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THE FEMALE CHARACTER
IN JANE AUSTEN’S NOVELS
AND IN THEIR SCREENINGS

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Preliminaries

This paper is entitled *The Female Character in Jane Austen's Novels and in Their Screenings* and constitutes an interdisciplinary approach of Jane Austen's work. As the title states, the central theme of this paper is the female character that is analyzed from two perspectives: as a literary character and as a cinematic transposition.

The choice of this theme has primarily a personal motivation that comes from my passion for the feminine prose of the beginning of the 19th century and especially for the novels of the British writer Jane Austen, which were my favorite reading over time. Another aspect that caught my attention and brought me into this area of study is the interest of the filmmakers for the writer's novels and the unprecedented phenomenon represented by Jane Austen in terms of screening of classic novels. Since 1940 until today, her work has given rise to more than 40 screenings and modern reinterpretations.

Following the screenings made over time and drawing a parallel between European and American productions, I noticed the varied way in which the female character is represented in these productions. Transformations arising in the process of screening at the level of characters and how they affect the overall perception of the work, as well as the perception of the whole social and cultural context, are the starting point of this paper.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, a first introductory chapter, followed by three chapters that approach the literary character in the fiction of Jane Austen, the television and film screening and the particularities of this process; the work ends with a chapter devoted to a detailed analysis of the transposition of the literary character in film.

Chapter I

The first chapter, *Jane Austen in the Context of the Early Feminism. The Female Character between Traditionalism and Feminism*, aims at creating a picture of the context in which Jane Austen's novels came out. The function of this chapter is to provide a theoretical basis of the paper. Considering the interdisciplinary character of my thesis, in order to understand the mechanisms of transposition of the text into film, I considered essential to have a thorough knowledge of the environment and of the factors that influenced the novelist's fiction.

In the opening of this chapter I realized a short presentation of how modern media of the 20th and 21st century influenced the reception of Jane Austen's work; I also took into consideration its incorporation in the contemporary culture, up to a complete reinterpretation of her novels through numerous screenings and television series, and sometimes extravagant modern adaptations of her novels, biographical adaptations, as well as the intense work done on the internet.

Another important aspect that I have developed in this first chapter was the historical context in which Jane Austen lived and created and how this influenced her literary creation. In this respect, it is important to notice that British feminist trends of the late 18th century did not occur in a historical vacuum, but grew up into a more general context of crisis, in connection with major historical events of the time – as the French Revolution or the Napoleonic wars – and is determined by the specific social, political, economic and cultural aspects of the society. Literature was for women of that society the main vehicle through which they could engage themselves into the social and political life, removing the constraints imposed by society.

Another aspect that I considered in this introductory chapter was that of the correct historical positioning of Jane Austen in the context of the debates of her time about the role and position of women in society. Jane Austen's literature has been the subject of ongoing debates about the extent to which it reflects feminist trends of that time, given the fact that her whole work presents aspects related to the positioning of women in society and the limitations they faced, or, in contrast, it is a profoundly traditional fiction, due to its attitude regarding relationships between men and women.

For a comprehensive contextualization of Jane Austen's work, in the last subchapter I analyzed the book market of the early 19th century and the fundamental role it played in the formation and crystallization of the novel as a genre, in the exceptional development of fiction written by women and, consequently, in the publication and reception of Jane Austen's novels. The last part of this subchapter was devoted to factors that contributed to the construction of the female fictional character in the novels of Jane Austen.

Jane Austen's novels and their characters are a hybrid between traditionalism and feminism, between realism and romance, or perhaps more accurately, form of realism tempered by romance, a form essentially conservative. Any criticism of women's dependence coexists

with traditional social structures through which the dependence is maintained; this feature is fundamental to Jane Austen's fiction.

Chapter II

The purpose of the second chapter, *The Construction of Literary Female Character in Jane Austen's Fiction*, is, as the title states, to provide a detailed presentation of the construction of female fictional character in Jane Austen's novels. For a better exposure of the issues researched in this paper, I considered compulsory to understand two key-concepts that form the basis of Jane Austen's fiction: the social and the moral network. Jane Austen's work coincides to a period of the British culture in which there was a general consensus on the elements that constituted a moral life. Understanding the interaction between morality and social norms –how morality was reflected into the society and how society, in turn, influenced the moral norms – is essential for contextualizing the work of Jane Austen.

In the first part of this chapter I reviewed an index of the key moral concepts of Jane Austen's novels: *morality, ethics, respect, compassion, decency, honesty, modesty, responsibility*. In order to emphasize the major interactions between morality and society, I made a succinct analysis of the novels *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of characters situated at the intersection of two axes – social position and moral behavior. Another aspect analyzed was the relationship between wealth, as a significant factor in the construction of relationships between individual and society, and the social responsibility of the people holding these fortunes.

The second part of the chapter is an analysis of female characters in Jane Austen's novels and their classification according to the identity typologies. All Jane Austen's novels are investigations of the inner universe, novels of female education, in which the heroines learn how to build a more accurate perception of the world and how to better understand human nature and society. Although the writer's novels are built around romance, love in Jane Austen's fiction is an appeal to rationality, has a pedagogical dimension, involving a form of self-awareness and maturity. Each novel presents a different type of heroine and a different approach of their issues. However, I considered the classification of Jane Austen's female characters into two categories; the classification does not affect any of the heroines' individuality: a first category is that of the

vivacious, exuberant heroine, category in which I placed Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood, while the second category consists of silent, introvert female characters, such as Elinor Dashwood, Fanny Price and Anne Elliot.

Elizabeth, Emma and Marianne are intelligent, spiritual, ironic, sometimes too secure for their own judgment, which is why mistakes occur in their relationships with others and with themselves. Elizabeth needs to learn to temper her ironic spirit, to listen to her own reason and to analyze in depth the situations and people around her in order to base her opinions on reason and not on prejudice. Although different as mentality and behavior, Marianne and Emma have in common the need to understand the role of affection in their personal life and how vanity, in the case of Emma and sentimentality, in the case of Marianne, can affect their happiness.

Although less exteriorized, spontaneous and apparently less ironic and charming, Elinor, Fanny and Anne capture the interest of readers through their strength of character, honesty, intelligence, reason and moral force they exhibit. The three heroines are neither lifeless, nor passive. Their liveliness takes place at the level of their thought, as they are tempered personalities, with a high degree of questioning. They are not in a position of going through a stage of maturity in order to become aware of their own weaknesses and mistakes and modify their behavior accordingly. The heroines of the three novels are already mature and responsible, their character is already formed; the main problem they have to face is the moral and emotional consistency according to the expectations of their society. Although they are well educated and have strong moral principles, the three heroines encounter difficulties in maintaining their moral rectitude when they are surrounded by people who put pressure on them to comply with society's expectations.

Chapter III

The third chapter, *The Literary Text and the Screening. The Reflection of Jane Austen's Novels into Film and Television Adaptations*, treats in detail the transition from literature to film, the advantages, disadvantages, difficulties and innovative nature of this process.

The first part of the chapter is theoretical, intended to explain the phenomenon of the film and television adaptation, focusing on the issue of the relationship between original and adaptation, respectively of the fidelity of the screening to the literary source. This aspect has

been developed in two subchapters that approached the screenings of the novels *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) and *Mansfield Park* (1999).

Sense and Sensibility is the perfect example of a novel that is fit for a successful film adaptation due to its captivating plot with interesting characters, its charming heroines and thrilling end. The screening made in 1995 by Columbia Pictures, in collaboration with Mirage, based on Emma Thompson's screenplay and directed by the American Ang Lee is a faithful adaptation model.

Mansfield Park is an opposite case. The novel has a relatively limited and monotonous action and the heroine of the story is introverted and shy, which would be an issue when transposing her into a film heroine. The adaptation produced by Miramax and BBC Films in 1999, directed by Patricia Rozema, raised perhaps the most fervent discussions regarding the lack of fidelity to the literary source, at the level of action, characters and message. Action is repositioned in a new context by developing the subject of slavery as a central theme of the film; for this reason, the main female character of the novel was basically recreated to fit in this new context and to meet the expectations of the audience at the end of the 20th century.

The last part of the chapter approaches the television adaptations and how the public role of television – to inform and educate – influences the translation of literature into film. To illustrate this point I have chosen to present two screenings made by BBC – *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) and *Sense and Sensibility* (2008).

The conclusion that emerges is that there is no cohesive theory on the cinematography art and even less on the screening. One might say that there is both an obvious compatibility and a hidden hostility between novel and film. Film adaptation seems to be a domain in the process of shaping and individualization, and is therefore open to theorizing, being a set of assumptions in the process of being explored, rather than a clearly defined field. There is no doubt that the meeting between literature and cinema is fruitful in terms of picture-word symbiosis, but the limits of these interferences cannot be neglected either.

Chapter IV

The last chapter of this paper, *Issues Concerning the Female Character and Its Transposition from Literature into Film*, approaches the transformations that take place at the

level of characters in the transposition of Jane Austen's novels into films or television productions. The chapter is divided into two distinct sections. In the first part I addressed chronologically the screenings of the six novels, focusing on the portrayal of the female character. I analyzed, on the one hand, how the social and historical context influenced the transposition of the fictional character into film, on the other hand, the influence that filmmakers have on public perception of Jane Austen's heroines and of her work as a whole.

In the second section I analyzed three recent film productions – *Persuasion* (1995), *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) – in terms of how the filmmakers undermined the feminist character of Jane Austen's heroines, by adjusting the female characters to modern media or by adapting their values to the contemporary society.

The first example exposed in this respect is the transposition of the supporting character Elizabeth Elliot in the film adaptation of the novel *Persuasion* made in 1995. The way this character was rebuilt by the screenwriter Nick Dear indicates that the screenwriter overlooked the key issues related to the position of women in the society of early 19th century, when a woman belonging to the Nobility could never adopt an indolent behavior. In the reality of the 19th century, women faced strong pressure concerning their behavior and their image in society and they would never express frustration about their social limitations. Nick Dear's adaptation highlights the opposite of this historical reality.

The second screening that I analyzed is *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), based on Deborrah Moggach's script. In this case, my analysis focused on the main character, Elizabeth Bennet. The heroine recreated by Deborrah Moggach and whose part was acted by Keira Knightley is insolent, uncivil and insensitive. She behaves with superiority, even with her own family and has an attitude and a vocabulary that would never have been tolerated by the society of that time. Again, the screenwriter ignores the social realities of the period, when no educated woman would have publicly displayed, so directly, her frustrations and an insolent behavior, not even to an intimate friend.

The last part of this section was dedicated to the screening of the novel *Sense and Sensibility*, which was made in 1995. My analysis focused on how the transposition of Elinor Dashwood in film affected the perception of the women's image in the British society of that time. Elinor Dashwood is one of the mature characters in Jane Austen's work and she is characterized by sense of responsibility and emotional stability. Elinor is a linear character, she

does not need to evolve or change her behavior, thoughts or perceptions, as a result of the events she encounters. However, the screenwriter Emma Thompson, who also plays the part of the heroine, brings several times Elinor in situations in which she collapses under pressure and she shows a sensitive side of her personality that the literary character has the maturity and decency to keep away from the eyes of the society. The screenwriter gives the impression that Elinor is the one who needs to undergo a lesson of maturity, in which she is supposed to learn the importance of knowing and expressing her feelings and frustrations.

The conclusion of this chapter is that the film transforms inevitably the literary source and its characters. The way in which a literary character is rebuilt or reinterpreted in order to be translated on screen may influence the reception of both the novel and the social context of the action. The intention of this chapter was not to reach a parallel between literature and film, but to highlight how the process of adaptation can positively or negatively affect not only the reception of a film or a work, but also an entire social and cultural context.

Conclusions

Novels of the 19th century formed the basis of an impressive number of screenings, both for cinematography and television. In the last decades of the 20th century, companies have produced screenings based on the classic novels of writers such as Charles Dickens, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and Henry James. Jane Austen is undoubtedly an unprecedented phenomenon in terms of classic novel screenings. Since 1940 until today, her work has given rise to more than 40 screenings and modern reinterpretations.

The answer to the question, why does Jane Austen's work and its heroines still present so much interest among modern audience, despite the distance of two centuries of social, cultural and technological changes, seems to be simple. Jane Austen explored those aspects of human nature that last in time and those issues and questions that are reborn with every new generation. The writer seems to know the deepest dimensions of human character and those things that never change are remarkably transposed in the consciousness of her characters: feelings, passions, fears, prejudices and the perpetual search for happiness.

Jane Austen's novels and their screenings are not perfect models of feminist narrative, but are also not a conservative propaganda, or another unfortunate manifestation of the cultural

industry. In film and television, Jane Austen may seem conservative compared to other modern productions, but there is no reason why the screenings of her novels should be seen from a superficial perspective, as simple love stories with happy endings. Even if these screenings present heroines that remind of Cinderella, they are nevertheless complex characters with significant and actual issues.

The conclusion that emerges is that between novel and film there is equally an obvious compatibility and a permanent conflict. Film transforms literature under all aspects of its construction, inevitably affecting characters and the message they convey. Nevertheless, screening remains a young domain, open to innovation, with an enormous creative potential. Deliberately or not, the filmmakers will always adapt the message of the literary source to the values of the audience. A literary source that contains perennial values able to adapt to various social and cultural contexts will always be a challenge for filmmakers. The fact that Jane Austen's novels continue to fascinate the audience two centuries after their issue and after their heroines gave birth to film protagonists that awoke the interest of a wide and varied audience, is a clear demonstration of universal human values that the writer conveyed to her characters.