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SISTERHOOD AND SOLIDARITY: EXPLORING EVOLVING BONDS IN JANE AUSTEN'S NOVELS

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most profound relationships that Jane Austen brings to life in her novels is sisterhood. Drawing from the letters Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra exchanged, we glimpse a bond characterized by mutual support and affection. In her “Letters” chapter, Le Faye reveals how Cassandra carefully preserved some of their letters while discreetly disposing of others: “It would seem that Cassandra’s censorship was to ensure that these younger nieces did not read any of Jane Austen’s sometimes acid or forthright comments” (33-40). Cassandra’s actions demonstrate her immense respect for her sister, Jane, and her desire to safeguard her legacy. Their profound relationship endured throughout their lives, as later confirmed by Cassandra when she described what Jane meant to her after her death: “The sun of my life, the gilder of every pleasure, the soother of every sorrow, I had not a thought concealed from her” (Austen 1817).

Despite Jane and Cassandra’s different personalities, “Cassandra had the merit of having her temper always under command, but...Jane had the happiness of a temper that never required to be commanded” (Austen-Leigh), the sisters’ relationship was characterized by affection and unwavering support, as revealed by their letters. Unsurprisingly, Austen includes the theme of sisterhood in her novels. Cohen states: “Austen has embraced the idea of using sisters so enthusiastically that she will not stop with the five daughters in the Bennet household but will construct relationships that imitate those of sisters among all women in the book” (111).

Nevertheless, the sisters’ relationships in Austen’s novels are not always a mirror image of the stable bond that Jane and Cassandra shared. As we delve into Austen’s enduring works, we uncover sisterhood’s intricate

nature and complexity with imperfect relationships. Furthermore, Austen’s novels emphasize the resilience and strength of women in the face of hardship and isolation. Despite the adversities and tribulations that her characters face, the bonds of sisterhood endure, ultimately fortifying each other in solidarity. This resilience and unwavering support are a testament to the enduring power of sisterhood, both in Austen’s world and ours. Austen’s genuine and authentic relationships echo the past and the profound relevance of sisterhood in contemporary women’s lives.

THE BENNET SISTERS AND THE POWER OF OVERCOMING SILENCE

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen explores diverse aspects of womanhood, including love, marriage, independence, and societal expectations. The sisters’ unlikely personalities and aspirations are a significant part of the novel. In her work *Novel Relations*, Perry points out the importance of sister relationships in the book: “The entire social fabric of *Pride and Prejudice* is constructed out of sister relationships, from the five Bennet sisters and Mr. Bingley’s two sisters...to Mrs. Bennet’s sister Mrs. Phillips and her sister-in-law Mrs. Gardiner...The social world of this novel could not exist if it were not for the sister tie” (118). However, the dynamic within the Bennet sisterhood reveals the difficulties of relationships, where confidentiality can be overshadowed by holding back emotions, leading to misunderstandings and stopping them from reaching their full potential.

We observe how important it was for Austen to portray relationships going through challenges and adversities and, most importantly, how to emerge from them triumphantly. While Elizabeth and Jane initially appear close, their hesitation to share significant details in their lives cultivates

misconceptions. May writes: “The sisters frequently engage in intentional concealment to avoid topics that would be painful to the other” (10). Despite moments of shared joy, Jane is reluctant to fully reveal her innermost feelings to Elizabeth, which is evident when she returns from London and is safeguarded after pursuing Mr. Bingley. Furthermore, Jane knows her sister’s character and how she “jumps to wrong conclusions,” differentiating her from her personality. In her “Considering Jane Bennet – and her Sisters” article, Birchall states that “Jane does not argue (after seeing her parents’ arguments all her life, arguing is not a thing she does), but though saying little, she thinks rightly all along, showing some perspicacity.” Additionally, Elizabeth decides to conceal from Jane her encounter with Mr. Darcy, where they discuss her relationship with Mr. Bingley. She defends her sister’s character against Mr. Darcy’s words, ultimately rejecting his proposal, “You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it” (Austen 687). The lack of communication and secrecy between the sisters causes misunderstandings that Austen uses to portray a society where women stay silent and value propriety over sentimentalism. When Jane finally discovers the encounter between Elizabeth and Darcy, she does not refrain from expressing her disappointment to her sister, “But Lizzy, you have been very sly, very reserved with me. How little did you tell me of what passed at Pemberley and Lambton!” (822).

Among all the tumultuous, we witness their love when Elizabeth promptly walks to Netherfield after learning that her sister fell ill. Despite Elizabeth being younger than Jane, she has a protective nature that emerges as she is determined to be by Jane’s side without caring about societal manners and expectations. Hannaford observes how “Elizabeth ignores social boundaries out of love for Jane’s well-

being; cynicism is absent as Elizabeth adheres to her heart, not to her mind.” Elizabeth enters the scene with prejudices about the Bingley sisters and is determined not to allow them to mistreat Jane. Despite the sisters’ differences and struggles, their deep affection transcends external pressures, reinforcing their relationship and advocating for each other.

Austen shows genuine and natural relationships between sisters who overcome difficulties but ultimately evolve and come together. They provide emotional support when women are left behind and without assistance. Sisters and women’s relationships in Austen’s novels are as significant as they are in our actual times. The support of sisterhood and womanhood is essential for the development and progress of the individuals within society. Relationships play a vital role in our well-being. Harvard Medical School states in their article “Strengthen Relationships for Longer, Healthier Life” that we not only find pleasure in social connections and relationships but also affect our long-term health, providing confidence, motivation, and happiness.

Not all the women’s relationships in Austen’s novels demonstrate their support for each other. The Bingley sisters display a different relationship since their motive is to stop Jane Bennet from joining their family. Through this female character archetype, Austen demonstrates the complexities of interactions among women. In our days, we have seen progress in promoting womanhood bonds and addressing gaps to help women feel supported. Jane Austen showed us the importance of women’s relationships and how crucial they are during times of difficulty. As those relationships evolve to the present, we continue to build up women’s bonds by creating safe places and providing opportunities to share challenges and successes without judgment.

THE DASHWOOD SISTERS AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF NEW ROLES

We identify similar relationships to those of the Bennet sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*. Although the Dashwood sisters seem to have the closest bond of all of those in Austen's novels, they have a relationship in much need of empathy and understanding after grieving the loss of their father. Their family roles when their father was alive have changed. Elinor, the oldest sister, immediately takes charge of the family. In her article "Although We Can Observe You No Longer: Death and the Dashwood Family," Karoub defines Elinor's role as "a job that would have belonged to the patriarch of the family: Elinor dives into this role without hesitation." Nonetheless, this causes discord and misunderstandings between the sisters as they take on their new responsibilities. Losing a parent brings significant changes to the family dynamics as sibling relationships are greatly affected by this traumatic event since "the parent is the link between them" (Rosenthal 965-74).

Furthermore, Marianne's dramatic actions significantly affect her relationship with her sister, as suggested by Brodey in his *Adventures of a Female Werther: Jane Austen's Revision of Sensibility* journal: "In other words, it is Marianne's histrionic misery... that alienates and isolates Elinor. For the sake of an unattainable ideal of universal sincerity, Marianne hampers intimacy where it naturally exists between the two sisters" (120). Elinor and Marianne's moral differences greatly affect their understanding of each other. Elinor is reserved and conceals her emotions for Edward, unlike Marianne, who freely expresses herself around Willoughby, disregarding appearance and social etiquette. Elinor is afraid to ask Marianne about Willoughby; instead, she discusses it with their mother, "I long to inquire, but how will my interference

be borne!" (Austen 264). Although Elinor will never behave like Marianne and let her emotions control her, and Marianne will never behave with the same reasonableness as Elinor, they eventually accept each other as their sisterhood bond remains unbreakable.

In her book *Jane Austen: Women, the Politics, and the Novel*, Claudia Johnson argues Marianne's "independence" when she says, "If Marianne has resisted the codes which not only require but reward calculator and cold-heartedness, she has submitted without resistance to those who dictate desolation and very nearly death as the price of feeling" (50). This interpretation underlines the complexity of Marianne's character and its effect on her relationship with her sister. As Elinor might not have initially understood Marianne's feelings and interpreted them as rebellion, she ultimately empathizes with her pain, helping her overcome the betrayal of her loved one: "Her sister's affliction was indubitable, and she thought with the tenderest compassion of that violent sorrow which Marianne was in all probability not giving way to as a relief but feeding and encouraging as a duty" (Austen 177). Elinor empathizes with Marianne's situation unaware that she would face a similar trial later. Marianne feels her sister's genuine act, which strengthens their bond: "drew near, but without saying a word; and seating herself on the bed, took her hand, kissed her affectionately several times, and then gave way to a burst of tears, which at first was scarcely less violent than Marianne's" (Austen 280). In the end, they provide mutual support and move beyond their pain and affliction, "in her sister's happiness [she] forgot for a time her disappointment" (Austen 186). Furthermore, they reach a stage where they understand each other's perspectives and feel at ease confiding in one another: "...shall we ever talk on that subject, Elinor?... Or will it be wrong? I can talk of it now; I hope as I ought to do." Elinor

tenderly invited her to be open” (Austen 443).

Just as Elizabeth and Jane overcome their secrecy issues and resolve their misunderstanding, Elinor and Marianne’s bond evolves to the point where they find themselves in the most beautiful and vital relationship they ever had. Austen shows the importance of sisters and women’s relationships in a male-dominated world where they did not have the support of the system and often found themselves isolated in a place with a “dominant ideology of its time for privileging the greedy, mean-spirited, and pedestrian” (Johnson 50).

SISTERHOOD BONDS BEYOND FAMILY

Austen’s interest in sisterhood and family relationships persists in all her novels; however, she portrays sister bonds as almost non-existent in *Persuasion*. Despite having two sisters, Anne Elliot is isolated and abused by them. Anne and her sister Mary have established a patient-caregiver relationship as Anne looks after her and her children whenever it is demanded of her. In her article “Professional Persuasion: Dr. Anne Elliot,” McLean compares Anne to a doctor when she describes the scene on the Cobbs: “She shows the clear-headed skill, control, ability, and knowledge we expect from a doctor. She is firm but calm under extreme pressure while all those around her, even seasoned naval officers, fall apart.” Unlike her sisters, she is a reliable woman who puts other’s needs before hers. Having very little in common, the sister’s relationship does not evolve much throughout the novel.

Mary Elliot constantly expresses her concerns about being left behind without Anne, “I cannot possibly do without Anne,” to which Elizabeth Elliot replies, “Then I am sure Anne had better stay, for nobody will want her in Bath” (Austen 1919). Following her father’s

vanity and arrogance, Elizabeth is only preoccupied with her societal status, putting social connections over her relationship with her sisters. Consequently, Anne develops an affectionate relationship with the Musgrove sisters, Mary’s sisters-in-law. Unlike Mary’s convenient relationship with Anne, Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove are close and confident with each other in a selfless way, showing a young and playful relationship. They have not yet reached an emotional and intimate level due to their young age and societal experience. The only thing that could interfere between Henrietta and Louisa is their interest in the same man, “And, in short, he had looked and said everything with such exquisite grace that they could assure them all their heads were both turned by him!” (Austen 1940). However, that does not seem to be the case, as their relationship appears to prioritize themselves, ending their temporary infatuation towards Captain Wentworth.

Anne witnesses Henrietta and Louisa’s interactions with Wentworth, quietly fighting her emotions as she reminisces about her past love for the captain. Instead of finding support from either of her sisters, Anne finds companionship with Lady Russell and her widowed friend, Mrs. Smith. Austen demonstrates through other relationships the importance of seeking emotional support beyond the confines of the family. Although Mrs. Smith is cast away from society due to her position as a widower and financial situation, Anne oversees the situation while prioritizing her relationship with her friend and confiding in each other despite her father’s disapproval: “a mere Mrs. Smith, an every-day Mrs. Smith, of all people and all names in the world . . . Mrs. Smith! Such a name!” (Austen 1919). Hall brings up an excellent point when she states in her article “A View from Confinement: Persuasion is Resourceful Mrs. Smith” the following: “Thus,

beyond the mere plot device of giving Anne information about Mr. Elliot, Mrs. Smith shows Anne the reality she might have faced as a widow without money or family support” (5). Anne finds comfort from her friend, but most importantly, she gains a perspective on women’s despair and sorrow during a time when society marginalized the less fortunate. Anne excels at the novel’s end as a mature and independent woman supported by significant female figures who play a critical role in her growth.

CONCLUSION

Sisterhood in Jane Austen played a significant role as the female characters overcame challenges and adversities by bonding with their sisters and other female characters and supporting each other emotionally and physically. Austen portrayed genuine relationships with flaws, adding depth and authenticity to her female characters and interactions. Women endured many tribulations during Austen’s time trying to find their place in society and within their families. Many came out triumphant, but not before they demonstrated significant growth and the immense capacity to be independent in a world dominated by men. Austen identifies the source of sisterly success in its feminine nurturing, fellowship, and affection conditions. With this representation of sisterhood, Austen supports sisterhood bonds

while advocating for selfless conduct and their well-being. Her portrayal of women’s relationships, with their strengths and imperfections, resonates deeply as the need for female connection transcends time.

Women’s bonds were essential to enduring societal constraints and achieving an individual’s potential in Austen’s era and continue to be crucial in our times. Relationships have evolved, and there is a growing recognition of women’s impact on each other and the world. However, we live in a society where women still feel isolated due to social constraints and expectations, economic difficulties, and individual struggles. The power of female relationships and solidarity continues to be a source of strength and inspiration for women navigating a complex world of social pressures that can strain these bonds.

Cultivating solid relationships through friendships, mentorship programs, and communities can foster a sense of belonging, confidence, and resilience and help women thrive in various aspects of their lives. Drawing from Jane Austen’s personal experience, who found solace in relationships and writing to cope with isolation, our society must continue to provide opportunities for women to support each other and eliminate the limitations impeding their abilities, empowering them to progress and acknowledge their entire potential.

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