly treats Mrs. and Ms. Bates with the upmost respect and kindness, even though they are lower in class. He also regards Jane Fairfax with fairness and caring, despite her unfortunate familial life. These aspects of Mr. Knightly would lead to his attractiveness and popularity today, because many people believe that the real personality of a person is derived when one can see them interact with people less well off than themselves.

Pride and Prejudice's Mr. Darcy is comparable to Mr. Knightly on many levels based on their wealth and accomplishments. However, Mr. Darcy is not as accepting of people as Mr. Knightly is. There are many instances in which Mr. Darcy displays direct prejudice against those he deems as “inferior” to himself and his companions. He refuses to dance with women of lower classes, and he actively looks down on Elizabeth’s family because of their vulgarity and want of propriety. Mr. Knightly provides for those with less than himself, such as apples for the Bates’, which were given from the goodness of his heart. Some speculate that Mr. Darcy’s grand gesture of kindness, paying for Lydia Bennett’s wedding to Mr. Wickham and paying for his commission, was meant to accomplish the selfish purpose of acquiring Elizabeth’s good favor. Mr. Darcy requires “a love that is active, generous, giving, and forgiving” (Hodges), in order to move past his tendency to resent those with power over him, which is shown when he does not receive Elizabeth’s rejection well at his first proposal.

Based on these perspectives of each hero's characters and motives, one would believe Mr. Knightly as the more popular hero in both the Regency period and today's era. However, Mr. Darcy's charm is embedded in the classic Cinderella tale of elevating a woman from poverty into a "princess" through a marriage of true love, which has mesmerized the masses since it was first published. Emma technically does go up in class when she married Mr. Knightly, but she had quite the yearly fortune and would never have experienced poverty if she were to never had married. Elizabeth needed to marry in order to have a house to live in when her father dies and in order to take care of her many other unmarried sisters. The conditions are of a different caliber, and Mr. Darcy is ultimately viewed as the most wonderful Austen hero because he inadvertently "rescues" Elizabeth from her low societal class. "...economic fundament is essential security for their successful marriage" (Gao), and women today also want men to provide for them and take care of them financially. This is still an important and relevant aspect to relationships in the twenty-first century, and the theme of financial security in a potential partner may contribute to the overwhelming popularity of Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy is still loved and revered because of the sustained love for the romantic "Cinderella" aspects of *Pride and Prejudice*. However, there are other heroes who may should have more popularity today than they did in the Regency period. Henry Tilney is the prominent hero depicted in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, her youngest novel when compared to written works, but one of her last published. He has never had the popularity of the other Austen heroes. The novel itself is often overlooked and forgotten, even if one is a huge fan of Austen's works.

Although Henry Tilney is not receiving his laurels of popularity just yet, he has some of the most contemporary views, and in many cases, equalized gender opinions. Henry Tilney does not assume Catherine is unable to understand him due to her age, sex, or lower societal status. He

treats her as a lady, and he also, in some cases, treats her as an equal. He teaches Catherine how to view nature, and often discusses the importance of reading novels with her as someone with more knowledge due to age and opportunity, but is not condescending when sharing his ideas with her or with his sister, Eleanor.

Henry Tilney's popularity would stem from his equalized treatment and willingness to discuss matters with women. Catherine is also one of the more progressive heroines because of her lack of insecurities. She knew that Henry Tilney loved her and never doubted that they would marry due to matters such as her social status or his father's possible refusal to bless them. She may well have the title of the most relatable heroine among contemporary readers, and Henry Tilney may therefore describe the most promising of all of the heroes to have a more fulfilled and happy marriage due to his respect for women and their opinions. Women today still struggle with sexism, which has always existed, and the desiring of equal treatment in many aspects of society. This lends Henry Tilney more deserved popularity because of his willingness to converse with women the same as men. He never looked down on Catherine's opinions and often thought that many of them had merit and good understanding. On the subject of men not reading novels because they, according to Catherine, "despised novels amazingly" (*Northanger Abbey* 121), Henry Tilney commented, "It is amazing; it may well suggest *amazement* if they do- for they read nearly as many as women" (*Northanger Abbey* 121). Therefore he deserves to have more popularity today than he did in the Regency period because of his progressive treatment of women as equals and belief in their opinions and thoughts as important. These characteristics are extremely important to most women in the twenty-first century, and he should have more popularity as a Jane Austen hero because of these attributes.

The least promising husband in terms of an equal marriage and loving relationship, according to current standards, is Edmund Bertram, the hero of *Mansfield Park*. He is perhaps not well liked because of his stuffy personality and condescending attitude towards the heroine, Fanny Price. She loves him throughout the entire novel and is one of the most loyal of heroines, second only to *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot. However, Edmund spends the majority of the novel in love with Mary Crawford, the conniving woman who shows off her charms and accomplishments in the effort of winning a husband with a large fortune. Even though she is not as virtuous or kind as Fanny, who has "not only has mastered an active set of moral principles that, thoughtfully applied, allow her to respect and balance her duties to herself and to her wider community but also has become able to think abstractly about the nature of universal good" (Graham). Edmund is still bewitched and proclaims his love for Miss Crawford despite her many erroneous comments and horrible choice of words that degrade his future profession as a clergyman because of "the liveliness, wit, forthrightness, and physical vigor seen in the Crawford siblings, Henry and Mary" (Graham).

Edmund's shallowness may contribute to his lack of popularity. Today's women prefer someone who loves the personality of their partner as much, or more than, the physicality. This may have also proven important for women of the Regency period, but they had less choice in regards to their marriage. Edmund eventually does marry Fanny because he feels comfort from her personality and knows that they should always understand each other, but this thought process is only revealed because Mary Crawford rejects Edmund and he had to find a new choice for a bride. His convenient choice was Fanny, and this would greatly decrease his intended popularity today, because instead of empathizing Fanny's importance and wonderful attributes, she was ultimately the second best option of bride next to Mary Crawford.

Edmund is also not nearly as kind as he may first appear in the novel. Fanny is not a reliable narrator when it comes to Edmund because she has always admired and loved him. She does not always realize how undermined she is when speaking to him. When she wanted to talk to him of her difficulties involving Henry Crawford's proposal, instead turned the conversation to focus on himself, "No wonder-you must feel it-you must suffer. How a man who had once loved, could desert you! But *your's*-your regard was new compared with-Fanny, think of *me!*" (*Mansfield Park* 444). His selfishness when only thinking of himself is evidence for his lack of attractiveness and fame when compared to other Austen heroes.

One of the most romantic of Austen's heroes is Captain Frederick Wentworth from her last complete novel *Persuasion*. Jocelyn Harris argues that Captain Wentworth is "based at least in part on Francis Austen, Jane's brother and a naval war hero" (Vandersluis). Therefore, Austen tried to impact qualities that she revered and loved from her heroic brother into Wentworth's character. This implies that he is meant to have attractive qualities based on true masculine heroics.

Captain Wentworth's success is described as a result of his "genius and ardour had seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path" (*Persuasion* 68). His is different from the other heroes because much of Anne's attraction towards Captain Wentworth was his personality, and not wealth. He did not have the advantage of wealth, and therefore only had his "full of life and ardour" (*Persuasion* 66), personality to give credit towards his marriage proposal. This is the one marriage where the heroine does not benefit financially or move up on the social ladder, which allows more credit towards Captain Wentworth's kindness and Anne's love.

The main aspect of *Persuasion* that leads to Captain Wentworth's attractiveness today is his choosing Anne, the older, twenty-seven year old spinster, over the younger and livelier women. There is a stigma against older women that has prevailed to even the twenty-first century. Women are considered less attractive the older they are. This is displayed in popular media where older women are often the subject of marriage jokes and are considered sad and lonely. Captain Wentworth's decision to love Anne even though she is past typical marriageable age, and even though there are other, younger, women available around him, makes him one of the heroes that should prevail today and have overwhelming popularity with contemporary readers. It is possible to consider that *Persuasion* "is less the story of the ascendancy of Captain Wentworth than of his domestication into conventionally female ways of knowing" (Walzer), which contributes to his understanding qualities that leads to his attracting more female fans with his sentimentality and forgiving nature.

The Austen heroes as a group are a large portion of the romantic heroes that are still beloved today, around the world and in many different formats. It is difficult to speculate which heroes were meant to attract and which were not due to Austen's spectacular social commentary that is present in each of her novels, however it is not hard to see which heroes are popular today and what aspects of their personalities contribute to this blatant fame. Colonel Brandon's persistence and calmness, Mr. Darcy's wealth and stoic manner, Mr. Knightley's generosity and patience, and Captain Wentworth's constancy and forgiveness convey their attractiveness and their deserving of popularity. Henry Tilney should have more popularity than he does because he is able to treat women fairly and with respect, which are attributes that are coveted today. Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram are the two heroes with the least popularity and love through history and today. They both lack excitement and passion. Edward Ferrars keeps secrets,

and Edmund Bertram would rather have married Mary Crawford over Fanny Price, the heroine. These aspects lead many Austen fans to dislike them because those qualities are unattractive.

The time period always greatly influences the popularity of each character because different characteristics are revered during the Regency period in comparison to today. The characters with more progressive attitudes toward treatment of women should have more popularity today than they did when they were first published, and the characters with less likeable and agreeable characteristics would not have much popularity today in comparison to the Regency period. Although it is true that Mr. Darcy's popularity, although perhaps baseless due to his unapproachable personality and unhappy disposition, reigns in comparison to the other heroes in both time periods, proving how similar the culture still is and how little certain aspects of society have truly changed. *Pride and Prejudice* was the most popular novel among Austen's family and friends, and is still her most famous and loved novel today, which demonstrates some of the unchanging values that are still considered important today in terms of love, marriage, and a potential spouse.

Regardless of the heroes intended popularity, or unexpected attractive qualities, each hero marries their heroine, and every misunderstanding is cleared up at the end of each Austen novel. The reader appreciates each hero for who they are and how they treat the heroine, and the heroine always falls deeply in love and lives a life of relative happiness. No matter whether someone is reading Jane Austen in the twenty-first century or the Regency era, the reader will have their heart moved due to the beautiful plot, inspiring heroines, and dashing heroes of varying popularity and attractiveness.

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