

## Rising from the Ashes : Transformation of Female Characters in Select Novels of Jane Austen

IRA

ADITI

**Abstract.** In all of Austen's novels, at some point, a main character has an epiphany: a point when their eyes are opened to their flaws or mistakes, and they choose to move in a new direction in their lives. Austen's novels have remained continuously in print since their publication and have been the subject of countless adaptations and scholarly studies. Her keen insight into human behaviour, social class, and the constraints placed on women have made her a beloved and enduring figure in English literature. Her sharp wit and vivid characters continue to resonate with readers and audiences worldwide. This study explores the psychological aspects of Austen's heroines' journey from an evolutionary perspective, revealing personality changes across the big five dimensions. As the story of her novels progresses, her protagonist's agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience increase while their extraversion and neuroticism decrease.

**Keywords:** Psychological issues; transformation; conscientiousness; extraversion; neuroticism.

When we think of classic writing, one title that constantly comes to our minds is Jane Austen. Born in 1775, this English writer remains an adored figure in the world of writing, captivating perusers with her quick depictions of society, paramount characters, and a composing style that proceeds to reverberate through eras of perusers over the world. One of the trademarks of Austen's composing style is her unpretentious however sharp social commentary. Her books, such as *Emma*, *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, are a reflection of the society she lived in, where class and marriage were significant. Austen's commentary on these topics is woven consistently into her stories. Austen dismembers the complexities of course, marriage, and individual partialities through the witty exchanges and the society encompassing her characters. Her composing style permits the perusers to see 'the underlying critiques' without plainly expressing them. Austen's characters are luxuriously created, and her composing style permits us to dive profound into their contemplations and feelings.

Her composition gives life to their particular characters, empowering perusers to empathize with their delights and distresses.

### **Austen's Phoenix: Transformation of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion***

Jane Austen's *Persuasion* critiques the aristocracy through the experiences of Anne Elliot, a self-sufficient and free-thinking woman. The story contrasts the extravagant, often corrupt lifestyle of the aristocracy with the simpler, more genuine lives of common people. Anne matures as she navigates social prejudices, exemplified by her broken engagement to Captain Wentworth due to his lack of status. Through various experiences, including interactions with less affluent but happier people, Anne learns the flaws of social class judgments.

Firstly, the main character, Anne Elliot, is deeply influenced by her father, sisters, and Lady Russell to make impulsive decisions about her love life. Anne, the daughter of the arrogant Sir Walter Elliot, is a quiet, alluring young woman with deep emotions. At nineteen, she fell in love with and was engaged to Captain Frederick Wentworth, a courageous man with little fortune. Unfortunately, Anne allowed herself to be persuaded to leave him in search of a man of higher status. Eight years later, Captain Wentworth returns, now wealthy but still unmarried. Anne is conflicted because her pride prevents her from loving Wentworth as she did before. Upon seeing Anne for the first time since their broken engagement, he harshly remarks that she is "so altered that he should not have known her again" (*Persuasion*, 24). Anne's timid nature makes her susceptible to others' opinions, which do not align with her own :

She prized the frank, the open-hearted,  
the eager character beyond all others.  
Warmth and enthusiasm did captivate  
her still. She felt that she could depend  
upon the sincerity of those who  
sometimes looked or said a careless or  
hasty thing, than those whose...tongue  
never slipped (276).

This quote illustrates Anne's longing for authenticity, reflecting Austen's effort to make Anne relatable. Although certain of her views, Anne often keeps them to herself.

Lady Russell is the first to influence Anne, convincing her that marrying Wentworth would ruin her future happiness, “She had spoken it; but she trembled when it was done, conscious that her words were listened to, and daring not even to try to observe their effect” (212). Anne decides to follow her instincts, maintaining composure and reflecting on her decisions. She keeps Wentworth in mind but continues her interactions with Charles, “That this man is struck with you, – and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again” (87). Wentworth’s love for Anne is subtly shown through his actions, though he often hesitates to express his feelings verbally (Butler). Anne’s reasoning helps her manage her emotions, achieving self-control and composure around others, “Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less” (64). She fights her emotions, believing her decisions benefit others, “Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up” (27). Anne’s family pushed her to reject Wentworth in favor of a wealthier match like Mr. Elliot. Austen, similarly, remained unmarried, valuing true love over financial gain. The verse 2 Timothy 2:22 advises, “Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.” This reflects Austen’s belief that genuine companionship in marriage is more important than wealth.

Anne is depicted as observant and reflective, forming her values through personal contemplation. She reasons with herself before making decisions, despite the discomfort this sometimes causes. Anne shows her practical maturity to others, redirecting her energy from her emotional turmoil to be useful. Her maturity is evident as she acknowledges her faults and strives to assist others, even at her own expense, “Though her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely glad to be employed” (68). Anne’s sister Mary relies on her at Upper Cross, recognizing Anne’s capability as a nurse. Anne avoids Captain Wentworth, but he notices and later entrusts her with Louisa’s care after an accident, “If one stays to to assist Mrs. Charles Musgrove will, of course, wish to get back to her children; but, if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!” (109). Anne’s nurturing nature emerges as she helps Louisa, becoming a calm figure in a crisis.

Despite her certainty, Anne rarely voices her opinions but admits she has much to say. She begins to express herself more, including to Captain Wentworth, while remaining open to others’ responses. In a

conversation with Captain Harville, she discusses the reliability of women versus men, showing her vulnerability. Lady Russell's advice prompts Anne to consider others' perspectives, reflecting the biblical verse Philippians 2:4, "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." Anne is seen as quietly rebellious, maintaining her feelings for Wentworth despite Lady Russell's influence (Zuppinger).

Anne's sense of duty sets an example for others. Jane Austen portrays Anne as a moral model, demonstrating the beauty of Christian living. Anne withdraws into solitude to manage her emotions and grows into an authoritative figure during crises.

Anne's maturity becomes evident when the Elliots move to Bath. Mrs. Russell, a maternal figure to Anne, hopes Anne will oversee Sir Walter and Mrs. Clay despite Elizabeth, the eldest, being present. Instead, Anne stays with her younger sister Mary and Mary's husband Charles Musgrove at their smaller manor, a stark contrast to the opulence of Kellynch Hall. This marks the beginning of Anne's awakening and her exposure to the lives of those less affluent, leading her to see the fulfillment they find in their simpler lifestyles. Meanwhile, Mary remains stuck in her ancestral pride, causing bitterness for herself and those around her.

During a visit to the Musgroves at the Great House, Anne observes the genuine good-heartedness and carefree nature of more common people, who have fewer concerns and freer lives. Though Anne envies their simplicity, she values her education too much to trade places with them. Her humility shines as she immerses herself in their world, unlike her sisters or father, who never dared to humble themselves in this way.

Anne's maturity is further demonstrated through her acts of kindness, such as tending to Mary's son after he dislocates his collarbone, while Mary and Charles visit Captain Wentworth. Still troubled by her past decision, Anne longs for her first love, Frederick, who is now close by. To avoid confronting him, she engages in simple acts that gradually transform her outlook on life and society.

Austen skillfully depicts the foolishness of lovers. Captain Wentworth, due to reluctance, arrives late for a hunting appointment with Charles, avoiding breakfast with Anne. When they finally meet, their

interaction is limited to a formal curtsy and bow, leaving Anne anxious about Frederick's true feelings. This uncertainty fuels their cautious behavior and mutual misunderstanding, creating a barrier that only time and shared experiences can overcome.

Finally, at the end of the book, the pretentious and wealthy characters' true attitudes are fully exposed. Austen ensures the reader grasps the underlying snobbery of her more affluent characters. Elizabeth refuses to visit Mrs. Russell due to her unfashionable clothing, and Mr. Elliot merely leaves a card, finding Mrs. Russell too old and unkempt to warrant a visit. At a party honoring Sir Walter's Aunt Dalrymple, the innocent gaiety is dampened by the arrival of Sir Walter and Elizabeth, whose "heartless elegance" casts a chill over the room.

Amidst this corrupt atmosphere, Anne's engagement brings her long-awaited happiness. Sir Walter finds Captain Wentworth respectable enough to permit the marriage. Lady Russell, who had favored Mr. Elliot and disapproved of Captain Wentworth, initially opposes the engagement. However, she demonstrates great strength of character by admitting her mistake and reassessing her prejudices. This ability to recognize and correct one's errors shows true greatness, especially in a society often blinded by its own biases.

Anne gains moral integrity by remaining true to her feelings and resisting vain desires. She acquires a profound understanding of the world and her society, a priceless knowledge. Unlike her relatives, who only complain and lament in adversity, Anne emerges from her trials as a better person, crowned with the beauty of happiness and self-worth.

#### **Emma's Transformation in *Emma* from an Evolutionary Perspective.**

Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) is renowned for its complex heroine, Emma Woodhouse, who undergoes significant psychological transformation throughout the novel. Initially viewed negatively, Emma's character evolves in terms of the Big Five personality traits. She becomes more agreeable, conscientious, and open to experiences, while her extraversion and neuroticism decrease. Additionally, her traits related to reproductive strategies and relationship preferences shift, making her more suitable for long-term relationships. These changes reflect a transition from a faster to a slower life history strategy, aligning with modern interpretations of life history variations, albeit influenced by the societal constraints on women in Austen's time.

In *Emma*, the eponymous heroine undergoes significant personal growth. Austen's writing style allows us to witness Emma's transformation from a well-meaning but misguided matchmaker to a more self-aware and empathetic individual. The use of free indirect discourse, a technique where the narrator's voice blends with the characters' thoughts, helps us understand Emma's inner world intimately. Jane Austen crafted a heroine who, in her own words, "no one but myself will much like." Emma is somewhat likable even at the start, but her spoiled and domineering nature necessitates personal growth.

As Mr. Knightly observes, she lacks personal vanity; otherwise, she might realize Mr. Elton's attraction is directed at her, not Harriet. Additionally, Emma's attentiveness to the poor and her conscience-evident when she limits Harriet's time with the Martins to just fourteen minutes- are commendable qualities. Imagining that Frank Churchill is in love with her (an episode somewhat reminiscent of Elizabeth Bennet's interest in Wickham) Emma flirts with him, which is inappropriate given the situation.

When Elton proposes, Emma learns her first lesson from her mistakes. However, this does not lead to more responsible behavior. Moments later, she is already considering a replacement for Mr. Elton in her plans for Harriet. Despite, her shaken self-confidence, she has not yet admitted to any moral wrongdoing. Experiences of repentance and atonement are still to come. She undergoes a transformation at Box Hill when her conscience is awakened. Mr. Knightley's reprimand for her harsh comment to Miss Bates makes her realize her mistake, "She felt it deeply... Emma's tears flowed all the way home." (*Emma*, 49) She has finally attained mature judgment. However, this maturity will be further tested when she discovers that Harriet hopes to marry Mr. Knightley.

Chapter 50 focuses heavily on letters—letters that reveal truths, both good and bad, for both the writers and the readers. It might seem cowardly for Emma to inform Harriet about her mistaken assumptions regarding Mr. Knightley through a letter rather than face-to-face. However, such a direct confrontation would likely intensify Harriet's humiliation. Emma reflects on her past interactions with Harriet and the embarrassments caused by her own presumptions. In contrast, Frank's letter is similar in that he too must explain and apologize for something unpleasant. However, unlike Emma, Frank's optimistic nature prevents

him from dwelling on the task. He believes that Mrs. Weston will forgive him and that his expressions of devotion will charm her. Regarding Emma, although he expresses remorse, he quickly asserts that Emma must have understood his intention - his actions to himself.

Emma writes to Harriet first thing in the morning, facing her unpleasant duty promptly. Frank, on the other hand, procrastinates and notes he received a letter from Jane while still composing his own. Emma tackles her task immediately, while Frank appears to delay it, reluctantly stopping and starting several times. Despite Emma's flaws, such as snobbery, she has the redeeming quality of ultimately accepting a more accurate understanding of events, even when it is uncomfortable. When Mr. Knightley rebukes her for her behavior towards Miss Bates, she does not succumb to self-delusion or reinvent the incident to protect her ego, as Mrs. Elton might. She accepts Mr. Knightley's perspective because 'The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart.' Although Emma sometimes behaves immaturely, treating Harriet like a doll and play-acting with Frank Churchill, she possesses an internal sense of truth. She may try to ignore it, but when confronted with it, she listens.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of the "perfect novel" is to critique social arrogance and the confusion of emotions. Through character development, Austen expresses her preference for the educated and virtuous ruling class. This exemplifies how Jane Austen defends her views on the importance of social structure. Additionally, the novel conveys a message about second chances in relationships and the importance of waiting for the right moment in life. Given the novel's time period, Austen highlights how marriage was often seen as a matter of convenience rather than love. In 'Persuasion', Jane Austen upholds Christian values by portraying her heroine as dutiful and patient, willing to wait for God's plan for her life.

### **Ira**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English, Patliputra University, Patna

### **Aditi**

Head, Dept. of English, College of Commerce, Arts and Science, Patna

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