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ABSTRACT

Before the insights of feminist criticism altered the way many writers are examined, Jane Austen and George Eliot were usually considered to be upholders of the status quo. The explosion in criticism in the last two decades, however, has reshaped and reinterpreted the canon, and has changed the way one academic teaches these two novelists. Using Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" and "Persuasion" and Eliot's "Adam Bede" and "The Mill on the Floss," she points out how British society is subtly criticized through the authorial voice. Both authors create female protagonists in precarious situations and with limited possibilities. Austen and Eliot, far from accepting the status quo, create fictional worlds which criticize the way these characters must conform in order to survive. Today's students see that the protagonists of these novels pay a very high price for preservation of integrity. The curriculum of the 1990s will probably reflect this kind of shift in perception of novelists, especially those of the 19th century. (NKA)

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Austen and Eliot: A Change in Teaching Approach

A paper for the CEA Conference on
"Challenge and Change: The English Curriculum of the 90s"

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Austen and Eliot:
A Change in Teaching Approach

This paper will examine two novels each of two of the major female British novelists of the Nineteenth Century, Jane Austen and George Eliot, attempting to show that in these novels each novelist, while perceived by her respective audience as an upholder of the norms of her particular age, actually offers a sharp critique of the society in which she lives.

This approach is one which I have been using for the past eight years in classes ranging from freshman-level introductory courses, through upper-level undergraduate period courses and capstone seminars for seniors, to masters-level courses, and it differs from my earlier academic introduction to the two writers in the 1960's and my early teaching in the 70's before the insights of feminist criticism altered the way we look at many writers, not just these two. Much of the earlier criticism of this century and prior to that purports that Austen and Eliot were upholders of the status quo. A. O. Cockshut, my teacher at Oxford, as recently as 1988 began his lectures on Austen, for example, by claiming that she is the last of the Augustan writers. But the explosion in criticism of the last two decades, in particular, has re-shaped the way I and others have been re-interpreting the canon, especially in my teaching of these two novelists. Eliot, too, in many of our undergraduate and early teaching experiences, was treated as a very bright, very profound, very unorthodox woman writer who depicted interesting characters in a static world order which they, or the authorial voice, rarely criticized.

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The paper will use the following novels to demonstrate how my approach to dealing with these novelists has changed over the past decade in line with the kind of shifts in the canon which are occurring throughout the teaching of English: Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss.

These four novels, as well as others in both the Austen and Eliot canons, present characters who appear to 'knuckle under' to the demands of the society when, in actuality, they are offering a strong condemnation of it. Examples which I am using are Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot from the Austen novels and Dinah Morris and Maggie Tulliver from the Eliot novels. All of these characters happen to be women which is not accidental, I believe. It is possible to show through each of them that the authorial voice, however veiled and subtle, criticizes quite severely some of the norms of the given society such as the 'place' of women and their ability to contribute to society in ways not strictly limited to marriage and child-rearing. For several generations these heroines, and other characters in these novels, have been presented as people who ultimately yield to the demands of the society with the implicit assumption that those demands are just and suitable. But my paper will suggest, using these four cases, that it is more appropriate to present these novels as sharp critiques of the authors' contemporaries and their values.

First, let me turn my attention to Austen. Pride and Prejudice is one of those novels with which we are so familiar and which many of us have taught so many times, that it hardly seems possible that there are other ways to see it. Vivacious, lively

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and intensely likeable, Elizabeth Bennet appears, by the end of the novel, to conform to the role of the proper married woman, fortunate to have 'snagged' the most eligible and fabulously wealthy Fitzwilliam Darcy. Mary Poovey points out that "By the end of the eighteenth century the Proper Lady was a familiar household companion. Her presence was comforting and salutary, for her desires bent gracefully to her master's will." (3)

But Elizabeth is neither so passive nor so unquestioning of her society's values that she accepts the role in the highly competitive marriage market that her mother is so desperate for her to play: namely, a tractable young woman, eager to please a potential suitor no matter what the price to her personal integrity. In fact, Elizabeth defies the social norm first by rejecting Darcy for a variety of motives, some of them based on misinformation and bias, and secondly, by spurning William Collins, a pompous, weak-witted fool by no means her equal. Her mother, here perhaps seen as the voice of 'proper society', is aghast at both refusals by Elizabeth and despairs of her ever marrying. That Austen condones Elizabeth's behavior, however, is clear, not only from the self-revelation and growth which she has Elizabeth undergo in relation to Darcy and the truth about him and about her own short-comings, but also, and perhaps more revealingly, by the fate of Elizabeth's friend, Charlotte Lucas, who feels compelled to accept the hand of a man she can only despise, William Collins, in order to avoid that fate of impoverished spinsterhood, the horror of any young woman of that day. That Austen takes Elizabeth to the brink of this disaster indicates, it seems to me, her harsh comment

on a social order which would mismatch women and men in marriage simply for economic security.

The case, as recent classes of mine have convinced me, is only stronger in Persuasion, Austen's last completed novel. Here the protagonist, Anne Elliot, a sensitive, intelligent woman has arrived at the advanced age of twenty-seven without marrying. That she has had a most attractive offer which she has refused, from Frederick Wentworth whom she loves but whose financial means were scanty, only heightens our pity for her. It appears that she will suffer the fate of undesired spinsterhood even when Wentworth reappears eight years later, now an established naval officer with the rank of Captain, for he seems uninterested, even cold in his manner toward her. Motherless and yoked with a proud, vain and impecunious father and sister, Anne assumes the parental role for the family. By the end of the novel, however, there is a reconciliation between Anne and Frederick and their eventual marriage.

Again, it is possible to teach this as the conventional happy ending of the early British novel which rewards the morally upright and punishes the dastardly. But, as with Pride and Prejudice, I find that late Twentieth Century insights challenge that easy reading. Once again, the heroine is surrounded by women with much bleaker futures as with her friend Mrs. Smith and her sister Mary Musgrove who live lives, if not of 'quiet desperation,' then nearly so. Anne, like Elizabeth Bennet, and like other Austen heroines such as Jane Fairfax in Emma, comes close to a dreary life of unmarried poverty or, worse, to a disastrous marriage with her

conniving cousin, Walter Elliot, who would use her merely as a stepping-stone to respectability.

Turning our attention to George Eliot, we can see the same kinds of concerns echoing through her novels. Like Austen, Eliot creates female characters with precarious situations and limited possibilities. It is possible to read them as 'trapped' in their worlds, even though they are either offered or actually accept marriage as a 'way out' of their dilemmas, personal or financial or both. Students in recent years react very strongly to the position in which the female characters find themselves. I would suggest that this in not merely late Twentieth Century hindsight, aggravated by a heightened consciousness brought about by the pervasive effects of the "women's movement"; rather, I suggest that the critique is implicit in Eliot's novels, most often subtly expressed, but, at times, breaking close to the surface. The examples from Adam Bede and The Mill on the Floss may help to substantiate this claim.

In Adam Bede, for example, the first of her full-length novels to be published, the character of Dinah Morris is the one on whom I have focused the attention of this paper. One might argue, however, that an equally interesting case might be made with the shallow and flighty Hetty Sorrel who appears to embody all the stereotypes about the 'brainless female beauty' with no future except what her good looks might purchase her. However, what recent teaching of this novel has persuaded me is that Dinah represents a powerful criticism of the status quo which holds that women are valuable only for their roles in marriage and child-

rearing. Dinah, a sober young woman, opens the novel preaching a fervent Evangelical message to the rural townsfolk of Hayslope. Throughout the novel she is an object of fascination, one might say condescension, for the men in the novel. They attend her preaching with a bemused skepticism. Even Adam, who comes to love her and eventually marry her, is uneasy with a public role for his wife. The end of the novel shows us a Dinah who has given up her preaching and accepted the conventional roles of wife, mother and doer of good deeds. In recent classes I have asked students if they are satisfied with the ending, one which would have pleased and placated the Victorians. To a person they talk about such ideas as 'waste of talent' and 'suppression of intellect' in the case of Dinah. It seems to me that it is possible, without stretching the text unduly, to read Eliot as conveying the same message albeit more subtly and carefully.

Likewise in **The Mill on the Floss**, Maggie Tulliver represents yet another case where, in recent years, I find myself pointing out those passages in the novel where Maggie is thwarted by the males around her from any attempts at intellectual contributions and growth. Maggie's plight chills us with the power of her society to confine her, to shut off all avenues to growth and happiness. Her experience of intellectual repression is profound. For here is a woman (a child when we first see her) who, from a Twentieth Century perspective, is wonderfully endowed with a creativity, initiative, a passionate desire to learn and a lively spirit and imagination. However, unfortunately for her, Eliot places her in rural England of the early nineteenth century where such traits earn her nothing

but personal frustration and severe disapproval from all the adults, and her beloved brother.

In the novel it appears to me that Eliot deeply sympathizes with her young heroine, who certainly has some characteristics of George Eliot in her, but refuses to allow Maggie any escape from a world in which she finds herself misplaced in every way, a kind of social exile who does not fit any of the social stereotypes which function almost with the force of moral law.

For Maggie longs to be educated. The evidence of her intellectual acumen is everywhere in the novel, but her father thwarts that because of the social dictates of the time which prescribed schooling for sons but not for daughters. One example from an early exchange in the novel will suffice to demonstrate this. In talking with Mr. Riley about his son's schooling Mr. Tulliver reacts to a perceptive remark by Maggie, still a very young child:

> . . .in a lower voice, turning to Mr. Riley, as though Maggie couldn't hear, [Mr. Tulliver says] "She understands what one's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read - straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. An' allays at her book! But it's bad - it's bad," Mr. Tulliver added, sadly, checking this blamable exultation, "a woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt."
>
> . . .It's a pity but what she'd been the lad." (66,68)

Whenever she tries to include herself in serious discussions with men, she is rebuffed, first by her father, then her brother and

later her suitor Stephen Guest. If time permitted to examine each of these interactions it would show a progressively more severe restriction of Maggie's happiest desires for acceptance and for intellectual respect and development. Indeed, as Gillian Beer notes, in Maggie, "passion takes the form of vehement intellectual need experienced as emotion."(87) Over the course of the novel, which details Maggie's painful growth to young adulthood, we see her gradually believing herself less and less worthy to be accepted in society. Ostracized by her brother and exiled from the family home, outcast from polite society because of her compromising, though entirely innocent overnight boat trip with Stephen Guest, Maggie despairs of ever finding a 'home' in the conventional Victorian sense of the word. Critics, of course, have made much of the final reconciliation with her brother at the conclusion of the novel when both are drowned in her desperate but futile attempt to save him from the flood, but one must question how emotionally or psychologically satisfying this reunion is, or, as Gillian Beer so eloquently asks of this novel, "Is the only form of heroism open to women to be martyrdom?"(82)

What this examination of the four novels has been attempting to show is that both Austen and Eliot, far from accepting the status quo, create fictional worlds which criticize the way in which the characters, in this case the women, must conform in order to survive. But teaching these novels today reveals characters who rebel, whether dramatically or quietly, against the constraints of society, against the notion that women, like books, are to be enjoyed but not taken seriously. (Cottom 81) Ultimately, perhaps,

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it is their very refusal to knuckle under these constraints which gives them their stature. As I mention in an article about such heroines, perhaps "Only those women who can muster enough inner strength to make some gesture of nonconformity survive with any integrity intact." (Lescinski 65) However, the fictional world our students see in these novels is one in which the price for preservation of integrity is very high indeed. I am more persuaded with each semester of this kind of teaching that the curriculum of the 90's will reflect this kind of shift in perception of novelists, especially those of the Nineteenth Century.

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