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Jane Austen's Artful Buildings: Embodying the *Bildungsroman*

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Throughout her literary career, Jane Austen regularly made use of architectural settings to embody crucial issues in her novels. Such settings in Austen’s work often function firmly within the popular attitudes of her age, serving as symbolic representations of status for her characters and operating on the associations coded by a society characterized by class tensions. For example, from her first published novel to her last, Austen makes use of the dichotomy between grand English country houses of the landed gentry and the pastoral cottages of peasants. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood family’s harsh relocation from the family estate to “cottage” life unambiguously represents a class demotion central to the novel’s plot. In *Persuasion*, the Elliots face a similar fate, though in a more nuanced manner, when members of the working class move into Sir Walter’s Kellynch Hall estate and Anne meanwhile encounters pastoral peasant locales on her journeys to Winthrop and Lyme, signifying a blurring of boundaries between two worlds defined by their physical spaces.

In contrast, Austen’s approach to architecture, which employed contemporary intellectual and aesthetic ideas to relate more specifically to character, provides what is perhaps a more complex and fruitful way to understand the author’s general storytelling formula. In many cases, her architectural settings serve as the site of and stimulus for a pivotal shift in the heroine’s develop-
mental arc. This is clear in the two Austen novels named for the story’s most important settings: *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*. In both cases, though these works were written at opposite ends of Austen’s career, the main character’s interaction with and reflection on the titular architectural setting comes to catalyze and represent a shift in her thinking. Not incidentally, these novels named for their settings are also those most clearly defined as *Bildungsroman* within Austen’s œuvre.

While there appears to be a correlation between works focusing on buildings and the emphasis of the *Bildungsroman*, these elements are present in all of Austen’s work. For example, though *Pride and Prejudice* is perhaps most famous for its iconic relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, what makes this central plot focus so compelling is that it facilitates the heroine’s reevaluation of herself (reading Darcy’s letter forced her realize that she hadn’t “known her own mind”). At its core, *Pride and Prejudice* adheres to the focus on the main character’s development as a model for learning how to navigate the social world in the Age of Sensibility. A point of interest for the purposes of this paper, then, is the use of architectural setting, particularly that of Pemberley, as a key element in Elizabeth’s development.

Comparing and contrasting the cases of *Northanger Abbey*, *Pemberley*, and *Mansfield Park* as sites of their respective main character’s self-reflection and growth show that Austen’s interest in architecture reflects her own exploratory journey. In each case, the heroine gains knowledge of both herself and the larger society through instructive interaction with these locations at the nexus of the manmade and the natural, and by analyzing her treatment of these subjects in each novel, we can also see how Austen either rejects or advocates for a Romantic worldview. While much scholarship surrounding Austen’s work acknowledges the prominent role of architecture as reflective of the novelist’s awareness of such major aesthetic themes, and others discuss the heroine’s socialization using aesthetic forms as tools in the female *Bildungsroman*, earlier critics do not tend to view the two as related concepts. In contrast, I argue that Austen uses built sites as devices pivotal to her heroines’ ultimate character development, effectively making such treatments into embodiments of each character’s specific coming-of-age journey, but also into a map of Austen’s development of such ideas within her narrative formula.

As her first novel, completed in 1803, it was in *Northanger Abbey* that Austen began to establish a pattern of using external setting as integral to a character’s interiority. Though the writing and characterization of the satirical novel are often criticized as heavy-handed, such a less-nuanced handling can be useful in understanding Austen’s development as an author. Her crafting of thematic emphasis using setting is especially evident in *Northanger Abbey*’s treatment of the Gothic, as the heroine’s preoccupation with romance novels is central to an obvious burlesque of the genre. In fact, here she sets a precedent for later works, with Catherine Morland’s confrontation with Northanger Abbey on her travels forcing her to confront her own assumptions and attitudes regarding society, as will be the case for Elizabeth Bennet encountering Pemberley and Fanny Price complicating and facilitating her homecoming.

As Avrom Fleishman argues, *Northanger Abbey* is at its heart “the story of a young lady’s development,” one that is firmly in the realm of the *Bildungsroman* in its “systematic exploration of the variety of forms which culture provides to constitute the individual mind—a culture including not only literature and moral dicta but esthetic norms, historiography, language, and several kinds of rhetoric.” In this context, Catherine Morland’s development centers on “making her mind up” with the “abstractions, symbols, and patterns of understanding ... in the process of cultural formation.” Catherine herself acknowledges her starting point with the statement, “And as to most matters, to say the truth, there are not many that I know my own mind about.”

To support his point, Fleishman cites the scene in which Catherine learns about the picturesque, an example demonstrating the role of architectural theory as a model of social learning. On their walk with Catherine, the Tilneys were viewing the country with the eyes of persons accustomed to drawing, and decided on its capability of being formed into pictures, with all the eagerness of real taste. Here Catherine was quite lost. ... The little which she could understand however appeared to contradict the very few notions she had entertained on the matter before. It seemed as if a good view were no longer to be taken from the top of an high hill, and that a clear blue sky was no longer a proof of a fine day. (1015).

Fleishman uses this passage to demonstrate the idea that cultural symbols shape people’s expectations for the world: Catherine’s favoring of fair weather and a clear view are confirmation of “a lack of a terminology by which to see the countryside around her” rather than support for a basic intuition that justifies her preferences. In this situation, though, Catherine is a quick learner: “A lecture on the picturesque immediately followed,” and Catherine is easily led by Henry Tilney to accepting the picturesque as the correct mode and adapting it into her own view (1016).

While Fleishman’s focus on the picturesque as representative of learned cultural symbols (comprising “real taste”) is useful, this emphasis also allows for the demonstration of Catherine’s seemingly girlish inclinations and impressionableness. The quickness with which Catherine’s change of perspective occurs frames her as a ridiculous figure, a characterization Austen cultivates throughout the novel. Here she is easily led by an eagerness to follow the example of her new friends, driven by emotions and admiration for her
countered aesthetic Neoclassicism, an artistic continuation of Enlightenment values past interpreted through a lens of romanticizing nostalgia—a trend which manifested an interest in revivalist styles favoring Europe’s medieval past interpreted through a lens of romanticizing nostalgia—a trend which countered aesthetic Neoclassicism, an artistic continuation of Enlightenment ideals that favored the worldly concerns of contemporary modernity. These wider aesthetic associations of the age surrounding this artistic atmosphere can be seen most clearly in Catherine’s tour of the abbey led by General Tilney. Here, Austen characterizes Catherine as embodying Gothic Revival ideals, primarily through an implicit foil entailed by the General’s Neoclassical impulses, to suggest the impracticability of innocent idealism in the face of the realities of a materialistic society.

The juxtaposition of these two characters of vastly different social standpoints presents Catherine in favor of a Romantic outlook in her valuation of the Gothic in opposition to the new and modern Neoclassical rooms presented by the General. However, the exaggerated emotive language also encourages the reader to view Catherine as a comical figure, consistent with Austen’s burlesquing tone, rather than as a representative of a serious intellectual, aesthetic position. The reader is told in a short, declarative statement introducing the renovated section of the abbey that “All that was venerable ceased here,” suggesting a sweeping, harsh judgement by Catherine (1054). Likewise, the claim that “The new building was not only new, but declared itself to be so” suggests an indignation towards a perceived double offense, furthering an exaggeration of an unforgiving attitude and judgement (1054). This passage also introduces a moralistic approach to appraising the surroundings and all that it represents, as the word “venerable” connotes something worthy of respect. Therefore, the following account of what is decidedly not venerable becomes a reflection of Catherine’s morals and character in opposition to the tastes of her counterpart, General Tilney.

The opposition here between the tastes of General Tilney and Catherine clearly corresponds to the era’s theoretical dichotomy between the aesthetics of Neoclassicism and Gothic Revivalism, a debate with which Austen’s audience would have been familiar, suggesting that Austen is consciously using these opposing tendencies regarding architecture and design as markers of larger opposing worldviews. The renovations of General Tilney embody a Neoclassicism representing contemporary modernity, particularly in its repeated mention of the renovation of the abbey which “declared itself to be new” (1054). In addition, the General’s renovations are defined by an overarching practicality: the renovated building was “intended only for offices,” suggesting a plan of ordered designation of rooms for a single purpose (1054). The office space, intended as a male domain where business ventures are carried out, embodies the Neoclassical movement’s primary proponents—the more established, powerful elite already at the top of the social hierarchy.

In light of this characterization, Catherine’s sympathy for Gothic tendencies comes to denote a distinctly female viewpoint here, making her a rep-
Austen’s evocation of the Gothic and Neoclassic tastes is thus not simply meant to provide laughable characterizations of a mistaken (Gothic-loving) versus the correct (anti-Gothic) worldview, but it rather serves to acknowledge the realities of the society in which this tendency exists. And her message is not so juvenile as the still-developing writing style may suggest. In fact, the issues raised here show that Austen engages with highly relevant, defining concepts of the nineteenth century while furthering her own highly attentive social commentary in *Northanger Abbey*, just as in her more widely-respected works.

In Austen’s later novels, the heroines are more formed in their opinions from the start, requiring a subtler sort of *Bildungsroman*. If Catherine Morland needed to make up her mind, then Elizabeth Bennet needed to learn not to make her mind up so quickly. Fleshman notes that Catherine “finds that she has made her mind up not, like Elizabeth Bennet, on the basis of insufficient evidence, but on the wrong kind of evidence altogether.”% Elizabeth, usually accepted as the Austen character most deserving of the title of a proper heroine, begins the novel characterized by a cleverness and quickness. This is what makes her appealing in many ways (and it is where she differs from Catherine), but it is also something that she must overcome in order to fully develop her abilities of fair and careful judgment. The change in her thinking is most clear in her opinion of Darcy, a shift in which the architectural setting plays an important role.

The picturesque is invoked early in the novel, with Elizabeth’s direct reference to the “charmingly group’d” image of the “picturesque” while on a walk, offering support for Austen’s—and Elizabeth’s—knowledge of this elite landscape tradition (239). Here it demonstrates Elizabeth’s proclivities towards cleverness and judgement. Her laughter while saying this lends her a somewhat ridiculing tone regarding the party led by Darcy, suggesting that she does not actually take to heart the picturesque ideals of moderated evaluation and an open appreciation of beauty. Elizabeth’s visit to and appraisal of the Pemberley estate in Chapter 1 of Volume 3 represents a key turning point in her development of her judgement, allowing Austen to cleverly utilize a setting embodying the sensibilities of her society in order to ultimately question them. Through Elizabeth’s experience of Pemberley, Austen presents the aesthetic concept of the picturesque as a model for the proper judgement of character according to moral atmosphere of the Age of Sensibility.

Though Elizabeth’s favorable impression upon her tour of Pemberley may appear to support a straightforward acceptance of social values in which the landed gentry reigns supreme and others should aspire to such material wealth and social standing, it is in fact part of a larger argument for the complication of such norms. At first blush, the description of the “large, well-proportioned,”
“handsomely fitted up” dining-parlor and the other rooms’ “furniture suitable to the fortune of their proprietor” seems to drive Elizabeth’s favorable opinion through an admiration of material wealth (342). However, putting this scene into the larger context of the story suggests that such a viewing is oversimplified. When considering that this interior description serves as a synecdoche for the estate of Pemberley as a whole, and ultimately for Mr. Darcy himself—in fact, the description of the “large, well-proportioned room, handsomely fitted” corresponds to the house as a “large, handsome stone building” and Austen’s embodied description of Darcy—we see that this positive impression is in marked contrast to Elizabeth’s previous prejudice against Darcy’s character.

Furthermore, the description of his home’s interior as having “less of splendor, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings,” situates Mr. Darcy in an implicit comparison to Catherine de Bourgh (342). In typical Austenian fashion, the placement of different characters in opposition as unexpected foils illuminates a new conception of each of them: in the face of the blatantly caricatured Lady, the idea of Darcy as a stereotypically proud, rich gentleman loses its potency, and he begins to seem like more of a complete and multi-dimensional human worthy of Elizabeth’s regard. At the same time, Austen suggests through free indirect discourse that Darcy possesses an interior mind that contrasts with surface appearances, stating that “Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste, that it was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine” (342)—his taste, here, seems to signify an authentic intellect (a classic “real elegance”) rather than adherence to superficial fashion.

This focus on an aesthetic of authenticity is in line with the idea of the picturesque landscape, also represented quite directly in the description of Pemberley’s grounds. For example, Elizabeth’s earlier admiration of the landscape—“where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste”—reflects the landscape sensibility of the English garden, which placed value on the accentuation of a given locale rather than an imposition of order (342). At the heart of the picturesque is the concept of mental presence in the temporal and spatial moment, based both on the intellectual rationality of Enlightenment and a Romantic attention to emotional sensation created by one’s physical surroundings. Therefore, the picturesque process of seeing acts as a useful metaphor for the type of careful, unbiased, and multi-level judgement of character (a mode perhaps best summarized as “sensible”) that Austen advocates for with Elizabeth’s reassessment here.

While the tour scene takes place indoors, much of it is devoted to a virtual experience of the entire landscape, not only through the use of synecdoche, but also through the emphasis on the act of seeing. As Elizabeth looks out the window at the landscape, Austen emphasizes the idea of a whole only completely seen through multiple viewpoints. For example, “the hill from which they had descended” took on a new meaning as “a beautiful object” rather than a space through the experience of distance (342). The description of “these objects ... taking different position ... from every window” as Elizabeth passed through each room is highly reminiscent of the picturesque ideal’s emphasis on changing vistas as comprising a complete temporal–spatial experience, while the earlier mention of her mind “too full for conversation” suggests that a fully meditative observational experience can counter her characteristic inclination towards quickness (342). More significant, though, is the idea that Elizabeth is now seeing beyond her immediate surroundings through this experience, enjoying a full “prospect” that connotes imagined possibilities. In this way, we see that Elizabeth is learning to view things outside of her own subjective prejudices and to imagine others’ perspectives. For example, she later “fixed [Darcy’s] eyes upon herself” when contemplating his painted portrait, effectively seeing things through his eyes (345).

With the language and imagery used to describe Elizabeth’s experience of viewing and interpreting Pemberley, Austen sets up her reassessment of Mr. Darcy and, by extension, her assessment of herself as firmly within the picturesque mode. With the invocation of the picturesque mode, the use of an architectural setting effectively suggests the art of drawing, with its emphasis on careful looking and framing. This is especially fitting, since Elizabeth’s lack of drawing experience is mentioned throughout the novel. Her experience with Pemberley represents, then, a new skill that allows her to correctly navigate the social world as a proper young woman. Just as Elizabeth learns the importance of meditation on the judgement of others as a means of personal and interpersonal growth and practices the art of seeing beyond caricature through careful observation, it seems that Austen’s reader is presented with this message through a parallel lesson through an exercise in close reading, perhaps an element in our own readerly Bildungsroman. The novel can thus be seen as serving as a tool for understanding oneself and others in a manner in line with the Age of Sensibility, balanced somewhere between the strict rationale of the Enlightenment and the sublime emotionality of Romanticism. In this way, Austen offers an alternative to the improper overly–Romantic Gothic literature satirized in Northanger Abbey.

While Northanger Abbey and Pride and Prejudice both explore the developmental aspects of characters by teaching a skill of perception that changes the heroine’s mind, Mansfield Park is clearest in its emphasis on a distinctly female Bildungsroman journey. While Catherine makes up her mind and Elizabeth changes hers, Austen follows the story of Fanny Price as she grows into herself. The setting of Mansfield Park, though not as fully described or even addressed as Austen’s other famous estates, still plays an important role. While one might expect travel to be the catalyst for growing into oneself, as is the case of Cath-
erine and Elizabeth’s visits to the homes of their romantic interests, the architectural setting in Fanny’s story facilitates a mental homecoming more than a physical one. As Nikolaus Pevsner notes, Portsmouth is the subject of little description in terms of architecture or landscape, a reticence which may be due to Austen’s considerable familiarity with this area compared to her more thoroughly described imagined landscapes.8 Instead, it is revealed that her true home is Mansfield Park, the stage for the story that plays out.

This is the approach to the novel taken by Matthew Taylor, who, by utilizing a framework from Shakespeare criticism, asserts that the outdoor landscapes in Mansfield Park serve as stages where romantic rivalries take place.9 Though Taylor focuses on renovations to outdoor landscapes as modes of social competition and argues that “outdoorsmanship in Mansfield Park always boils down to self–exhibition and competition,” the idea of the physical setting as a stage can also be extended to fit into Austen’s pattern of invoking different artforms through architecture.10 We can extend the stage metaphor to the entirety of Mansfield Park itself, with its implications of growth inherent in its name giving a hint at Austen’s intent to frame the estate as a place of growth. In this novel, the theatricality and social artifice of characters such as the Crawfords serve as a foil to the moralism of Fanny. For example, she is the only one hesitant to participate in the play: “she could not endure the idea of it” (519). The idea of endurance in the face of such artifice is important, since this action facilitates Fanny’s growth. Rather than changing herself by utilizing the tools of the gentry’s many artifices, she instead uses theatre as a tool to define herself against others through her refusal to participate.

This instance of Fanny’s moral position showing through is representative of her overall character development. Fanny remains a relatively passive actor in her own story, and her growth is characterized by a process of enduring spectatorship. In this way, Fanny represents a distinctly feminine heroine in an alternative to the traditional action-focused male Bildungsroman. In accordance with this approach, Austen presents Fanny as an exemplar of a distinctly feminine morality among the larger theater of a problematic and patriarchal society. In fact, this novel stands out in Austen’s body of work as perhaps the most inune morality among the larger theater of a problematic and patriarchal society. In this way, Fanny represents a distinctly feminine heroine in an alternative to the traditional action-focused male Bildungsroman.

Austen’s own journey regarding the role of gender and cultural norms in shaping one’s story of personal growth. Rather than adapting to the world by learning new methods of artistic judgement, Fanny realizes her development by growing into herself with relatively little external imposition as she observes the story surrounding her. In this way, Austen inverts conventions to create a distinctly female Bildungsroman, working within but also subverting the norms of Romanticism, with an argument for the merits of subjective and personal judgement of the scenes playing out rather than adopting a codified approach of aesthetic criticism.

Overall, by considering these three works and Austen’s engagement with both architecture and literature, visual arts (through the drawing-focused picturesque), and theater, we might identify this preoccupation with artforms as an integral part of Austen’s characteristic formula. Rather than separate elements, these ideas and artforms are intertwined, showing that Austen engaged in a thorough and holistic consideration and criticism of the cultural and social trends of her time. Tracing the development of Austen’s work throughout her career, it may seem as though she moves from a Neoclassical/Enlightenment worldview to one embracing Romanticism, reaching an aesthetic of Sensibility as these crossed in Pride and Prejudice. However, careful attention to her treatment of architecture, which simultaneously embraces and criticizes these opposing worldviews by observing a dichotomy between them, reveals that Austen’s own journey regarding the Bildungsroman was more complex. This process plays out in her use of architectural spaces that are at once domestic and worldly, often reflecting the complexities of each main character’s growth. Though her work may have become subtler across her career, Austen remained an intentional and observant critic of society, acknowledging the complicated role of gender and cultural norms in shaping one’s story of personal growth.

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NOTES
4 Ibid., 650.
5 See, for example, Catherine’s discussions with Mr. Thorpe and Henry Tilney regarding her
On January 6, 1941, a mere eleven months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor dragged the United States into war, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave his eighth State of the Union address. In this speech, Roosevelt articulated the Four Freedoms that constituted his vision for a peaceful, democratic world order: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. These freedoms were an essential component of FDR’s proclamation that “Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere.” While this idea became important to the rhetoric of the Allies during World War II, it revealed an unsettling split in American policy abroad and the domestic treatment of African Americans and other minorities.

Indeed, while FDR promoted his four freedoms abroad, these freedoms were not fully enjoyed by all men and women in America. Specifically, African Americans did not enjoy many of FDR’s espoused freedoms, with their treatment in the South being especially heinous. By championing these values, Roosevelt opened up America to charges of hypocrisy from African American intellectuals, the African American press, and foreign powers. These criticisms formed the basis upon which African American intellectuals and black presses, during and after World War II, advocated for civil liberties and civil rights. By seizing upon FDR’s four freedoms, African American intellectuals and presses advocated for the dismantling of Jim Crow, comparing the Jim Crow South to Nazi Germany, and they seized upon differences between America’s stated...