

LUCIANE OLIVEIRA MÜLLER

**REVISITING JANE AUSTEN: A READING OF KAREN JOY
FOWLER'S *THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB***

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FOWLER'S *THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB***

Doutoranda: Prof^ª M^a Luciane Oliveira Müller

Orientadora: Prof^ª Dr^a Sandra Sirangelo Maggio

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Luciane Oliveira Müller

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4. Jane Austen. 5. Zygmunt Bauman. 6. Recepção.

This dissertation is dedicated to friendship: among the different sources of relationships, friendship is the one I consider the most important. The bond between real friends lasts a lifetime, it does not matter if they are near or far, if it is sincere the bond between friends surpasses time and space. Therefore I dedicate this dissertation to all my friends.



This picture was taken in Jane Austen's House Museum in Chawton, a small village in the district of Hampshire, England. It was the house where Jane Austen spent her last years.

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There are some great writers who wrote too much. There are others who wrote enough. There are yet others who wrote nothing like enough to satisfy their admirers, and Jane Austen is certainly one of these.

(Margaret Drabble, Introduction to *Lady Susan, The Watsons and Sanditon*)

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RESUMO

Quase dois séculos separam Karen Joy Fowler e Jane Austen. A segunda é um importante ícone literário inglês, autora de seis dentre os romances mais preciosos da literatura inglesa, admirada por seu estilo, sagacidade e sutileza na delimitação das personagens e de suas relações sociais. A primeira é uma premiada escritora americana contemporânea de ficção científica e fantasia, autora do romance *The Jane Austen Book Club*, que constitui o corpus da presente tese. Apesar da grande distância na época, no assunto, e mesmo em estatura literária que as separa, ambas estão profundamente envolvidas na investigação da natureza e dos laços humanos. *The Jane Austen Book Club*, ao mesmo tempo em que homenageia Jane Austen, também compõe um rico contraste entre a vida como ela era no século XVIII, na Inglaterra rural de Austen, e como se configura agora, na ensolarada Califórnia de Fowler. Neste romance de Fowler encontramos personagens interessantes que vivenciam diferentes tipos de crises pessoais, alguns dos quais não seriam nem compreendidos e nem mencionados na época de Austen. Eles formam um clube de leitura e se encontram mensalmente, durante meio ano. Em cada encontro, discutem um dos romances de Jane Austen, cada membro ficando responsável por liderar a discussão de uma dessas obras. O romance de Fowler é dividido em seis capítulos respectivamente: Jocelyn com *Emma*, Allegra com *Sense and Sensibility*, Prudie com *Mansfield Park*, Grigg com *Northanger Abbey*, Bernadette com *Pride and Prejudice* e Sylvia com *Persuasion*. A maneira como interagem com seus romances escolhidos diz muito não apenas sobre cada um e suas circunstâncias, mas também a respeito do mundo em que vivem. Quanto mais nostálgicas e românticas se tornam as noções que apresentam sobre mundo idealizado de Austen, mais claramente podemos perceber as carências que fazem com que assim o percebam. Portanto, o objetivo desta tese é apresentar uma leitura de *The Jane Austen Book Club* através da aproximação com a obra de Austen, e assim entender o que as personagens de Fowler estão procurando, e por quê. A premissa é que essa busca revela muito a respeito do mundo contemporâneo. No âmbito da literatura, tomando Austen e Fowler como autoras que revelam os protocolos de leitura de suas épocas, espero explicitar algumas das razões do fascínio exercido por Austen sobre o leitor de hoje. Para tanto, utilizo como apoio teórico o contraste entre os conceitos de modernidade sólida e modernidade líquida propostos por Zygmunt Bauman, especialmente em relação às considerações sobre os termos fluidez, ética, velocidade, desimpedimento e medo.

Palavras-Chave: 1. Literaturas de Língua Inglesa. 2. *The Jane Austen Book Club*. 3. Karen Joy Fowler. 4. Jane Austen. 5. Zygmunt Bauman. 6. Recepção.

ABSTRACT

Almost two hundred years separate Karen Joy Fowler from Jane Austen. The latter is a great English literary icon, author to six of the best treasured novels in English literature, admired for her style, wit and subtlety in the delineation of her characters and their social relations. The former is a contemporary awarded American Sci-fi and Fantasy writer, author to the novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, which is the corpus of the present dissertation. In spite of the wide distance in time, subject matter, and even in literary stature that separates them, both authors are deeply involved in the investigation of human nature and human bonds. *The Jane Austen Book Club* not only pays homage to Jane Austen, it also offers a rich contrast between life as it was, in the 18th Century, in Austen's rural England, and as it is now, in Fowler's present-day sunny California. In Fowler's novel we meet six interesting characters who undergo different kinds of personal crises. They form a book club and meet monthly, during half a year. In each meeting, they discuss one of Jane Austen's novels. Each of them is in charge of leading the discussion on one of the novels. Fowler's book is divided in six chapters, respectively: Jocelyn with *Emma*, Allegra with *Sense and Sensibility*, Prudie with *Mansfield Park*, Grigg with *Northanger Abbey*, Bernadette with *Pride and Prejudice*, and Sylvia with *Persuasion*. The way they interact with their assigned novels tells much not only about them and their circumstances, but also about the world in which they live. The more nostalgic and romantic their notion of Austen's idealized past becomes, the clearer we can identify the circumstances in present-day life that provoke such reactions. The aim of this dissertation is to present a reading of *The Jane Austen Book Club* through an approximation with Austen's work, so as to understand what Fowler's characters are looking for, and why. The premise is that their quest tells about the world we live in nowadays, and about the difficulties we have in dealing with personal relations. To approach the contrast between the solid fictional world of Jane Austen and the liquid fictional world of Karen Joy Fowler, I rely on the theories presented by Zygmunt Bauman, especially on his use of concepts as fluidity, ethics, velocity, disengagement and fear.

Key words: 1. Literatures in English. 2. *The Jane Austen Book Club*. 3. Karen Joy Fowler. 4. Jane Austen. 5. Zygmunt Bauman. 6. Reception Theories.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may be.

Jane Austen, *Emma*

When I was a young girl, I had the same kind of family that almost all of my friends had, with a father, a mother and some siblings. It was very common then that a marriage would reach its end just when one of the parents died. Divorce was not so common at that time, although the practice was already legal. This way, the dissolution of a marriage was not as common as it is nowadays. In those times, my understanding of family was the union of a man and a woman, and their offspring. This understanding was part of my childhood and also adolescence. After a gap of years, when adulthood arrived, I realized that our society and some values were changing. Nowadays, with the loosening of some strict conventions, circumstances are different. Now I have a daughter, and most of her friends belong in families that went through divorce, or were rearranged by new marriages. There are also a number of alternative arrangements, such as the union of two mothers and their children, two fathers and their children, a single parent and his or her children and several other kinds of family arrangement. Things are now much different from the way they were in my childhood. I do not mean to add here a judgment of value concerning this change. As in all such cases, there are naturally many things that improved and many things that were lost in this new configuration of things. My point here is simply to stress that matters concerning family relations are different from what they were some decades ago. I take these new family configurations at face value, as a sign of cultural change.

As a consequence, the role of the family as the nucleus of social life has also been displaced. Extended families, friends, schools and similar entities have somewhat substituted

for the traditional homestead, which for so long had been the source of inspiration for many authors and historians. In this sense, since family is a social microcosm, examining it might offer material for the understanding of the changes a given society undergoes.

As the English historian Lawrence Stone puts it, “the microcosm of the family is used to open a window on to this wider landscape of cultural change” (STONE, 1990, p. 22). Since this dissertation is written from within the field of literary studies, and as whenever we speak, we speak from a certain place, the main interest I pursue here relates to the status of literature. If families change, if life has changed, so have cultural norms and practices. As a consequence to all that, inevitable aesthetic and structural changes are to take place in the field of art as well. My dissertation proposes a stroll through such new fields, and the literary corpus I propose is the novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, by American contemporary author Karen Joy Fowler. This novel, written in 2004, juxtaposes the two contexts to be analyzed, family relations as they are now, in contemporary California, and as they were in Jane Austen’s time, in rural England. As both the United States today, and England at the rise of the 19th Century, represent the most powerful political and economic structures of their times, they can be considered equivalent fields of experimentation for the purposes of my research.

I start, thus, with the fictional worlds of these two authors, Austen and Fowler. The former uses family life (its configuration, and its problems) as the center of interest from which all the rest derives. Austen’s fiction mirrors, records, and reveals, the values of the eighteenth century rural English society in which it is embedded. Karen Joy Fowler, as Austen, deals on the same themes, also from a very feminine perspective¹, but from within her own paradigm of time and space, revealing the ways of present life. Although performed in a different way, the focus of investigation remains the interest in human bonds within a narrative family scope.

Not to skip the tradition of using the famous *Austen’s sentence* in a work that is somehow related to her, I say that “It is a truth universally acknowledged that...” the writing of every dissertation functions as a psychological plunge into the self, as an investigation and an exorcizing of one’s personal demons. One cannot write a dissertation without revealing oneself, therefore I start this investigation by admitting that the force that triggers my research

¹ I mean by feminine perspective the fact that most of Fowler’s characters are female, also because those stories are written by two women presenting their ideas in relation to female dilemmas.

is the need to understand, and to adapt to, the increasing pace of change the world I live in is experiencing at present. My excuse is that probably every other dweller of this world has a similar need, and my hope is that the trip we embark on now may be useful to us all.

The reason why I bring Karen Joy Fowler's *The Jane Austen Book Club* as the corpus to be analyzed is that this link between contemporary America and Austen's rural England background comprises exactly the time span I mean to investigate in regards to the changes of paradigms concerning personal and family relations in which these two fictional universes are inserted in. The very fact that Fowler chooses Austen's fictional universe as an interlocutor indicates the extent of the increasing appeal exerted by Jane Austen's fiction in the reading context of the 21st century. In the last two decades, not only have Austen's novels reached a peak in their sales and critical fortune, but also the author has been turned into a cultural icon. These things have been celebrated both by the academic world and the movie industry. When I submitted my dissertation project to the graduate program, in 2009, my research was to be the first carried out at UFRGS about Jane Austen. In two years' time, however, we have five other works related to this author being developed here. Surely, there must be a reason for this phenomenon. I can say that Austen's thematic is extremely agreeable to the contemporary audience; or, conversely, that there is something in the memory of such an idealized rural arcadia context that fills an empty space our contemporary world is craving to fulfill.

To understand this intriguing puzzle, I need to confront the contexts of Austen's rural gentry and Fowler's Californian contemporary middle class. The first challenge lies in keeping neutral, because of the tendency we have, when dealing with the past, to concentrate on the good memories and forget the bad parts of it. Or, as L. P. Hartley puts it in the first sentence of *The Go-Between*, "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." (HARTLEY, 2004, p. 17) Therefore, in order to approach the English social context of the late 18th Century I will count on the support granted by English historian Lawrence Stone author to the book *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 – 1800* and the English historian George Macaulay Trevelyan author to the book *English Social History*.

Out of the several remarkable thinkers who study our contemporary age, I choose to use the theoretical support offered by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, not only because of his ideas, but also because I think his terminology very appropriate to the ends of this investigation. Bauman coined the expression *Liquid Modernity* to refer to the characteristics of our time, as opposed to the preceding *Solid Society*, which was characterized by stability

and repetition, when changes were neither as drastic nor as swift as they are now. The three words used by Bauman to define liquid society are *flexibility*, *volatility* and *fragmentation*. These features influence several current social models and structures. For Bauman, traditional institutions such as family, class, religion, marriage, have become frail and unstable. They need to be redefined (BAUMAN, 2000, p. 147), but the very speed of the alterations prevents the settling of a new ethics. According to Bauman, even the concept of love has changed in liquid times. All things considered, it is only natural that people now and then may find themselves nostalgic of the calm and steadiness of the solid rural society presented in Jane Austen's novels. Present-day readers tend to discard the claustrophobic, prejudiced, misogynistic dimensions of that past world and concentrate on the sense of protection fixed and durable ties may convey. At least this is what happens with the six protagonists in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, the fourth novel published by Fowler, this enjoyable story which pays homage to Jane Austen's fiction.

In urban present-day California, we meet six interesting characters who have two things in common: difficulties dealing with personal relations, and a deep interest in Jane Austen's stories. In this narrative, each character is responsible for promoting a monthly meeting to discuss an Austen novel. They form a book club, and as they are six, each becomes responsible for one of Austen's six novels (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion*). As happens in Austen, Fowler's novel is about the perils of human relationship. Each character interacts with her/his novel in a way that reflects their personal difficulties in dealing with emotions. Within these intertwined stories (Fowler's and Austen's), the reader witnesses moments of partnership and separation involving wives, husbands, friends, mothers, daughters, brother and sisters, son and father, lovers, encompassing practically all kinds of human family bonds.

Through Fowler's perspective, Austen's characters seem to come to life as modern and up to date. The six chapters of *The Jane Austen Book Club* refer to the six protagonists, each one responsible for one of the Austen novels. Among them we have five women, Jocelyn, Sylvia, Bernadette, Prudie and Allegra, and one man, Grigg. As in Austen's stories, Fowler's novel has a predominantly female dominant plot. It is curious to see how the stories mingle, and how much the protagonist in each chapter resembles the correspondent protagonist in Austen's fiction.

In comparing these two fictional worlds we realize that, in spite of the differences in time, space and context, there is still so much that remains the same as concerning human emotions and feelings. The difference is that the points of perception have changed in opposite directions. For example, in Austen's time marriage was one of the few possibilities for most women in order to succeed socially and not to become a burden to their families. Nowadays, on the other hand, many women avoid getting married or having children because that might prove a hindrance in their professional development. It seems as if the wheel has come full circle, and what is a solution in one time becomes a problem in another time. In both situations, however, the lack of one of these dimensions - the personal or the social - seems to provoke a sensation of failure and a feeling of great loss. Fowler's novel tackles on the same issues related to human bonds and at one time comforting heavy aspects of family life. This story also opens the doors to a rich study of these two complementary societies, showing what each one has that the other lacks. On the one hand, things are always changing; on the other hand, human beings remain basically the same. The question I pose, that fuels this research, is: "How do personal relations stand amid all such changes?"

Bauman, in the book *Liquid Love*, proposes that contemporary men and women are eager for companionship, "despairing at being abandoned to their wits and feeling easily disposable, yearning for security of togetherness and for a helping hand to count on in a moment of trouble, and so desperate to 'relate' " (BAUMAN, 2003, p. viii). However, in spite of this plea for companionship, Bauman believes that they fear that such relationship can harm their freedom, "in a world of rampant 'individualization' relationships are mixed blessing, they vacillate between sweet dream and nightmare" (Idem, p. viii). In addition, Bauman claims that, "human attention tends nowadays to be focused on the satisfaction that relationships are expected to bring precisely because somehow they have not been found fully and truly satisfactory; and if they do satisfy, the price of the satisfaction they bring has often been found to be excessive and unacceptable" (Ibid, p. ix).

Bauman's description of this double feeling stresses the ideas of satisfaction and desire. In Austen's world, the predominant words could be duty and subsistence. Regardless of how enticing and seminal the cultural discussion is, nonetheless we are dealing with novels, which are textual productions. This aspect of the matter is investigated with the help of American literary critic Peter Brooks' ideas about plot and desire, contributed in the book *Reading for the Plot*. To him,

Plots [are] a viable and necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world, and (...) in working out and working through plots, as writers and readers, [we are] engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning (BROOKS, 1984, p. xii).

The relevance of Brooks' input is that it brings the role of the reader into the issue. Not only are we the readers, but also Fowler's novel's protagonists are readers, they read stories and search for meaning, meaning to the story and, mainly, to their own lives.

With the support granted by the above mentioned critics, theoreticians and historians, we can approach the aspects of *The Jane Austen Book Club* that offer the key for the fascination the contemporary readers feel towards the mysteries of Jane Austen's fictional world. Lawrence Stone's documentation reveals Austen's society; Bauman helps us with his perception of contemporary liquid life; and Brooks discloses the structural secrets of the narrative plot. With all this, we can investigate the new ways of perceiving human relationships within a family circle. This route is probably as good as any other chosen, but it is filled with the thinkers and authors I believe are pertinent to this work.

Additionally, this dissertation also aims to do what Fowler's novel does, to pay homage and celebrate Jane Austen's genius. Austen's social criticism, and critical perception are so keen that we sometimes draw much on these subjects, and do not emphasize as much as we should the exquisite refinement of her aesthetics. Her treatment of the themes, as in the case with Shakespeare, is never to be dated, because she deals with certain aspects of human emotions, which remain the same, regardless of any possible changes in patterns of behavior. In Claudia L. Johnson's terms, "Austen is a cultural fetish; loving – or hating – her has typically implied meanings well beyond any encoded in her works" (JOHNSON, 1997, p. 212). The same way we can regard the words of Virginia Woolf,

Here was a woman about the year 1800 writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching. That was how Shakespeare wrote, I thought ... and when people compare Shakespeare and Jane Austen, they may mean that the minds of both had consumed all impediments; and for that reason we do not know Jane Austen and we do not know Shakespeare, and for that reason Jane Austen pervades every word that she wrote, and so does Shakespeare (WOOLF, 1957, p. 50-51).

Jane Austen has presented her readers, for more than two hundred years, a rich feminine understanding perception of the world, as well as an enticing overview of the English rural society of early nineteenth century. Stories of apparently ordinary people living apparently simple lives in the apparently restricted environment of the English countryside have proved to be very popular until nowadays. Austen portrays with mastery the growth of her characters while they learn how to deal with their inner and outer problems and how to master their own lives. No wonder that now we have this myriad of references to Austen as therapy, as self-aid, as a guide for survival in liquid times. Jane Austen has an outstanding talent for unveiling every ordinary situation as an interesting documentation of a given people and society. In so doing, with her pinch of irony and wit, Austen turns her work a-temporal and enchants readers all over the world.

The Jane Austen Book Club stands on its own merit as a literary piece. It can perfectly be read, understood, appreciated and enjoyed by people who do not know Jane Austen's stories. However, the more of an Austen reader one is, the more one can take from Fowler's work. This applies to the plot relations, to the brilliant pieces of criticism the characters sometimes formulate, and even to the influence of Austen we perceive in Fowler's style.

The intertextual Fowler-Austen exchanges deal with some romantic icons that haunt our imagination, with some unforgettable love couples as Mr. Darcy and Lizzy Bennet, Emma Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley, Marianne Dashwood and Colonel Brandon, Anne Elliot and Capitan Wentworth. In the reading of *The Jane Austen Book Club* it is possible to identify the influence of Austen's characters upon Fowler's characters' attitudes and decisions.

In terms of structure, this dissertation is devised in three chapters. The first two are divided in three subchapters each, and the last in seven. The first chapter, titled "Forming a Book Club", offers an introduction to the author Karen Joy Fowler and her style as a writer; shows how Fowler pays homage to Jane Austen; and presents the structure of the novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*. The second chapter, "Solid Times and Liquid Times" presents the thought of Zygmunt Bauman and the concept of liquid times and solid times; relates these concepts with the fictional universes of Austen and Fowler; and considers the circumstances of those who live in liquid times. The third chapter is divided into seven parts, one for each of the chapters we have in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, and each revisiting one of Jane Austen's six novels. And one more for the epilogue.

With this panorama of the dissertation, we start now our adventure, with a plunge into the fictional worlds of Jane Austen and Karen Joy Fowler.



2 FORMING A BOOK CLUB

Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworked in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue.

Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*

As Peter Brooks reminds us in the epigraph above, “our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative” (BROOKS, 1984, p. 3). We create stories, tell them, and hear them told. Some of these stories are creative and well structured, and some are not. Some people are good readers; others can be both good readers and writers. I have been told that reading improves writing. Although I do not know the percentage of the readers to whom the saying applies, I can certainly point two successful cases: Jane Austen and Karen Joy Fowler, two good readers who became professional writers. Among the authors whose presence we can feel in the style of Jane Austen we have, for instance, Ann Radcliffe, Henry Fielding and Lawrence Sterne. In the case of Fowler, the presence of Jane Austen can be perceived not only in the plot and in the theme of the novel, but also in Fowler’s style as a writer, in the elegant shaping of the sentences, in the philosophical twists attributed to simple little things, in the wit and humor spread all over her text.

The Jane Austen Book Club, opens with a statement: “Each of us has a private Austen.” As happens with Austen, Fowler starts her work by inviting us, the readers, into that “us”, and we instantly become a part of the story to be read. In truth, this sensation chases the reader along the narrative. Also like in Austen, there is a very complex command of narrative point of view in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Each different chapter presents the perception of

the world of the host to the Austen novel being commented there, but this perception is influenced by two further objects. The first is the dialogue established with the specific Austen novel dealt with in the chapter, a treat that can only be enjoyed by those who have read the novel in question. And the second is this intriguing overall narrator, who intertwines the chapters, sometimes treating the characters as a third party (a first person plural narrator), and other times including itself in the group, through the use of the pronoun “we”, as if the story was being told by one of the six protagonists. This form of narrating a story, sometimes including, sometimes excluding the reader and the narrator is probably as strange as Austen’s constant shifts in point of view concerning Lizzy’s perceptions about things, in *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, has sounded to the early nineteenth-century contemporary audience. Ultimately, the result of this intriguing narrative technique used by Fowler places the reader within the discussions of the book club, feeling like a member who is also paying homage to Jane Austen. In this sense, I can say that this is a book meant to be read by *Janeites*.²

In order to explore the interesting fictional universe of this novel, the first part of this chapter retraces some facts about Fowler’s development and experience both as a reader and as a writer. The second part considers Fowler as a reader of Austen, and the third explores the structure of *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

2.1 MEETING KAREN JOY FOWLER’S VARIED STYLE

The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies.

Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*

Jane Austen has been read and admired for two centuries, and I think I am entitled to say that her considerable critical fortune has never seen a higher peak than the one we live through in our days. As happens with the great canon names, this position has been conquered through the number of innovations she contributed to the novel as a genre and to the treatment

² This term starts in a short story by Rudyard Kipling, about a group of soldiers who were admirers of Jane Austen’s works. “They have formed a shadow Masonic lodge based on their deep admiration and extensive knowledge of Jane Austen’s novels, which are a source of consolation and support as they undergo the horrors of World War I trench warfare.” This information is available at http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/novel_19c/austen/janeites.html. Accessed on September 5th, 2012.

of the themes she specializes in, namely social interaction and personal relations. After so many years, when so much has been said and written by fans, readers, researchers, critics and theoreticians, people seem to have more to say and write about, no matter how difficult it is to find something new to add into the discussion. The simple act of opening an internet search triggers thousands of pages leading into the study of her life and work. Some of these pages take us to Karen Joy Fowler, whose stature as a writer is none as tall as that of iconic Jane Austen, but who has a solid and well established reputation of her own. Fowler has been writing and been awarded for almost thirty years now, and researches on her work – like mine – start to open their way. Working with Austen and Fowler, therefore, is a task that demands contrary efforts. In the case of the former, the considerable amount of bibliography available may prove frightening and discouraging; in the case of the latter, several gaps and unexplored territories must be filled up with research and experimentation. That is why this initial part of the work introduces some elements that inform us about aspects of Fowler's circumstances, experience, career, and work.

Karen Joy Fowler is an American female author in her early sixties now, author to six novels and five short story collections so far. In 1987 she won her first award, the John W. Campbell Award for best new science fiction writer³. She was born in 1950 in Bloomington, Indiana, had an ordinary childhood and moved with her family to Palo Alto, California, when she was twelve. There she studied, forged her career as a respected sci-fi author, met her husband and constituted a family. Fowler inherited her family's love for books. Her first experiences as a reader started before she could read them. She liked to listen to her father reading stories to her older brother, and pretended they were intended to her. Also, she loved when her teachers read books in class.

Fowler's personal and professional lives have always mingled. She attended the University of California, where she majored in political science. It was there that she met her husband, to whom she got wed at the same year she graduated and started her Masters. On the last year of her Masters, she got pregnant of the first of their two children. While she raised the kids, Fowler took a course on creative writing. On her thirtieth birthday, she decided to become a writer. As happens to most professional women in our days, her personal and professional experiences are intertwined, she forged her career and formed her family at the same time, an experience that is stressing and has its risks. Still, I cannot help thinking about

³ Further well informed data about Karen Joy Fowlers biography is available at <http://www.sfga.org/members/fowler/KJFbiblio.html> . Accessed on October 10th, 2012.

how much Jane Austen would have appreciated such an opportunity, both as a person and as a writer.

Fowler initiated her career with short stories. In 1986, she published her first collection, under the name of *Artificial Things*. Then, she started writing novels. Five years later in 1991, she was awarded a Commonwealth Club Medal for her first novel *Sarah Canary*. In 1996, she published her second novel *The Sweetheart Season*. The third novel came in 2001 under the name of *Sister Noon*; this same novel made Fowler a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award in 2002. But to this dissertation, the most important book is her fourth novel, *The Jane Austen Book Club*, published in 2004. This novel did not grant her any awards, or nominated her to any contest; however it helped put her career in evidence, because it is a work related with Jane Austen. The simple fact that Austen's name is on the cover of her book attracted the attention of a wide number of Austen's readers. The reception was so intense that three years later, in 2007, was made a movie version of *The Jane Austen Book Club*. In 2008, Fowler won the Nebula Award for the second time for Best Short Story for her 2007 story "Always". At the same year, she published her fifth novel *Wit's End*. In 2009, the short story "The Pelican Bar" won a Shirley Jackson award, and a World Fantasy Award in 2010. In May 2013, she released her new novel *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*.

As it is possible to see, from the beginning of her career Fowler has been alternating the publication of novels and short story books, and this fruitful production has been rewarded with awards and nominations to important prizes. Her two children are adults now, and her wedding is still on. Even after she became an acknowledged author, she remained in her group of creative writing. The group would meet regularly to read and discuss their works in progress. Eventually, Fowler became the leader of the group. As Alan C. Elms observes in an article for the periodical SFRA Review, when he refers to his twenty years in this group of creative writers led by Fowler, she is a different kind of leader, "she works as an equal rather than as The Leader" (ELMS, 2008, p. 6). He also informs us about how interesting things were when, during their meetings, Fowler would bring them her works (short stories and chapters of the books she was writing) to share impressions with the other members of the group. As Elms puts it, by doing this Fowler gives the group the opportunity of witnessing her process of creation and the course of her development as a writer. Elms also tells us that, initially, as happens with many writers, Fowler's works were refused by some publishers, but

then things turned out well and she found a way to forge her career as a literary writer. Fowler's experience within this group of writers, and the support she got from them, seems to influence her process of writing and style. This is possibly one of the reasons why she conducts her narratives giving the impression that she wants to share them with the readers. Her texts often deal explicitly with the experience of writing a text. The very fact that we have a group of readers as protagonists in *The Jane Austen Book Club* evinces this mark of her style as a writer.

Differently from the case with Austen, instead of specializing in one subject, Fowler sometimes varies her subject. Besides novels, she also writes short stories, poetry and pieces of criticism. And as most of authors, she demonstrates to be a good reader of what is happening in the world around her. This can be felt in an interview for the online journal "The Short Review", spotlighting short story collections. Referring to the fact that her tone in some stories is so dark, she says that she is "actually a reasonably cheerful person, day to day. Though the state of the world is always cause for alarm and depression".⁴ Another mark of Fowler's style that may derive from her experience as a sci-fi author is the use of the novelties of technology, which are so present in our twentieth-first century contemporary life. Fowler often mixes in her stories poems of canonical writers as epigraphs, displayed in e-mails and blogs, blurs the limits between reality and fiction by using current day historical facts spread along the narrative to give a sense of truth, and brings turmoil into our expectations as readers by playing with her multi-faceted narrators. Through her characteristic narrative resources and mysterious themes she invites the readers to be part of the stories that she impresses in their minds. Also in this she has the mark of a contemporary writer, for the role of the reader and the role of the character sometimes blend, because her works instigate and motivate the readers to access her stories as if they were characters belonging into that fictional world. As to their plots, Fowler's stories vary so much that it takes some time until the reader realizes what the recurring items that permeate them are. The best way to achieve that is by reading her body of works more than once. In order to exemplify this, I will now briefly comment on some stories written by Fowler in which some particularities are recurrent. Among them I underline the short story ("Always") and two of her novels (respectively: *Sarah Canary*, *Wit's End*) which I compare to *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

⁴ The whole interview is available at <http://www.theshortreview.com/authors/KarenJoyFowler.htm> . Accessed on March 24th, 2013.

“Always”, the Nebula awarded short story, was originally published in the April/May 2007 issue of *Asimov’s Science Fiction*. Nowadays, it is collected in the 2010 publication *What I Didn’t See and Other Stories*. In this story, it is possible to identify at least one similarity to *The Jane Austen Book Club*, which is the presence of different narrative voices. In “Always” there is a first person plural narrator, a third person singular narrator, as well as a first person singular narrator. This mixture of voices is one of the characteristics which I can underline as part of Fowler’s style. Also, in terms of similarities recurrent in her stories I can underline the thematic which she now and then repeats. For instance, the theme of immortality presented both in “Always” and Fowler’s first novel *Sarah Canary*. In that novel, the character Harold considers himself immortal and also sees immortality in Sara Canary which is the main character of the story.

Another aspect recurrent in Fowler’s style is the re-envisioning of some well known stories and authors. We witness that in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, in *Sarah Canary*, and also in *Wit’s End*. In the former we have Fowler’s characters’ stories mimicking Austen’s characters’ stories. In *Sarah Canary* it is possible to say that the novel addresses L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, which was published in 1900. In Fowler’s story, the characters Chinaman, B.J and Adelaide (could be seen as a rereading of Tin Man, Cowardly Lion and Straw Man) pursue their individual and mutual dreams, and face various perils during their journey in an attempt to return Sarah Canary (Dorothy) to her place of origin (home). Indeed, the common thread between those novels is the journey back. In *Wit’s End*, Rima Lansill echoes Austen’s Catherine Morland, of *Northanger Abbey*, in her involvement with ghosts and Gothic themes. Her pursuit of the ghosts of her past in her godmother’s house is similar to Catherine’s search for mysterious stories in Mr. Tilney’s house. Another characteristic common to *The Jane Austen Book Club* and *Wit’s End* is the use of external materials, such as historical facts, or quotations written by well known writers spread along the narrative. In *The Jane Austen Book Club* the external materials are excerpts from Austen’s novels. In *Wit’s End*, they appear in form of blogs and internet files, like Wikipedia entries.

In terms of structure, Fowler’s *Wit’s End* presents other similarities with *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Both stories have an intriguing narrative structure, with different layers of discourse, which forces the reader to be attentive so as not to lose track. In *The Jane Austen Book Club* the reader should mind the contrast involving Austen’s stories and Fowler’s characters’ stories, because they are intertwined along the narrative. In *Wit’s End*, Fowler

plays with the act of writing and with creating the story, as if she partakes the experience of writing with the reader, as she is used to doing with her group of creative writing. In this narrative, she mixes the actual and the fictional worlds⁵ within the same story. In the beginning of the narrative the reader is informed that the protagonist of Fowler's novel, Rima, finds out that someone she knows in real life, her father, also exists in the fictional universe of a book that she is reading.

No matter how different the settings of her books are, Fowler demonstrates to be invariably a great storyteller. Within her narratives there are usually a number of interconnections and stories within stories. This varied style of writing invites readers to plunge into her fictional universe, and offers them a clear sensation of being part of the story, either as a member of the book club, as in the case of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, or as a reader of a printed story where one reads the story of one's actual life, as in *Wit's End*. It is possible to say that these literary resources and varied style presented by Fowler may be a sign of the liquid world the author inhabits.

As this brief section about Fowler reaches its end, we turn now into the comments about the role played by Jane Austen's world and novels in the shaping of *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

2.2 PAYING HOMAGE TO JANE AUSTEN

The great thing about books was the solidity of the written word. You might change and your reading might change as a result, but the book remained whatever it had always been. A good book was surprising the first time through, less so the second.

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

In an introduction to a 2006 edition to *The Complete Novels* of Jane Austen, Karen Joy Fowler, as a literary critic, presents Jane Austen as a genius "who occupies the rare

⁵ This terms actual and fictional world are borrowed from Umberto Eco's book *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*.

intersection of academic and popular culture” (FOWLER, 2006, p. vii). In so doing, Fowler searches for some explanations in order to understand why Jane Austen is admired by both: academics who read her books as researchers and scholars, and ordinary readers who read Austen for entertainment and enjoyment. As she does not find reasonable answers for this question, she ends up reaching the following conclusion: a genius cannot be explained, if so, it ceases to be a genius. Equally, when the English critic and writer Anthony Burgess writes about Romanticism in his book *English Literature* he finds difficulty in placing Jane Austen in a specific period of literary history. Therefore, he ends up saying that Jane Austen cannot appear among the romantic writers, which are her contemporaries. Neither could she be categorized as a romantic because, in spite of being contemporary to the romantics, Austen’s aesthetic does not present the features which are characteristic to the Romantic Movement. Thus, Burgess decides to open a special entry to Austen and place her apart from the other writers because, in his opinion, she is “unique” (BURGESS, 1990, p. 175). Let us also take in consideration the British botanist and intellectual Reginald Farrer’s⁶, who thus speaks about Austen and art:

Art is a mysterious entity, outside and beyond daily life, whether its manifestation be by painting or sculpture or literature. If it use outside events at all, it must subdue them to its medium, and become their master, not their mere vehicle. So hundred thousand novels come and go; but Jane Austen can never be out of date, because she never was in any particular date (that is to say, never imprisoned in any), but is coextensive with human nature (FARRER, 2002, p. 322).

Farrer underlines Austen’s genius as an artist who never ceases to be important to the understanding of some specific aspects of human nature. Taking all those considerations about Austen’s talent and merits into account, it is possible to state that Jane Austen’s work deserves more than being explained and classified; it deserves to be honored and praised. This is what so many authors of derivative works have done for some decades. And so does Fowler in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Through her six characters and their intelligent responses to Austen’s novels, Fowler expresses her admiration, love, and respect for Austen’s work.

⁶ This text was published in *Quarterly Review* in July, 1917 for the centenary of Austen’s death. The version I use was also reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, 2002.

In an essay named “Sequels”, Professor Deidre Shauna Lynch says that there are many terms which are used for a derivative work, such as: “sequels, prequels, retellings and spin-offs” (LYNCH, 2005, p. 160). Those are books which choose a specific topic or novel to pay homage to a given author. Derivative works can be books, films, television series, internet-based adaptation, etc. Among them I can cite Jon Spence’s *Becoming Jane Austen* (2003) which is a biography based on Austen’s historical life, which later became the fuel to the 2007 fictional movie *Becoming Jane*. There is also the notable Guy Andrews’s four chapter series *Lost in Austen* (2008), a fantasy about Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* in which the protagonist, Amanda Price, an English present-day fan of Austen swaps places with Elizabeth Bennet. Similarly, there is the American drama web series *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012) written by Hank Green and Bernie Su’s which is another adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, where the story is conveyed in form of vlogs⁷. The reason why I selected those specific derivative works among many others has to do with the fact they represent exactly the idea I want to express here. *Becoming Jane*, for instance, play with the idea of a precise biography of Austen which we actually did not have. The second one, *Lost in Austen* represents, in my opinion, the desire of Austen’s readers of plunging into Austen’s universe and meeting Mr. Darcy which is what Amanda Price really did. And *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, can be seen as a very recent representation of Austen’s appeal, and also as a representative of our Liquid Times within this new format of representing art.

And then, we have Fowler’s novel which is the target of this dissertation. She chooses to write a novel that praises, simultaneously, Austen’s six canonic novels, through six characters: Jocelyn, Allegra, Prudie, Grigg, Bernadette and Sylvia. Each of them reads a book, brings that book into their personal lives, and creates nice pieces of criticism about Austen’s stories. Once a month these characters meet for the book club discussion. In these meetings their comments about Austen and their comments about their personal lives get intertwined. Within that fictional construct, those real persons mix their real lives with Austen’s fictional characters’ lives. And they use Austen’s characters’ experiences to understand and solve their own problems. Here, Fowler’s technique reminds me of Aristotle’s notion of art: “arts imitate men in action but they do it differently” (*Poetics*, 2000, p. 5). In Fowler’s case, her artistical creation is imitating Austen’s art; which means that Fowler’s characters are imitating Austen’s characters’ attitudes. This demonstrates Fowler’s creativity, she creates an

⁷ Vlogs, also known as video blogs, or video logs, are a form of blog for which the medium is video. They are also a form of web television. This source of information is available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vlogs> . Accessed on March 8th, 2013.

environment in which her art is imitating ordinary men in action: her characters are reading and discussing Austen's books as it happens in real life. The reason why Fowler does that can be searched in Aristotle's studies:

The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons [...] the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring [...] For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause. (Ibid, 2000, p. 7)

Fowler, at one time, pays homage to Austen and borrows from her and from her style, in the same way that Fowler's characters use Austen's novels as a pretext to meet other people, as a means of enjoying and enriching themselves, and as an aid to solve their personal problems. For Lynch, in her essay "Cult of Jane Austen", Fowler's characters "make the novelist [Austen] their oracle, using a 'Magic 8-Ball' they have filled with quotations as their instruments of divination, they likewise endow her with power to link the mundane and the transcendent" (LYNCH, 2005, p. 116).

Fowler's characters do not read Austen as academic readers, who address her work to do a scientific research about a specific topic, but as ordinary readers and admirers who read her novels for the pleasure they grant. I do not see this as a problem; on the contrary, for me as an academic student and researcher of literature, the appreciation and understanding of a piece of art goes beyond and precedes any academic study. A piece of literary work can be either/both studied and explored through scientific knowledge or/and emotionally felt and admired by its readers. That is what Fowler's characters show when they read Austen and share their own understanding of her novels. They present their own interpretation, and their display of feelings, in a way that, in the end, they become connected to one another as friends. By doing so, they put in evidence the importance of the reader as the audience of a piece of art. In his book *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* Umberto Eco says that there are two kinds of readers: the empirical reader and the model reader. For him, the empirical reader can be anyone who reads a text and uses it "as a container of their own passions, which may come from outside the text or which the text may arouse by chance" (ECO, 2004, p. 8). The model

reader in Eco's terms is "a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create. If a text begins with 'once upon a time', it sends out a signal that immediately enables it to select its own model reader, who must be a child, or at least somebody willing to accept something that goes beyond the commonsensical and reasonable" (Ibid, p. 9). Thus, following Eco's ideas, it is possible to state that Fowler's characters can be classified as both empirical and model readers. There are moments in which those readers plunge into Austen's universe, accept the rules of her game and go beyond the commonsensical and reasonable to make the most of Austen's stories. During those moments they come up with interesting pieces of criticism. However, there are also other moments in which their emotions emerge and they use Austen's stories to search for solutions to their own personal blunders. The mixture of different roles gives an interesting balance to Fowler's novel. This trick places her in the same position of Austen, when we think that their novels attract both publics, ordinary readers and academics.

Furthermore, as Fowler puts it in the epigraph above, once a book is written it cannot change, its content becomes forever solid. Nevertheless, in Fowler's story the reader and the act of reading undergo changes. Each time a book is read, it shows something different, a detail which was not detected in the previous readings. Equally, the reader becomes more experienced and attentive to particular details. So does Fowler, who had the opportunity of reading Austen and turned this experience as a reader into the experience of a writer by creating a piece of art, a novel which also becomes a solid story.

One might ask why Fowler chooses Austen, among so many important writers, as her interlocutor. Maybe because they live in such different (complementary) worlds. Fowler is a 21st century wife and mother who leads a hectic life in the U.S.; Austen is a single genteel lady from rural England. As happens in *Lost in Austen*, when Amanda Price and Lizzie Bennett swap their lives, Fowler's and Austen's symmetrical circumstances might seem fascinating to each. As I mentioned that Fowler is from the United States, it also occurred to me that it is the land of JASNA (Jane Austen Society of North America), the world's biggest Jane Austen society, with a well-established tradition of readers of Jane Austen. JASNA was founded in 1979 by a great-great grand-niece of Austen named Joan Austen-Leigh. In a local meeting, members of JASNA may discuss an Austen's novel, hear a lecture about her or the Regency period, enjoy a Box Hill picnic, or even learn English country dancing. Through these activities this nonprofit organization created a tradition of reading and admiring Jane Austen throughout the United States, Canada as well as in a dozen of foreign countries. So,

when characters decide to join in their own Jane Austen book club, they are joining this practice which is becoming more and more common all over their country. By extension, we might even say that Fowler's novel can also be taken as a homage to JASNA too, as the meetings we have in the book mimic some of the meetings which JASNA promotes to their members. In chapter five the group meets in Library Gallery a place where they can eat and dance, which is similar to the balls we have in Austen's novels and in JASNA's meetings.

2.3 DECIPHERING A STORY: *THE JANE AUSTEN BOOK CLUB*

Words were invented so that lies could be told. If you want to know someone, don't listen to what they say. Look at them.

Karen Joy Fowler, *Sister Noon*

When Karen Joy Fowler decided to create a fictional universe in which the main characters were readers and admirers of a given canonical author, she might have no idea of what to expect from the audience of her work. It is always difficult to say what makes a story be considered good for its readers, what elements relate to its plot, characters, structure, theme, and style. Some stories are well accepted from the start, there are others which take some time to be accepted, and even respected, by the readers. This becomes more complicated when we deal with a subject that is dear for its readers, as is the case with Jane Austen. As an admirer, attentive reader and researcher of Austen's novels, I can say that Fowler was very careful in approaching and dealing with this well-known fictional universe. It is possible to say that her story is not meant to be a contemporary version of Austen's novels and characters. Although the similarities can be clearly identified, Fowler avoids competing with Austen in Austen's territory. She rather draws on the longing present-day characters' show for the things they miss, things that existed (and were even a problem and a burden) in Austen's time, and that no longer exist nowadays. One of the goals of this dissertation is to find out what is it that Fowler's characters are searching for in this fictional eighteenth century England. In order to initiate this pursuit, I use the remaining part of this section to explore the

structure of Fowler's story, whereas the deeper analysis of Fowler's story will be developed in Chapter Three.

Structurally, *The Jane Austen Book Club* is a novel of about three hundred pages divided respectively into a prologue, which presents the six characters of the story and their ideas in relation to Jane Austen. After that we have six chapters titled as months of the year (from March to September). November comes as the epilogue. As appendices, we have a reader's guide which contains brief summaries of Austen's novels; the response which presents some pieces of criticism about Austen's novels from 1812 to 2003; some questions for discussion in the name of all the six characters; and finally the acknowledgments.

In the prologue, we are guided by an intriguing unknown first person plural narrator⁸ which introduces us to the characters. Through this narrator we witness how Jane Austen is seen by those characters, with the exception of Grigg, who is a novice in Austenland ("none of us knew who Grigg's Austen was" [FOWLER, 2004, p. 5]). In Jocelyn's opinion, Jane Austen is a wonderful writer who "wrote novels about love and courtship, but never married" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 1). Similarly, she proposes that *Emma* is a book that "no one has ever read it and wished to be married" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 2). For the elder member of the group, Bernadette, "Austen was a comic genius. Her characters, her dialogue remained genuinely funny, not like Shakespeare's jokes, which amused you only because they were Shakespeare's and you owed him that" (Ibid, p. 1-2). For the recently divorced – and probably the reason for the creation of the book club – Sylvia, "Austen was a daughter, a sister, an aunt. Sylvia's Austen wrote her books in a busy sitting room, read them aloud to her family, yet remained an acute and nonpartisan observer of people. Sylvia's Austen could love and be loved, but it didn't cloud her vision, blunt her judgment" (Ibid, p. 2). Sylvia's daughter Allegra has a different opinion about Austen. For her, "Austen wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of women. If she'd worked in a bookstore, Allegra would have shelved Austen in the horror section" (Ibid, p. 4). The younger, and only still married member of the group, Prudie, sees Austen's books as something which "changed every time you read them, so that one year they were all romances and the next you suddenly noticed Austen's cool, ironic prose" (Ibid, p. 4).

⁸ This interesting and intriguing narrator was chosen as the main theme of an undergraduate monograph completion of Fabiane Marina Amend Ariello, from Universidade Federal do Paraná (2008) which is available at http://www.letras.ufpr.br/documentos/graduacao/monografias/ss_2008/Fabiane_Ariello.pdf. Accessed on March 5th, 2009.

After this brief introduction to Fowler's characters and their opinion about Austen's novels, the story begins. The proposal is to use the six chapters to do a monthly meeting in order to read and discuss Austen's six novels. During these meetings, a member of the book club is responsible for hosting the meeting and holding the discussion of a chosen novel. The group decides to start the discussions with *Emma*, and the one responsible for hosting the meeting is Jocelyn. This way, the story initiates in a warm evening day in March at Jocelyn's house. Interestingly, each chapter has an introductory sentence presenting the theme that will be approached in it as in the following example. I will use the same sentences to introduce the paragraphs that comment on each of these parts.

“CHAPTER ONE in which we gather at Jocelyn's to discuss Emma” - This kind of chapter titling was commonly used by several authors in the past. We have them in Jonathan Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, or Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, to mention but a few. Along thirty pages, the narrator mixes Jocelyn's personal stories through flashbacks with the discussion of *Emma*. In the first two pages of this introductory chapter, the narrator presents the scenery (Jocelyn's house), and some characters: Grigg, Bernadette and Jocelyn. After that we plunge into a flashback meeting of the young friends Jocelyn and Sylvia. Two pages more and the narration returns to the discussion of *Emma*, in a mixture of Fowler's character's opinion about Austen's story and pieces of descriptions and hints about those characters' own lives. Then the story shifts again to a longer flashback on Jocelyn's youth. During four pages the omniscient narrator presents the hardships of an unprotected and unprepared adolescent. After that, the lenses turn to *Emma*, following the same pattern of the previous discussions. The narration goes through in this pace, some pages about the book club, others in flashbacks of Jocelyn's story. Fowler conducts her narrative as if she is holding a camera which goes back and forth through both stories showing what is happening in the present, when they are together discussing Austen's novels, and what has happened in the past in the lives of Fowler's characters. There is a certain parallelism involving the issues raised in the discussions about Austen's story, in Jocelyn's flashbacks, in the fake life Jocelyn's parents lead, and in the secrets, within Austen's *Emma*, involving Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill. The sense of menace in *Emma* proposed by Grigg echoes Jocelyn's misfortunes revealed in the following chapter. Similarly, we have the misunderstandings in the relations of Harriet, Mr. Knightley, Emma and Mr. Elton echoing in the corresponding relations of Jocelyn, Sylvia, Daniel and Tony. Thus, narration goes back and forth along these different levels of narrative, with the help of different narrators. When

the group is discussing Austen's stories there is a plural first person narrator, but in the flashback the narration presents an omniscient voice.

“CHAPTER TWO *in which we read Sense and Sensibility with Allegra*” – has an intriguing beginning. It opens with a list of things that are not found in Austen's novels: “locked-room murders, punishing kisses, girls dressed up as boys (and rarely the reverse), spies, serial killers, cloaks of invisibility, Jungian archetypes, most regrettably, doppelgängers, cats” (Ibid, p. 43). We understand that the narrator is referring to other literary genres which differ from Austen's. This might be a warning for the reader not to demand from one text things that he should expect in other texts. After this exposition of the things that are not present in Austen, chapter two starts with a sentence that introduces the discussion of *Sense and Sensibility*, and then shifts to Allegra's story. This structure seems to follow the same pattern of the previous chapter. This chapter highlights the strange way in which the female members of the book club treat Grigg. They look at him with suspicion, every word he says about Austen is carefully analyzed and more often than not criticized. It seems that his opinion needs to be endorsed. He is clearly the minority there, the outsider whose reading experience is based on sci-fi novels only. If he says something relevant they reluctantly approve and agree with him saying, but if he says something unusual he loses all his credit, as we verify in Sylvia's remark:

Sylvia could imagine no such thing. It was all very well to point out fairytale themes in Austen; Sylvia had done this herself. *Pride and Prejudice* as “Beauty and the Beast.” *Persuasion* as “Cinderella,” et cetera, et cetera. It was even all right to suggest that Dickens also did well what Austen did superbly. But “The Elinor Show”! She did not think so. What a waste those eyelashes were on a man who watched sitcoms (FOWLER, 2004, p. 50).

In this chapter, the structure changes slightly. Instead of having the mixed discussions about Austen's novels and Fowler's characters' stories through flashbacks, we have the stories which are narrated by Allegra to Corine. These stories not only echo Austen's novels, but also Fowler's own experience, as when Allegra mentions that “Corine joined a writing group that met once a week” (Ibid, p. 66), or when we learn that Corine had her first works refused by the publishers in the beginning of her career, as happened to Fowler. A fact similar also to what happened to Austen with her two works *First Impressions* (which later on turned into *Pride and Prejudice*) and *Northanger Abbey* which were first refused by the

editors. At the end of this chapter, there are mentions to Austen's works being refused, and to two negative reviews, one from Mark Twain and the other from Ralph Waldo Emerson. This is one example of what I mentioned previously, when I referred to Fowler's use of external materials in her works, as if these elements from the actual world might reinforce and endorse her arguments.

“CHAPTER THREE *in which we read Mansfield Park with Prudie*” – This chapter is different from the other two mentioned above. It does not initiate in a meeting of the group, as the other ones, when they are discussing one of Austen's novels. Chapter three starts with a flashback about Jocelyn and Prudie's first meeting. They were in a movie theatre watching a film version of *Mansfield Park*. At the end of the movie they start talking and exchanging opinions about Austen's novel and the movie version. As a high school teacher, Prudie's opinion about Fanny Price is, “Fanny was the prig in your first-grade class who never, ever misbehaved and who told the teacher what anyone else did. How to keep the movie audience from loathing her?” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 83). Another difference in this chapter is the use of epigraphs from *Mansfield Park*, which are spread along the chapter. Here the pattern was broken: instead of the mixture of flashbacks and pieces of discussion about Austen's novels, there are those epigraphs to hint the change of subject in the story. Indeed, each epigraph introduces a theme which is going to be developed in each part of the chapter, as Prudie's infancy with her mother, her work as a teacher, her marriage to Dean. Also, in this chapter the group does not discuss Austen's novel, because the meeting would take place in Prudie's house, as she was to host the discussion. However, Prudie's mother died exactly on the day of the meeting. Therefore, instead of the *Mansfield Park* discussion, what we have is some opinions of Prudie about the novel, when she was preparing herself for the meeting. At the end of this chapter, Prudie dreams of Jane Austen and her mother.

“CHAPTER FOUR *in which we read Northanger Abbey and gather at Grigg's*” – It initiates with the group mentioning that Prudie had missed their meeting at Grigg's house. They did not mention anything about *Mansfield Park*. The discussion about this novel is not done, and Prudie and the readers will have to do without it. They go forward to the next book, Grigg's novel written by Austen, *Northanger Abbey*. Along the first two and a half pages the only reference to Austen's novel is in the title. This passage is used to describe Grigg's house, and the reaction of the female members of the group as they enter it. As the narrative advances, the structure of flashback mixes bits and pieces of Grigg's childhood, adolescence,

and the way he meets Jocelyn. We do not follow the references to the chosen novel, as we do in the former chapters. This section is more about Grigg than about the book club. There are only three pages about *Northanger Abbey* in a thirty-five page long chapter. The fourth chapter ends with an excerpt of two pages from Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho*.

“CHAPTER FIVE in which we read *Pride and Prejudice* and listen to *Bernadette*” – initiates presenting some first impressions the members of the book club had about one another, in reference to the first title of Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The group meets in Library Gallery, a place where people can eat and dance. The first to arrive are Prudie, Dean, and Bernadette. While the three are there, waiting for the others, we are informed by the narrator that Sylvia and Allegra are at home preparing to come, and that Jocelyn and Grigg are coming together. In a shift of setting we follow a conversation about *Pride and Prejudice* held between Sylvia and Allegra. The interactions between Jocelyn and Grigg, in Grigg's car, mimic Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy's conflicting relation. It is possible to say that both relations are full of pride and prejudice. The chapter ends without a substantial discussion of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. The narration mixes bits of Bernadette's past life with what is happening with Sylvia and Allegra at their house, and Jocelyn and Grigg's argument during their journey to the Library Gallery.

“CHAPTER SIX in which we read *Persuasion* and find ourselves back at Sylvia's house” – is preceded by some e-mails exchanged between Grigg's sisters, talking about two subjects: their mother, and the possibility that Grigg might be in love again. Right after that, the chapter initiates, presenting Sylvia in her work place at the State Library. She is in the California History room and starts to ask herself why people do look backward. “What were people hoping to find? What bearing, really, did their ancestry have on who they were now?” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 208). Those questions seem to echo the question that triggers this dissertation, about what Fowler's characters are searching in Austen's stories. Do they know they are searching for something? What elements can past experience offer to our present time? The last chapter of *The Jane Austen Book Club* follows the same pattern of the previous ones, with several levels of narrative intercalating flashbacks with the moment the characters are living in the present-time of the story.

The epilogue, “November”, presents some news about the group and about what they have done in the months after the end of their reading of Austen's novels. This part reminds me of what Austen's nephew says in *A Memoir of Jane Austen A Life*, the first

biography written about Austen (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2002) He says that after finishing writing her books, and publishing them, Austen would continue to talk about them with her family, as if they were real people whose lives continued to exist outside the books. Fowler also mentions this in an excerpt at the end of chapter five, when Bernadette wonders about Mary and Kitty Bennet's destinies after the story ends. Fowler answers Bernadette's questions with some notions she got from Austen's first biography.

With this brief plunge into Fowler's novel's structure it is possible to see that her story follows a certain pattern, which is characteristic of her style. Her novel has different levels of narrative, flashbacks, different narrators, excerpts from different sources spread along the narrative, and a time line that is well defined. Also, the narrative casts several references to American culture through some icons from television, TV series, songs, and authors, as well as to English culture, through writers like Shakespeare, Dickens, Tolkien, and obviously Austen.

If Jane Austen had plenty of time to draw on the characteristics of English rural society, it is possible to say that Fowler does the same in her own time. Through these six characters, Fowler presents aspects of the twentieth first century's way of life. In Austen's time the pace was different, everything seemed to happen slowly. People had time to read long novels, to spend more time with friends and family, talking and relaxing. We witness such activities in Austen's stories. Yet, in Fowler's time, we have a different pace, everything happens much faster. Long novels are not so common as they were in Austen's time, and the length of time spent with family and friends, nowadays, tends to be shorter. Most of the activities practiced in the present-day society are performed in a hurry. Fowler condenses in one novel issues approached by Austen in six different stories. In this way, we can say that the very structure of *The Jane Austen Book Club* is a sign of the liquid times mentioned by Bauman which is the theme of the next chapter.



3 SOLID TIMES AND LIQUID TIMES

Liquid life, just like liquid modern society, cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*

Every society undergoes constant changes in values, structure, attitudes, behavior and style. Changes have always happened throughout history. However, what is different in the twentieth-first century is the fact that those changes are more visible. Novelties are spread in a speed never seen before. In the past, when something happened in a given place, a country for instance, it took some time to the other countries to get to know about it, or be affected by it. There was a greater distance separating the action and the reaction. Nowadays, with the advent of the internet and cyber time, we get to know what is happening around the world instantly, and the consequences are also instantaneous. Therefore, velocity is one of the determinant characteristics of our world, and one of the elements studied by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in his pursuit to understand our time and our present condition in the world.

As this is a dissertation about literature, my concern is the analysis of the literary corpus, which is *The Jane Austen Book Club*. Bauman's thoughts, through some of his concepts, will be used as a valuable support in the development of certain ideas, as a bridge that connects the somewhat distant fictional universes of Jane Austen and Karen Joy Fowler. Bauman's first contribution comes through the concepts of "solid" and "liquid" times. Whenever I refer to *solid times*, I am talking about Austen's portrayal of 18th Century rural England and the kind of society and world view it represents. As to the expression *liquid times*, it invites us into Fowler's present-day sunny California – which can be extended to represent in many ways the globalized postmodern world her readers also inhabit. As these notions were not invented by me, but borrowed from Bauman, I consider it important to

retrace some of his arguments and comment on them before applying them as tool to lead my discussion about *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

3.1 ZYGMUNT BAUMAN

*Family connections were always worth preserving,
good company always worth seeking.*

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

We human beings have this peculiarity: on the one hand, we cannot be constantly in company, we need some time to be alone and organize ourselves; on the other hand, we cannot stand a long period without the contact of the other people. We need company, we need to relate. The ways in which we conduct our relations, and the value we attribute to them, come from a mixture involving our natural tendencies and the circumstances and values of the society we live in. As Austen points in the excerpt above, family connections and good company should always be preserved. Almost two hundred years after these words have been written, this theme is still dear to some authors and theoreticians. Austen wrote these words from within a time when several values were different from ours. Personal relations were stronger, and there is a negative and positive point to this. On the one hand, the grip of society over individual wish was fierce and could be oppressive; on the other hand, communal life might grant one the feeling of belonging and of being important to others. Many of the problems Austen's characters have to deal with come from the fact that they cannot move as freely as they would, due to the emotional, social, moral and familial ties that involved them. Karen Joy Fowler's characters, similarly to Austen's, are also being apprenticed to the task of dealing with personal bonds, but in a different kind of environment. They inhabit the 21st century, and this difference in time and space works as a counterpart to the way things happen in Austen's fiction. In Bauman's terms, Austen's world is solid, whereas Fowler's is liquid. As a consequence, the characters that inhabit these different environments act and react based on different codes of behavior.

Zygmunt Bauman is a notable sociologist and theoretician born in Poland in 1925. As I write this line he is 88 years old, and in full command of his art. He travels around the world

delivering lectures, and still publishes at least one book per year. In his youth Bauman studied sociology and philosophy, becoming a lecturer at the University of Warsaw, where he remained until 1968. Then, he moved to England where he established a family and a career. Since 1990 he is an emeritus professor at the University of Leeds. In 2010 this institution launched The Bauman Institute within its School of Sociology and Social Policy in his honor. Bauman's expertise is the study of contemporary society, and he concentrates his attention in aspects related to consumerism, globalization, and ethics. For him, society is reaching a new stage, turning into a new form, acquiring a new shape. To exemplify such changes, he uses the metaphor 'liquid' modernity substituting for a former 'solid' modernity. Solid elements are expected to be stable and durable, which is very different from liquid elements, that constantly change their form so as to adapt to the vessel that contains them. Bauman observes that, as reality changes, the concepts and values that relate to it also change, to the point that former solid and stable concepts and values have melted in the new globalized times. I take here, as an example, marriage as an institution. In the times of solid modernity (here represented by Austen's universe), marriage was a very serious legal, religious, monetary and personal thing, very difficult to dissolve. Divorce was an exception, hardly granted, and a stain to all members of the family it affected. In the time of liquid modernity, however (as shown in Fowler's fiction), there are a number of alternatives to marriage, as well as a number of alternative modes of living within a family.

As well as in the case mentioned above, which relates to marriage and family as institutions, several other things are different in liquid modern society, respecting thought, attitudes, and opinions. That said, most of the terms that I use in this dissertation relates to contemporary human relations are borrowed from Bauman, especially when it comes to issues related to morals and ethics, family connections, fear and happiness. Some of the books in which Bauman investigates those circumstances are - *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (1994), *Liquid Modernity* (2000), *Liquid Love* (2003), *Liquid Life* (2005), *Liquid Times* (2007), and *The Art of Life* (2008).

As happens with all theories, Bauman's model respecting liquid and solid modernity has gathered its supporters and detractors. Those who adhere to this nomenclature do so because they find it useful to highlight some aspects of the issues they mean to discuss. This is my case. Those who find fault in it, however, tend to blame Bauman for his nostalgia of the way things were in the past, meaning that when he compares the 21st century liquid society

with the solid one that preceded it, the comparison is detrimental to the former. Having read several of his books, I do not take things this way. Whenever I think, or write, I do so from a determined point of perception. Perhaps because Bauman comes from a Jewish family, and experienced all the circumstances involving Nazism in Europe, and World War II, he is well aware of the problems that can derive from extreme nationalism, which is one of the pillars of solid times. Conversely, as a philosopher, he is keen to warn us against the excesses on the opposite side, such as the discarding of the former previous code of ethics before a substitutive code has been proposed. In short, for the sake of this dissertation, Bauman's theories are to be used as nomenclature that helps me establish a dialogue between Fowler and Austen. As much as possible, my intention is to avoid a discussion about which time – past or present – is better or worse to be inhabited. The idea I partake is that in both there are positive and negative elements, all included in the same package. Solid society possessed a sort of organization whose shape is better established, rules that were easily grasped, rewards and punishment clearly stated. This applies to the rules of the game in Austen's novels. Liquid society, on the other hand, offers more possibilities of action and choice. Because it is fluid and slippery, the rules of the game keep changing while the game is being played. These features can be identified in Fowler's novel.

The definition for the term "Solid" offered by Bauman comprises the following range of meaning: "durable"; "stable"; "strong"; "fixed". These characteristics possess a positive and a negative side. On the one hand something which is considered stable and fixed might offer a sensation of security. On the other hand stability and long duration can offer a sensation of imprisonment and/or repression. For the sake of this dissertation, all of them are accepted to exemplify the solid society presented in Austen's fiction. With an eye to the example that I mentioned above about the institution of marriage, let us see how these definitions of something solid apply. Marriage is an institution which originates the founding nucleus of society which is the family. As Lawrence Stone proposes when he talks about the past, or – using Bauman's terms – the solid society: "for most people in England, therefore, marriage was an indissoluble union, breakable only by death" (STONE, 1990, p. 34). If so, the terms 'strong' and 'fixed' are the ones that better characterize the solidity of this institution. Also, in those times, marriage was seen and treated as a capital business: when couples get married, they are well aware of the financial and political aspects of the enterprise. As with any other kind of business, it was expected that the institution might last long, and for this to happen it needed to have a strong basis. Following the same trail,

something solid does not mean something perfect or excellent: it means something you can rely on. These aspects are clearly identified in Austen's novels. Most of the marriages we find there have this mark of long duration, of something definitive as Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* says to Henry Tilney: "people that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together" (AUSTEN, 2004). Also they present this notion of business and here I can cite many examples: Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas, Robert Ferrars and Lucy Steele, Mr. Elton and Mrs. Elton to mention but a few. Divorce, for instance, was never mentioned in an Austen's novel.

As for the term "Liquid" Bauman presents the following definitions: elements which are unstable and change their form constantly so as to adapt to the vessel that contains them. Since liquid represents Fowler's society, and marriage was the example used to represent Austen's solid society, let us follow the same idea. In Fowler's liquid world things 'flow freely', which means, there is nothing to bar its flow. As such, a marriage can initiate as well as end without difficulties as Bernadette exemplifies with her several marriage experiences.

The methodology applied here to shed light on what is being done in *The Jane Austen Book Club* operates with basis on comparison between Austen's (solid) and Fowler's (liquid) societies. In general, this is what Bauman does, only that he refers to what happens in History and I refer to what happens in Literature. In the case involving Austen and Fowler – except for some twists in the plots of the former that might defy common life statistics – both create fictional worlds that operate precisely in the same way the worlds their author inhabit work. For these reasons, I mean to use – as Bauman does – the technique of contrast to highlight what one society has and the other lacks, and vice versa.

In the book *Alone Again: Ethics After Certainty* (1994) Bauman states that the old millenary binary relation involving State and Church has ended. In its place we have a new binary relation comprising Bureaucracy and Consumerism. The morals and ethics of the former solid system no longer apply in liquid society. In this book, Bauman is concerned about the danger of present-day lack of moral and ethical⁹ standards, for we are undergoing a period of testing. Each previous set of values is being reevaluated, so that eventually a new code may replace the one that has been discarded. The anxiety provoked by this state of suspension can be taken as one of the reasons why Jane Austen's critical fortune has raised to

⁹ I understand that Bauman sees moral and ethics as intrinsically connected, and that is how these notions are to be treated here.

unprecedented heights in the two last decades, as her fictional universe poses a simple and clear set of moral and ethical norms. In Austen's first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, for instance, John Dashwood is universally repudiated because of the way he disowns his half-sisters and step mother, leaving them totally helpless, even though he has promised his dying father he would look after them. As the British author and biographer Paula Byrne puts it in an essay about Austen named "Manners",

Austen's novels were written on this spectrum: she was always interested in 'character of mind'; she anatomized the 'general way of life', the morals and habits, of the English middling classes of her time; and she was exasperated by – and made comic capital out of – excessively ceremonious behaviour and over – studied civility (Byrne, 2005, p. 297).

In Byrne's words, Austen demonstrates great interest in the way people behave in society. Equally, Bauman understands the necessity of a set of rules so that people can live in society and shows his apprehension to the dangerous phase we are going through now. In this sense, he worries about the enfeeblement of the superior powerful force connected with the ideas of God or State, which compels men to follow moral rules. To be moral, in Bauman's terms, means to act according to reason. For him, "in a moral world, only the voice of reason should be heard", this way emotion should be treated with caution (BAUMAN, 1994, p. 4). Likewise, Bauman proposes that in the modern shapes of our society reason shares space with emotion and the possible consequences of this cohabitation are shifts between order and chaos (Idem). Consequently, he states that "where reason does not rule 'everything may happen', and thus the whole situation is hopelessly beyond control" (Ibid). When we transfer this thought to Austen's novel *Sense and Sensibility*, we witness Marianne losing her reason when she falls in love with Willoughby, damaging her reputation because of her exaggerated manifestation of emotion towards him. A contemporary reader may disagree about the subtleties of Austen's society, but to that society reputation is something very important for a woman.

In liquid society the former code of morality is losing its space. For the lack of a new code, we become exposed to possible atrocities performed by people who seem not even to be aware that they are transgressing the rules. In Fowler's novel, I can cite one example of this:

Jocelyn was abused by an older guy, because she disturbed the friendship of his young brother and his young brother's best friend. In this case, it is possible to assert that his attitude is more emotional than rational. Sometimes this kind of attitude happens, however it cannot turn into a rule, otherwise it opens space for disorder. Bauman says that "we seem to require now an entirely new brand of ethics" (Ibid, p. 37), in a society that is melting in form and losing its shape. We need to find a way to redefine moral and ethical standards in order to avoid social chaos.

In *Liquid Modernity* (2000) Bauman deals on the velocity that characterizes the changes that took place in some structures, values, traditions. Obviously, changes have always existed, they mark the evolution of our species and our history; what is unprecedented is the increasing speed in which these changes occur. To Bauman, the substance which could more easily adapt to this phenomenon is the 'liquid' substance. Bauman draws on the word 'fluidity', one of the characteristics of what is liquid. He sees that "as the leading metaphor for the present stage of the modern era" (Idem, p. 2). Fluidity differentiates liquids from solids. Accordingly, solids have a fixed shape, therefore they are stable; whereas liquids do not possess a single form, they are shaped according to the recipients where they are put into. In this sense, they are prone to constant change. If fluidity is the term chosen by Bauman to characterize the liquid society, 'bonding' is chosen to summarize the solid society (Ibid). In this liquid context, ruled by instability and uncertainty, the term Bauman uses to represent human relations is *disengagement*. In the liquid setting the flow of time is greatly important, because, "fluids travel easily. They 'flow', 'spill', 'run out', 'splash', 'pour over', 'leak', 'flood', 'spray', 'drip', 'seep', 'ooze'; unlike solids, they are not easily stopped – they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through other still" (Ibid). In so doing, Bauman states that modernity undergoes a process of 'liquidity', through the dissolution of some solid (formerly sacred) traditions. Among the first two solids sacred to melted - or, as puts it, which were profaned - are traditional loyalties represented by family and ethics (Ibid, p. 2-3). Bauman's views can immediately be identified in Austen's and Fowler's narratives. All of Austen's stories are about female characters searching for a suitable marriage in order not to disappoint their families, which means stability for them for the rest of their lives, and a guarantee that they will not prove burdensome to their family or social group. A strong sense of moral, and of belonging, is identified along these narratives. In Fowler's story, the fuel of the narrative is a book club, which was mainly created because of a divorce. In Fowler's novel it is possible to identify a wider range of human relationships:

we have single people, divorced people, engaged, and disengaged, heterosexual and homosexual. Most of them do not seem to see marriage as something essential to their lives, as happens in Austen's world.

Moreover, Bauman states the word that best characterizes the solid modernity is engagement, which is directly opposed to disengagement, the word that characterizes liquid modernity (Ibid, p. 120). To Bauman, "being modern came to mean, as it means, being unable to stop and even less able to stand still" because if we stop we lose opportunities (Ibid, p. 28). In this sense, we undergo an endless pursuit of fulfillment: "achievements lose their attraction and satisfying potential at the moment of their attainment, if not before" (Ibid). That is to say, individuals who grow up in this process of fluidity may not find satisfaction with their attainments and tend to live under the sensation of incompleteness and longing for something they miss but cannot identify what that is. Many characters in Fowler seem to feel that way, and recur to Austen as an aid against depression. Bauman analyses this sensation of incompleteness in the work *Liquid Love*.

In *Liquid Love* (2003), Bauman investigates the ways in which liquidity affects human relations. In the past, relationships were shaped differently. Bonds were expected to stable and last long. They were called: relation, kinship or partnership. Marriage was associated with the idea of 'till death do us part', which was something reassuring in cases of successful connections, and tragic in cases of unsuccessful connections. Nowadays, on the other hand, long-lasting relationships are becoming rare. We have a preponderance of short-term involvements between disengaged persons, something similar to the period of validity of a product in a market. The terms which represent this new configuration are 'disengagement', 'network' and 'connection'. Influenced by our globalized society of consumerism, quality has been surpassed by quantity. The motto is: life is short: enjoy life, otherwise, time and better opportunities will be lost. An example of this syndrome is Bernadette in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. She is in her sixties, has been married several times, and keeps searching for something. In her own words, she is "letting herself go" (Fowler, 2004, p. 2).

In the last two chapters of *Liquid Love*, Bauman raises a discussion about a problem people who live in big cities face now: people tend to live alone among strangers, and this coexistence brings to light a new feeling: fear. As Bauman says, in the twenty-first century, especially right after the 11th September attacks, human beings meet difficulties in loving their neighbors because they do not know who these neighbors are, nor if they can be trusted. This

is one of the differences between Austen's and Fowler's fictional universes. Austen's stories are set in the countryside, whereas Fowler's setting is urban. Life in Austen's communities may be sometimes boring, or oppressive, but people know one another, and feel safe. Fowler's characters seem to be aware of the fact that they inhabit a hostile environment, where fear is intensely present, and have developed strategies to deal with that. They will not easily trust another person. Bauman deals with this feeling of fear and loneliness in the two books, *Liquid Life* and *Liquid Times*.

In *Liquid Life* (2005) Bauman resumes some concepts presented in his previous books such as instability presented in *Liquid Modernity* and in *Liquid Love*. He also introduces some aspects that will be approached in his future books such as the pursuit of happiness in *The Art of Life*. Initially, he states that “‘liquid life’ and ‘liquid modernity’ are intimately connected”, and future predictions become more risky and misleading in this context (BAUMAN, 2005 p.1). In this sense, Bauman sees “‘liquid life as a succession of new beginnings” (Idem, p. 2). This means that everything happens with a certain speed. Marriage, for instance, in this context, is a relationship that can begin and end many times, as Bernadette shows in Fowler's novel. Likewise, Bauman argues that “‘liquid life is consuming life”, if so, this might mean that everything which loses its commercial value soon becomes waste in this new setting of life. For him, consuming life “is marked and measured by the difference between ‘up to date’ and ‘out of date’, or rather between today's commodities and those of yesterday that are still ‘up to date’ and thus on shop shelves” (Ibid, p. 24). In Fowler's story, when Sylvia ends her marriage, she feels out of date. In this liquid context an individual must be always up to date in order to avoid not being discarded. This context which changes constantly and seems not to offer space for something durable is the scenery of Fowler's novel.

If in *Liquid Life* Bauman starts to raise some issues which originate fear. In *Liquid Times* (2007) fear is the main theme. In this book Bauman observes that he does not intend to answer all the questions he raises; his intention is to trigger a discussion about the social problems society is facing instead. Initially, he reviews some issues presented in his previous books such as the speed in which things change, the divorce of power and politics, and the feebleness of human bonds. In advance, Bauman puts forth his understanding of the challenges that individuals undergo now. He proposes that “‘society’ is increasingly viewed and treated as ‘network’ rather than a ‘structure’ (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 3). Within this network, Bauman says, individuals acquired freedom to choose what they want to do with

their lives. However along with this freedom comes a sensation of insecurity, because in this new frame choosers are expected to bear the consequences of their choices in full (Idem, p. 4). This insecurity brings to light a sensation of fear which Bauman sees as the most sinister of the demons nesting in the open societies of our time. He also proposes that we seem not to be in control anymore, whether singly, severally or collectively and to make things still worse we lack the tools that would allow politics to be lifted to the level where power has already settled (Ibid, p. 26).

Bauman's last book to be explored in this dissertation is *The Art of Life* (2008). There he deals on what may be considered one of the most important aspects of human lives, the pursuit of happiness. Bauman proposes that happiness depends on the mixture of security and freedom, something difficult to reach. When we have one we lack the other. The most important point highlighted by him is that happiness is something personal; each person has his or her understanding of happiness. Therefore, it is impossible to develop a formula for happiness. For some people happiness means to have money or prestige; for others, it means to be with someone they love. Happiness is something as unique as one's DNA. When Fowler and Austen deal with this pursuit of happiness to their stories we clearly perceive the difference between them. Austen's characters are in search of stability in their relationships. Yet, Fowler's characters search for solutions for their personal frustration. And they find their solutions by reading Austen's stories.

In order to explore a little more fully those notions of solid times proposed by Bauman, the second part of this chapter plunges into the past, more precisely, into Austen's universe and presents some examples of solid notions spread in her time.

3.1.1 "The Past is a Foreign Country"

Delighted to connect anything with history already known, or warm her imagination with scenes of the past.

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

The title to this section comes from the first sentence in the novel *The Go-Between* (1953), by the English author L. P. Hartley: “The past is a foreign country, they do things different there” (HARTLEY, 2011, p. 1). I interpret this sentence as meaning that we tend to concentrate on the good moments of the past that we keep registered in our memory (we erase the bad ones as much as possible); to the same degree that we concentrate on the dangers and risks of the present, so as to evade them. As a consequence, we develop a feeling of nostalgia regarding the past, and a feeling of anxiety, in the present, so as to avoid problems in the future. In this sense, Austenland becomes twice as safe, because it belongs not only in the world of the past, but also in the world of fiction. We can revisit/reread Mr. Darcy’s Pemberley or Anne Elliot’s Bath as often as we wish and they will keep reassuringly the same. But Hartley’s sentence in *The Go-Between* warns us that, in our actual lives, if we revisit a place (or a person) that has been important at some point in the past, we may feel like foreigners arriving at an unknown territory. Austen’s rural England, like the Rio de Janeiro of Machado de Assis, are considerably changed. There are even those who argue if they have ever been the way we read them now. Interestingly, the past tends to be seen and cherished as something better than the time and place we live in. When we think about the past we tend to create an imaginary perfect place in our minds. And this place, similar to a foreign country, seems to be different and difficult to reach. As a matter of fact, our perception of the past can be accessed through history which is recorded in books, pictures and memories. Most of the times, when we think about the past we tend to forget that in the past problems also happened, this way we erase the bad memories and think only about the good ones. As the excerpt above shows, past memories promote a sensation of something pleasurable which warms our imagination. However, similar to the past, which possesses some sad stories and facts, not all the foreign countries are appealing. There are some places which are beautiful, well-developed and charming; however, there are others that are poor, dangerous and sometimes even ugly.

The past I am referring to in this dissertation is the one presented by Jane Austen in her six novels: *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. This is a predominantly female universe that shows the stories of some women from different generations that have to find a way to adapt to the challenges posed by that given society. Among them we find different kinds of women: strong, weak, happy, sad, intelligent, determined, or proud. As the scholar Hazel Jones puts it “Jane Austen presents us with fallible women, who learn from their mistakes, because this is how

experience is gained” (JONES, 2009, p. 4). By doing this, Austen opens space to the appearance of some contemporary criticism which seems to think that Austen presents in her novels characters, attitudes and values which might possibly be found in her own context. By analyzing those fictional representations we can have an idea of how that society works.

Some aspects of life might prove hard in late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, especially for women. It was a period of difficulties, because of the Industrial Revolution and French Revolution, which were happening in Europe. Also as Hazel Jones puts it, women’s “present and future economic security lay in male hands – fathers’, brothers’, husbands”” (Idem, p. 2). Their options were few for the female members of rural gentry: either they married, or became a burden to their family, or descended socially and went for a job as a teacher or a governess. The other possibilities were unmentionable. Marriage was the best solution to their predicament. Accomplished young women had a better chance to find good matches. Actually, that society did not give women many opportunities for personal development as we have in our society of the twenty-first century. Nowadays, many women are economically and personally independent. By far, the best option to women in the solid society is to get married, and to accomplish that, it is necessary to fulfill some requirements. First of all, the concept of a marriage at those times was different from the one we witness in the twenty-first century. Secondly, at that given society people did not act as freely as we do nowadays. People, especially women, should act according to some codes of conduct. And those codes were spread through books, there were even some specific ones named conduct books¹⁰ which gave women guidelines to act accordingly. To exemplify those conduct books it is possible to cite James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1767) and D. John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to his Daughters* (1767). It is possible to say that Jane Austen was well-acquainted with them. In *Mansfield Park*, for example, she presents a scene in chapter V when Mary Crawford and Edmund were talking about how women should behave when formally presented to society.

Furthermore, to marry or become a governess, women need to be accomplished which means to know how to manage the household, to play the piano, sew, write, read, draw, and sing. However, at those times as G. M. Trevelyan observes in his book *English Social History*, ““women’s education was sadly to seek’, the first instruction initiates at home, ‘the

¹⁰ According to Jane Nardin “the conduct books adumbrate a vision of a perfect society in which social behaviour is the outward manifestation of inward moral commitment. And their vision is highly conservative – their ideal men and women act in ways that are calculated to preserve the existing social hierarchy”.

ladies learnt from their mothers to read, write, sew and manage the household” (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 274). Jane Austen also started her education at home, and then, when she was seven, she went to a boarding school with her older sister Cassandra. The same happens with the Brontë’s sisters. But to live in such institutions was not safe, many girls got sick and died during their staying at those places. The English biographer and journalist Claire Tomalin in her book *Jane Austen: A life* lists some aspects of Austen’s life from her birth to her death. Tomalin draws essentially on aspects related to education and entertainment. She seems to agree with Trevelyan in respect to education: “boarding schools for girls were not hard to find in the 1780s, not least because keeping a school was one of the very few ways in which a woman could hope to earn a respectable living; but accounts of what went on in them make depressing, and sometimes horrifying, reading” (TOMALIN, 1999, p. 37). That said, Tomalin presents some difficulties which girls face when they went to those institutions, such as lack of sufficient food to survive and lack of safe accommodations, “pupils were fed on the principle ‘eat the bread, smell the cheese’, and all made to sleep in the drawing room (...) “sharing a bed was more common than not” (Idem, p. 37). Tomalin says that “children were often half starved by their schoolmistress because they were struggling against poverty themselves” (Ibid, p. 37). This way, it is possible to understand why Trevelyan and Tomalin approach the sad side of seeking for an education in the English society of the eighteenth century. Most girls put their lives into risk in those boarding schools; starvation allied to bad accommodations were quite dangerous in times of scanty medicine resources and the spread of typhus epidemics. Tomalin tells us that Austen got ill when she was in a boarding school and only survived because her mother had found it out in time. The Brontës did not have the same luck, and lost two girls among their six children (GASKELL, 1997). These girls were studying in a school for daughters of the clergy (both Rev. Austen and Rev. Brontë were clergymen). The possibility of becoming a governess is not seen as something agreeable or appealing. In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax fears the very possibility of becoming one. Each time Mrs. Elton mentions a possible position for Jane in one of her friend’s house, Jane comes up with an excuse and changes the subject.

Trevelyan suggests that there is a trade aspect in marriage in the English society of those times. Women could be seen as a sort of merchandise in that society. If a woman meant to marry, her family should have some means to bargain: “in the upper and middle classes,

husbands were often found for girls on the principle of frank barter¹¹” (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 275). These women would have a better chance to marry if they were young, beautiful, educated (which they called “accomplished”) and if their families could offer something in return, as a dowry. This subject is at the main core of Jane Austen’s novels. There we can identify some circumstances of different women, some with more, some with less possibilities or necessity of finding a match. At that time, marriage was still regarded more like business, trade, or political alliance than as a romantic personal relation. In this sense, the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries were very complex times, because they superpose the previous notion of two families getting united by common interests with the new notion of love and individual choice. Therefore, an Austen heroine should not only find a husband to suit the interests of her family, but also manage to fall in love with him. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lizzie Bennett is disappointed when her friend Charlotte decides to marry Rev. Collins – with whom she is not in love – for practical reasons, in the way things were done in the past. Lizzie, the protagonist, has herself some problems in falling in love with Mr. Darcy, but finally manages to do so (after she visits his wonderful manor house), so that the novel has both the socially acceptable and the romantically expected happy endings. Trevelyan also proposes that,

Since almost everyone regarded it as a grave misfortune to remain single, women did not account it a universal grievance that their hands should often be disposed by others. They were no doubt usually consulted as to their destiny, much or little according to character and circumstance. Swift, in writing ‘to a very young lady on her marriage’, speaks of ‘the person your father and mother have chosen for your husband’, and almost immediately adds, ‘yours was a match of prudence and common good liking, without any mixture of the ridiculous passion’ of romantic love. And this description would probably have covered a vast proportion of the ‘arranged’ marriages of the day (TREVELYAN, 1978, p. 276).

Trevelyan observes that romantic love is seen, in Swift’s words, as a ‘ridiculous passion’. This does not mean, however, that it did not exist in English solid society. Indeed, even in Austen’s fiction there are some romantic couples who elope in order to live their love story. Actually, such type of occurrence was not uncommon:

¹¹ This expression refers to one of the principles of Economics, meaning exchange in a market: exchange of goods resulting from demand. (Information available on the address http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile. Access on 09/06/2013)

But since the ‘ridiculous passion’ often asserted itself, runaway matches were common enough, as in the case of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. And even without that desperate expedient, an ever-increasing proportion of ordinary marriages were the outcome of mutual affection. Divorce was almost unknown. It was obtainable only through Church courts, and then only if followed by a special Act of Parliament; not more than six divorces were thus legalized during the twelve years of Queen Anne (Idem, 1978, p. 276).

In *Pride and Prejudice*, young Lydia Bennet elopes with the soldier George Wickham. The same happens in *Mansfield Park* when the older daughter of Sir Thomas Bertram who is already married, Maria Bertram elopes with Henry Crawford. In *Sense and Sensibility* Robert Ferrars elopes with his brother’s fiancée Lucy Steele. Colonel Brandon’s first love did the same, and had circumstances been different something similar might have happened to Marianne. But the only characters that actually do such things are the secondary characters in the stories. An Austen protagonist would never fall that way, they would rather remain single.

Morals and manners are clearly identified topics in the core of Austen’s novels; furthermore, they become the target of many scholars when exploring Austen’s works. Martin Price, for instance, in “Manners, Morals and Jane Austen” says: “it is in manners that Jane Austen’s world exhibits great density, for manners are concrete, complex orderings, both personal and institutional. They are a language of gestures, for words too become gestures when they are used to sustain rapport; most of our social ties are established in ‘speech acts’ or ‘performative utterances’” (PRICE, 1975, p. 266). In this essay, Price analyses the way Austen introduces her characters and how this introduction lead us readers to evaluate such characters, as well as see how they deal with the conventions in that society. In general, Jane Austen uses the secondary characters to do non-standard things so that they can be analyzed and criticized.

As this first journey throughout the past is reaching its end, I invite you reader to embark into another one. This time the journey searches for answers about the development of a specific literary genre, the novel. The intention is to see how the novel influenced Austen’s works or if Austen’s works contributes to the development of the novel. Also, this journey intends to investigate the evolution of this literary genre, and investigate the influences of this literary genre in Fowler’s works.

3.2 THE NOVEL THEN AND NOW

The novel is for us a great anthropological force, which has turned reading into a pleasure and redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and of language (...) the novel becomes the first truly planetary form: a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction, and to find the right language for the next generation of readers.

Franco Moretti, *The Novel*

As happens with all forms of art, if the world changes, the forms that represent it also change. Therefore, it is only natural that the structure of Jane Austen's solid novels be different from the form of Fowler's novels. It is also true that nothing comes from nothing, and that the seeds to any movement are present in the previous movement. The fact that thinking characters in Austen are so unquiet indicates that they feel the need of more fluid strategies in their social interaction. And the fact that characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club* are so much in need of a substitute for friendship makes them wish to join a book club so that they can talk about solid values that have faded away.

Respecting the structure of the novel as a genre, we have previously drawn on how much Austen has innovated in the field, adding psychological depth and realism to prose narrative structures as picaresque or romance. According to Jack Goody, the term novel means *novelty*: "In the eighteenth century, it comes to be employed as in contemporary English to refer to a long fictional prose narrative in contrast to the romances (the French and Italian *roman* and *romanzo* cover both), because of the close relation to real life" (GOODY, 2006, p. 18). This way, the novel was defined as a work of fiction in prose of a certain length; which arises from the desire of depicting and interpreting human characters, placing greater emphasis on character than on plot. This new kind of fictional text presents the point of view of one single individual, usually a common person, not a kind of nobleperson. The

circumstances respecting the protagonist are more relevant to the reader than the historical or political context that relates to him. As stated above, in the first stages of the novel we have the picaresque, the epistolary and the gothic trends. When Austen comes into the scene, she brings a number of new techniques that introduce a new kind of psychological and social density into the trade.

According to Terry Eagleton, “the novel is a genre which resists exact definition” (EAGLETON, 2005, p.1). And we will not pursue further into the search of such definition because we would lose track of our aim that is to examine what changes and what remains in the specific cases of Austen and Fowler. Let us start with Austen’s case, or rather with what was there, in the context of the novel, as she started writing. Although narrative prose has always existed, Ian Watt (2000), in *The Rise of the Novel*, traces the start of the genre as such in eighteenth century Britain with Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. To literary critic Walter Allen, however, in *The English Novel*, Henry Fielding pioneers the novel with all the characteristics we attribute to the genre. When he looks backwards in time, and outside the British frontiers, Allen sees Cervantes: “There can scarcely have been any one book that has more profoundly shaped the novel as a whole than Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*” (ALLEN, 1991, p. 22). Hungarian philosopher George Lukács, in *The theory of The Novel*, who does not search for the origins of the novel, says that:

The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel hero’s psychology is demoniac; the objectivity of the novel is the mature man’s knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness of inessentiality (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 88).

Lukács’ discussion about God says much about this shift from solid into liquid that Bauman refers to in *Alone Again*, when he connects solid modernity to the binary God + State, and liquid modernity to the binary Bureaucracy + Consumerism. Lukács proposes that in a world without God, it is necessary to have something to give meaning to life, and that the novel is a way of searching for this meaning: “The novel tells of the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence”

(LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 89). This would explain why, inside the fictional world of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, the characters, burdened by anxiety, turn to novels to bring some meaning back into their lives. In Austen's novels they find elements of solid modernity that can pacify their angst; and they can already find fluid elements that are related to the world they inhabit. Because, as I said before, the seeds of every movement can be found in the previous movement. The eighteenth-century is already a time of speed and change. No matter how much people philosophized about religion, Bureaucracy was already occupying a greater space in people's daily life than God in the Age of Reason. German-born American literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht creates a metaphor about a road to analyze the evolution of the novel.

The core reality of the eighteenth century was indeed the life of the mind, the Cartesian dimension of human existence – and this also was the dimension that the new dominant form of the novel, quite obviously, was a world that harmoniously fit under the control of the subjects agency, a novel, also, that had no more use for bumps in its roads (GUMBRECHT, 2006, p. 632).

Contemporary British philosopher and literary critic Terry Eagleton revisits a range of prominent theorists. He has done so in order to find some possible answers for the question “What is a Novel?” he posits in his book *The English Novel: An Introduction*. After some speculations Eagleton says, “the novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them. It is the queen of literary genres in a rather less elevated sense of the word than one might hear around Buckingham Palace” (EAGLETON, 2005, p. 1). Eagleton sees the novel as a hybrid genre which mixes some peculiarities and characteristics of its ancestors. In a way, it is possible to say that Eagleton agrees with Franco Moretti in the epigraph when the latter compares the novel to “a phoenix¹² always ready to take a flight in a new direction” (Idem, p. ix). For this reason, it is possible to say that the novel is a genre which is always changing and suffering influences from other literary genres.

¹² According to the *Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, the phoenix became an emblem of rarity or uniqueness. (FERBER, 1999, p. 153)

Thinking in terms of the evolution of the novel, Grumbrecht concentrates on the changes from the 1920s onward, respecting thematics. He says that the modern novel does not “allow the hero to grow and develop his subjectivity and agency”:

Bracketing the dimension of space, which necessarily entails a loss of world of reference. To be in-the-world, to be in the world as a body, that is, to experience the world in the spacial dimension, has turned into an existential value for many of us. Therefore, agent roads in the novel are not only the literary form of a loss of agency. They also are the literary place where we can recuperate the space that allows us to be-in-the-world (GUMBRECHT, 2006, p. 645).

Grumbrecht proposes that the twentieth century individual has changed his search. Previously, the search was for self-individualization; then there came the fragmentation of the subject. And nowadays, in liquid society, the same individual searches for re-insertion which means to be part of the world. Initially, what we had was a human being who was so much integrated in the world that he craved for individuality. Now we are at the other extreme, therefore the human being initiates another search, which is to be part of the world again. This applies to characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. It is as if they have reached their total individuation within a liquid world. Now they need a reference to be in the world again, and the reference they choose to follow is Austen.

3.2.1 From Austen To Fowler

Jane Austen's primary interest is people, not ideas, and her achievement lie in the meticulously exact presentation of human situations, the delineation of characters, who are really living creatures, with faults and virtues mixed as they are in real life.

Anthony Burgess, *English Literature*

By reading Burgess' words on the epigraph above, related to Austen's works, I realized that they summarize some aspects approached on the previews subchapter about the

epistemology of the novel. When Jane Austen initiated her career as a writer, the novel was gaining space, delineating its form in order to affirm itself as a new literary genre. In the same way, it is possible to say that Austen's talent to delineate characters realistically and stories contributed to the assertion of the novel. By doing this, Austen acquires the status of, as Walter Allen puts it, "a modern novelist" who wrote "the pure novel", and whose work is considered up to date. I believe that by "pure novel" Allen means the fact that when Austen was writing she pursued perfection,

The writer of pure novel sets out to delight us [...] by attention to the form and qualities of composition, to design, to the subordination of the parts to the whole being the exploration of the relations between his characters or of their relations to a central situation or theme [...] Perfection, however, which is what the pure novelist is after, demands the recognition of severe limits [...] the art of Jane Austen is made possible precisely by the recognition of limits (ALLEN, 1991, p. 108-109).

When Allen underlines that Austen recognizes her limits, he sees this as a positive aspect in her works, as this restricted scope contributes to the final product of her composition. This restriction gives Austen more time to revise and rewrite her works before publication, and a greater mastery of her subject as well. Allen goes further saying that this restriction and the way Austen conducts her works contribute to the development of the novel:

Because her scope is restricted in its material, more can be learned from Miss Austen about the nature of the novel than from almost any other writer. Miss Austen is praised for her delineation of character, and it is superb in its excellence; but one has only to read her to see the limitations of those critics who judge a novelist solely in terms of ability to create character; for what gives her characters their value, what in the deepest sense 'makes' them, is that it is through them that their author expresses a discriminated view of life, a highly serious criticism of life expressed in terms of comedy (Idem, 1991, p. 112).

Even nowadays, the narrative point of view tends to comply with the point of view of the protagonists. As a consequence, there was a tendency to underline their good qualities and not their imperfections. Jane Austen, however, two hundred years ago, innovated here too, in shifts in point of view that we have in *Pride and Prejudice*, in the distorted perceptions of

Catherine Morland, in *Northanger Abbey*, or even in the creation of Emma Woodhouse, a character that “no one but [its author] will much like” (AUSTEN-LEIGH, 2002). Emma is presented as a somewhat spoiled young woman, now *Emma* “is her most perfect and fully representative work” (LODGE, 1978, p. 11). From what I have been reading extensively about Jane Austen, I gather that she seeks for exactness in her novels through a process of tireless and attentive revision. And *Emma* is the only novel from the mature period which she had plenty time to revise. *Persuasion*, Austen’s last novel was being revised when she died. Still talking about perfection, the scholar S. Diana Neill proposes in *A Short History of the English Novel* that, “as a novelist Jane Austen employed the dramatic form evolved by Fielding, but she refined it and gave it perfection” (NEILL, 1952, p. 128). Therefore, Neill goes further saying that,

It is not surprising that the final versions of her novels had a formal perfection – no loose ends, no padding, no characterization for its own sake and a flawlessly consistent idiom suited to the person who used it. Nothing is allowed in a Jane Austen novel that is not there for a clearly defined reason, to contribute to the plot, the drama of feelings, the moral structure or the necessary psychology (NEILL, 1952, p. 126).

Accordingly, it is possible to see that there is a consensus between the above mentioned scholars that analyze Austen’s works. They all agree that she is a perfectionist. It is possible to say that one of the reasons for her work to be so widely read until today has to do with the dedication she employs in her work. Austen not only makes use of the writing techniques available at her time, she creates new narrative devices when she feels it necessary. In *Pride and Prejudice*, for instance, she breaks the conventions with the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who is neither the youngest, nor the most beautiful among the fictional sisters. She is the most intelligent, however. So intelligent as to realize in the middle of the novel that she has been mistaken in her judgment of others. When Elizabeth retraces her readings of the world, her readers are forced to do the same. As a consequence, new psychological density is added to the novel as a genre. Austen is also the first author in the history of this new literary genre to register the feminine condition, to “put the female world

standing up,”¹³ as an object to be seen, studied and analyzed. Austen’s heroine has some voice and is not the kind of character who will faint when facing difficult situations. Again I use Elizabeth Bennet as a good example, when she dares to decline Rev. Collins’ proposal, even though she is well aware of the consequences of her act.

If in Austen’s time the novel was a new literary genre in process of development, nowadays, in Fowler’s time, it turned into a full-blown genre. It does not mean that now it is possible to come up with a clear definition to this genre, however, what we have now is an acceptance of novel as a form of writing stories. If Austen’s contribution for the assertion of the novel, then, has to do with the restricted scope of her stories and search for perfection, with the appearance of strong heroines, it is possible to say that Fowler’s, now, is the plurality of style and insertion of external elements she adds to her novels.

Fowler has published so far six novels, like Austen. And this is just one of the coincidences between these authors. Their style of writing also presents some similarities. Fowler, in a way similar to Austen, introduces her characters by offering us some hints of what kind of people they are. As an example of this is what we have at the prologue to *The Jane Austen Book Club*, in which Jane Austen and all the characters of the story are presented. Or rather, each character is presented according to the kind of Austen they read: “Jocelyn’s Austen wrote wonderful novels about love and courtship, but never married. The book club was Jocelyn’s idea, and she handpicked the members. She had more ideas in one morning than the rest of us in a week, and more energy, too” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 1). We can feel some irony in the narrator’s words. First, it is saying that a woman who never married wrote novels about love and courtship; then, the same narrator implies that this apparently sweet Jocelyn can be very demanding and bossy.

Following Austen’s model, Fowler also writes about the kind of people she meets, about the things she knows, in novels set in places like the places she has lived in. But along with the likeness there come the differences, because the world Fowler depicts is drastically different from the world Austen depicts. Consider, for instance, the marriage then, through this discussion involving Laurie and Prudie in *The Jane Austen Book Club*:

¹³ Here I quote the expression used by Dr. Márcia Ivana de Lima e Silva during a discussion held on the subject at my Qualifiers, held on July 18th, 2013.

“You can marry someone you’re lucky to get or you can marry someone who’s lucky to get you. I used to think the first was best. Now I don’t know. Wouldn’t it be better to spend your life with someone who thinks he’s lucky to be there?”

“Why can’t you both be lucky?” Prudie asked.

“You can wait for that, if you like.” (But Laurie was the one who hadn’t married yet.) (FOWLER, 2004, p. 102)

Fowler’s story reveals that the subject is still important, although there are now different perspectives to it, let alone the fact that getting married is not a drastic necessity anymore. Prudie “was still learning how lucky she was. Dean was so much more than solid. He was generous, friendly, easygoing, hardworking, good-looking” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 102).

Another similarity between the two authors is the thematic line they approach, as both write novels about human bonds, in fictional universes that have women as main characters. Grigg is the exception that proves the rule, because he is here as much as a social minority as women are in Austen’s world. He has been raised in a predominantly female universe, with his mother and sisters. Now he is the only male, among five women, in a book club about Jane Austen, a writer of female stories. In Austen, a woman would have to open her way so as to make herself intellectually respected and accepted in a male environment. This is what happens to Grigg, in a reverse way. He has some difficulties to be taken as a serious member of the group, as he has never read Austen, is fond of science fiction, and commits the *gaffe* of buying one edition with Austen’s complete works, when a serious affiliate would have bought individual annotated editions.

Although the thematic is similar, there are nuances which vary within those fictional universes. Thus, each fictional context presents courtship differently. In Austen’s context, for instance, courtship has a short length of time: as such, the time between the arising of interest and the proposal used to be short. And it is possible to identify one example of some courtships which have very short duration in some of her stories as in the following examples: Robert Ferrars and Lucy Steele in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Collins and Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mr. Martin and Harriet in *Emma*. Also, courtship in Austen’s time is seen as something strong, as a kind of commitment. However, in Fowler’s turn the length of time can vary, and does not mean much, it depends on the interest of the couple. As well as the sense of commitment which is implicit in courtship in Austen’s stories, it can be different

in Fowler's novel. As example of this, I can cite Jocelyn and Daniel's, Sylvia and Tony's courtships, which end when Daniel realizes he is interested in Sylvia, and Tony in Jocelyn. They exchange the couples without any sense of guilt, however with some embarrassment.

As far as the approximation between these two writers is concerned, I consider it pertinent to refer to their different stature. I am aware that that it is unfair to Fowler to contrast her work so frontally with a canon giant as Austen is, a writer whose critical fortune has been so competently developed for two hundred years, whose works we feel so comfortable to read, because we are used to the conventions of a tradition that Austen herself helped to shape. Austen's fictional universe is solid, and so are protocols¹⁴ we follow as we move in it. Karen Joy Fowler, on the other hand, is contemporary to her own readers, does not have yet a significantly established critical fortune, and writes contemporary literature. This last point is important because of the critical parameters, which are less preoccupied with the question of canonicity and literariness. In a solid frame, probably this very project of contrasting a canon author and a relatively incipient name would have been barred.

The Jane Austen Book Club has multiple narrative points-of-view, a resistance to being qualified in terms of high or low literature, the lack of a very definite plot. Those are exactly the reasons why I chose to approximate and to confront Austen and Fowler, because each represents not only the social conventions of their time, but the aesthetic parameters and the mode of production of their time as well. As a representative of solid times, it is expected that Austen's world be more comfortable to read. It lays in the past, its values and norms are sanctioned, and it counts on the benefit of a nostalgic approach. Nonetheless, different as they are, both authors are experts in the use of wit, humor, irony, playfulness and pastiche, elements that Fowler inherited from Austen to a great extent.

Therefore, I find it important to ratify here that it is not the intention of this work to force Fowler to be compared to Austen in terms of artistic status or rank in the literary canon. Austen's fiction enters my dissertation as the representative of fiction and fictional standards in the times of solid modernity. Fowler comes as the representative of the kind of art produced in liquid times. So much said on this respect, we now move into the next section, which introduces the discussion about the search of a new ethos.

¹⁴ The term "protocols" is used here in the sense of "reading protocols", an expression used by Roger Chartier, the French historian who analyses the social significance of the text, the different kinds of readers, as well as the peculiarities in the reception of a textual production.

3.3 IN SEARCH OF A NEW ETHOS

We are presently moving from the era of pre-allocated 'reference groups' into the epoch of 'universal comparison', in which the destination of individual self-constructing labours is endemically and incurably underdetermined, is not given in advance, and tends to undergo numerous and profound changes before such labours reach their only genuine end: that is, the end of the individual's life.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*

The eighteenth century was a period of great changes, like the Industrial Revolution, which initiated in England and spread all over the world; the Republican movements, as the French Revolution and the Independence of the United States. Even in Jane Austen's provincial communities the marks of all that could be sensed. The peaceful agrarian communities are visited by soldiers and naval officers involved in the Napoleonic wars, baronets like Sir Walter, in *Persuasion*, go bankrupt, and tradesmen, like the Bingleys, in *Pride and Prejudice*, prosper. The unprecedented explosion of new ideas and new technologies reached even that remote community. This revolution can be considered one of the big shifts in recent history. Artists are said to be very sensitive to such changes, and they appropriate the elements they sense into their work. Even though the reliable solid communities inhabited by Austen's characters may seem protected from such changes, if we examine the author's style we clearly identify the marks of the modern ethos starting to show. Austen chooses the novel, the new genre, as her media. The constant shifts in point of view warn us that the time of one fixed, capital Truth is over. Duality shows in the nice rogues, in the flawed protagonists, even in the double roles, as in the two sisters Elinor and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, or in the two scoundrel siblings Mary and Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park*. All these symptoms mark a clear change in perception of things. Romantic revolutionary ideas are now getting infiltrated into Neoclassical stable grounds. In the eyes of the English literary critic and novelist Walter Allen, however, "Miss Austen was untouched by the romantic movement. This does not mean that she was ignorant of the power of feeling

or that she despised it; it does mean that she believed it should be controlled and that in writing its expression should be intellectual” (ALLEN, 1991, p. 117). Such affirmation can be verified in her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* when she portrays two sisters, one representing sense and reason and the other representing emotion and sensibility. At the end of the story sense prevails.

Jane Austen lived in the countryside. Provincial life is not so clearly or directly affected by political or international affairs. Maybe for this reason, there are no explicit references to industrialization or to the Napoleonic Wars in her novels. Walter Allen refers to that,

There is a whole larger world outside it of which she says nothing, but that does not invalidate the world she has made. The scope of her art is not in fact lessened by her ignoring of the major events in the history of her time: the reality of her world would not have been in any way intensified had she dragged in references to the Napoleonic Wars or to the Industrial Revolution. Her world is self-contained, but the larger context is supplied by her continual awareness and scrutiny of the values that govern the one she creates (ALLEN, 1991, p. 111).

I find it difficult to subscribe to Allen’s notion that Austen either ignored or was not interested in what happened in the world. Two of her brothers served in the navy and raised to the ranks of Admiral. In her last novel *Persuasion* we follow the trajectory of Frederick Wentworth, a young navy officer who is rejected as a suitor to a Baronet’s daughter. Eight years later, the Baronet is ruined and Wentworth returns as an important Royal Navy Captain who has earned £ 25.000 as a reward for his deeds in the Napoleonic Wars.

All things considered, although Austenland can be considered a safe haven for present-day readers, the marks of growing changes can be felt even there. It is also a matter of justice to point that, although the center of interest in Austen is the circumstances involving women, men are also expected to submit to the rules. The circumstances of the second male son in genteel families is similar to those of women, they have few options left but to enter the Church, or the army, or the Law, or marrying a wealthy wife. In the times of solid society, marriage was ultimately a sort of business or social solution. Perhaps things are still like that today, in many cases. However, nowadays, women can apply for jobs, have a profession, they can even have a sexual life or bear children outside the boundaries of married life. Women

have a right to choose their partners, and to divorce, if that proves necessary, without being condemned to social ostracism. According to Brazilian legislation, at least, couples who live together for more than two years share a number of responsibilities towards each other whether they are married or not. In liquid society the business element is still present, but it is no longer connected with the act of getting married as the best option. The disruption of some strict conventions has made old traditions (like marriage) more flexible, propitiating the appearance of new social configurations which open space for new matrimonial arrangements. In Bauman's words, things are being re-accommodated into a new format, and a new ethos is being searched. If the world could stand the Industrial Revolution with its innovations, changes and constraints, it will certainly do the same with the speed involved in liquid times.

In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, characters do not seem to worry about the liquid elements presented by Bauman, but they are aware of their feelings towards this new world and the changes it has undergone. They understand the differences between their world and Austen's, and show that in their discussions about the novels. They know that they inhabit a different moment in history, and that they have more freedom of choice and action. They also have to cope with the feeling of insecurity that choice implies. As an example of that we have Sylvia saying, "How could I have let myself forget that most marriages end in divorce?" [...] "You don't learn that in Austen. She always has a wedding or two at the end" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 37). Divorce was something unthinkable in Austen's time, when marriage – be it good or bad – was bound to last a lifetime. Yet, in Fowler's book Sylvia is the only one among the six characters who had a long marriage. This is why she had forgotten that most marriages end in divorce. Among the other characters we have single people, people recently married, divorced, and with a different sexual orientation. Also, these characters demonstrate that their dissatisfaction with their world may or not be related to sexual issues. Marriage and sexuality, and money are now blended with other kinds of preoccupation. Still, they feel that if they cling to Austen's stories some answers will be reached. They feel that there is something in Austen's universe that is lacking in theirs. The different ethos these different fictional worlds carry may be one of the reasons why one seems so necessary to the other. That is why Fowler's characters use Austen's novels as an oracle to guide their quests.



4 THE BOOK CLUB: SEASONS WITH FOWLER AND AUSTEN

It was essential to reintroduce Austen into your life regularly, Jocelyn said, let her look around. We suspected a hidden agenda, but who would put Jane Austen to an evil purpose?

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

SeaSon is a dear term for literature, rich and meaningful. It represents the cycles of life, the changes that nature undergoes, and the ways that influence the characters' moods. Accordingly, let us consider how seasons appear in these stories created by Fowler and Austen. In *The Jane Austen Book Club* they come in the chapter divisions and in the choice of the settings for the meetings of the book club. Each chapter covers the month in which one of the members is planning how to host the group in the discussion of the monthly assigned Austen novel. Their meetings start in March, marking the beginning of spring with following description "the sunset had been a spectacular dash of purple, and now the Berryessa mountains were shadowed in the west. Due south in the springtime, but not the summer, was a stream" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 9). Although the weather in California is usually warm and mild, the Beryessa mountains, set in a conservation area, are always covered in snow. They are set in the Napa County, between San Francisco and Sacramento, in an agricultural region considered the best wine-production section in the country. Therefore, if Austen's works are set in Rural England, Fowler's novel can be said to take place in rural California. As the novel opens, spring is felt in the way characters behave, choosing activities in the open air after the end of the colder months. They go to long rides to explore the fields near their towns, in a way similar to what we have in *Emma*, when they go to Mr. Knightley's Donwell to visit the strawberry beds, or visit a near village named Box Hill.

Jocelyn is responsible for the opening of the book club, with the reading of *Emma*. According to Lionel Trilling the weather plays an important part in *Emma*,

The weather plays a great part in *Emma*; in no other novel of Jane Austen's is the succession of the seasons, and cold and heat, of such consequence, as if to make the point which the pastoral idyll characteristically makes, that the only hardships that man ought to have to endure are meteorological (TRILLING, 2000, p. 95).

Although both stories portray the seasons in their narratives, they represent them differently. Spring in Fowler's California may be brighter and warmer than in Austen's England. Also, the range of temperature that separates winter and spring is considerably smaller in California than in England. The change of the seasons certainly influences Austen's characters moods more directly, in their world without air conditioning, central heating, electricity or modern means of transportation. Austen's winters are freezing, gray, wet, and represent a time of reclusion, offering a greater contrast with spring, with its welcome moments of outdoor activities.

The presence of Austen's characters is intertwined with the story in Fowler's narrative. By reading that title of the novel one may imagine a book filled with deep literary discussions and pieces of criticism, but that is not exactly what we find there. We find a story on its own terms. The readers who have a wider experience with Austen will appreciate the intelligent discussion about Austen, and will understand the unstated connections that are being made. But that is not a requisite to enjoy Fowler's novel, which also has value and meaning to those who have never read Jane Austen. *The Jane Austen Book Club* can be read from different perspectives. For instance, the matchmaking theme is updated and can be approached on its own, or contrasted with the correlate couples in Austen: Emma, the heiress, becomes related with Jocelyn, the woman who chooses to breed dogs; while the couple Marianne and Willoughby, turns into Allegra and Corinne, the lesbian duo. Prudie mirrors Fanny Price. Grigg echoes Catherine Morland's naivety, and his taste for sci-fi substitutes for Catherine's crave for Gothic novels. Bernadette, as well as Elizabeth Bennet, reevaluates their first impressions; and Sylvia, similarly to Anne Elliot, gives a second chance to a long lost relationship.

As Linda Hutcheon puts it, “adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting” (HUTCHEON, 2006, p. XVI). Indeed, it is possible to see many similarities of Austen’s novels echoing in Fowler’s story, in Hutcheon’s words, “if we know that prior text, we always feel its presence shadowing the one we are experiencing directly” (Idem, 2006, p. 6). This is what the Austen reader feels in *The Jane Austen Book Club*, where several details can be seen as an approximation of one story through another. In this section, opening with the season mottoes, we will now enter these delightful fictional universes so as to identify those similarities and enrich our reading of the stories.

4.1 MARCH: SPRINGTIME WITH JOCELYN AND *EMMA*

Emma is spoiled by being the cleverest of her family. At ten years old, she had the misfortune of being able to answer questions which puzzled her sister at seventeen. She was always quick and assured: Isabella slow and diffident. And ever since she was twelve, Emma has been the mistress of the house and of you all. In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother’s talents, and must have been under subjection to her.

Jane Austen, *Emma*

We thought how the dog world must be a great relief to a woman like Jocelyn, a woman with everyone’s best interests at heart, a strong matchmaking impulse, and an instinct for tidiness. In the kennel, you just picked the sire and dam who seemed most likely to advance the breed through their progeny. You didn’t have to ask them. You timed their encounter carefully, and leashed them together until the business was done.

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

Spring is a wonderful season, associated with youth, flowers in bloom, lusty breezes, life in its brightness, with animals wooing their mates to secure the preservation of their species. In this sense, we could say that Jane Austen’s literature is spring literature, having the rituals of match-making at its thematic core. The month of May – that stands for full spring in the Northern hemisphere – is, of ancient tradition, the month of the brides, associated with the perfume of flowers in the woods and gardens, with birds singing, and human demonstrations of happiness and love. According to CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANT’s *Dictionary of Symbols*,

The alternation of the seasons, like the phases of the Moon, punctuate the rhythm of life and the stages in the cycle of development – birth, growth, maturity and decline. This is a cycle applicable to human beings as well as to their societies and civilizations. It also illustrates the myth of the eternal homecoming. It symbolizes cyclic alternation and perpetual rebirth (CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 840-841).

English Literature is famous for its representations of spring. Chaucer's Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* reminds us of the relief we feel when spring arrives, and substitutes for the harshness of winter, making it possible for us to witness the rebirth of life through the transformations that nature undergoes,

*Whan that aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of march hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour*¹⁵ (CHAUCER, 1400, electronic source)

But, as with everything in nature, there are several other aspects to spring, many of which are not amiable at all. Shakespeare complains, in *Sonnet 18*, that “rough winds do shake the darling buds of May” (SHAKESPEARE, 2001, p. 20). And T. S. Eliot gets to the extreme of declaring that

*April is the cruelest month,
Breeding lilacs out of the dead land,
Mixing memory and desire,
Stirring dull roots with spring rain* (ELIOT, T. S., 1973, p. 27).

If an author who writes in English refers to spring and to the month of May, he/she knows the readers will connect that with Shakespeare; he/she is inviting the readers to bring Chaucer and Eliot into their mental set. It is in this context that we meet Jocelyn Morgan, a character in Karen Joy Fowler's novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* who is completely fond of

¹⁵ In the translation of Paul Halsall, “When April with his showers sweet with fruit/The drought of March has pierced unto the root/And bathed each vein with liquor that has power/To generate therein and sire the flower. (<<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/CT-prolog-para.html>>. Access on 28th August, 2012.)

Jane Austen's *Emma*. Similarly to Emma Woodhouse, Jocelyn is an intelligent, determined, hard-headed but good-hearted woman. So good-hearted she is that, as a teenager, she relinquished her relationship with her boyfriend Daniel in favor of her best friend Sylvia. Now she is a single woman in her fifties, and Sylvia and Daniel are about to divorce, after thirty-two years of marriage. It is mainly to cheer her friend Sylvia up that Jocelyn comes up with the idea of forming a book club.

Fowler's Jocelyn and Austen's Emma, as can be appreciated in the epigraph to this section, share a tendency to fix other people's lives according to their notions about social arrangements, human bonds and marriage. But, in the meanwhile, they forget to consider their own personal interests into the bargain. During the narrative the reader witnesses these characters attempting to marry everybody in order to deny their inner desire of find a suitable match for themselves. This can also be an echo of Jane Austen herself, who never had any marriage experience, and yet spent a great part of her life writing about the theme.

Within this context of rebirth inspired by spring, we get to know that Sylvia is beginning a new phase in her life. Similarly to nature, which ends a phase of reclusion, cold and darkness, brought by winter, the same is happening to Sylvia. Her husband Daniel falls in love with another woman and decides to end his long marriage of thirty-two years. This situation forces Sylvia to initiate a new life without him, going through a moment of reclusion. Within this context, Sylvia comes closer to Jocelyn, her best friend since they were twelve, who is described as "a woman with everyone's best interests at heart, a strong matchmaking impulse, and an instinct for tidiness" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 29). In this situation it is possible to assert that Jocelyn is playing the whole of a mother. She is doing her best to amuse her friend and avoid suffering. However, she forgets that it is in those moments of difficulties that people end up growing. Suffering can be a kind of metaphor for winter; in nature, when winter comes it seems to destroy everything. But when spring comes we witness the rebirth of nature. It is a cycle of life. Life is made not only of happiness, sometimes it is necessary to undergo some difficult moments to rethink and reevaluate things.

To better understand Jocelyn and Emma and their role in these novels it is necessary to plunge into those stories in order to identify the approximations between Fowler's novel and Austen's. To begin with, one of the characteristics that first approximate Emma and Jocelyn is the fact that both are spoiled. For this reason, they love to be in command. In Austen's words, "Emma has been the mistress of the house and of you all" (AUSTEN, 2000, p. 23). As for

Fowler's story "Jocelyn's parents adored her so, they couldn't bear to see her unhappy. She'd never been told a story with a sad ending. She knew nothing about DDT or Nazis. She'd been kept out of school during the Cuban missile crisis because her parents didn't want her learning we had enemies" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 12). This way, Jocelyn was overprotected and similarly to Emma had to learn the truth through her mistakes. Arguably, another similarity that Jocelyn presents in relation to Emma is their 'believed' capacity of matchmaker. As above mentioned, Jocelyn forwent her relationship with Daniel in favor of Sylvia. She was the one who had "introduced Sylvia to the boy who would become her husband'. And 'this early success had given her a taste of blood'" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 3). Like a vampire, she wants more. Actually, what happened was a little bit different from the way Jocelyn reports. Daniel and Sylvia fell in love and decided to tell it to Jocelyn. And she, who was not really interested in Daniel, accepted this situation easily. As can be appreciated, a similar situation is presented in the beginning of *Emma*, when Emma thinks she is responsible for Miss Taylor's marriage. Actually, Emma thinks too much about marriage. Throughout the story, she believes she has the power to encourage new couples to get married, while she also loves to boast that she herself will never marry. This way, she decides to find a good match to Harriet, and that is when everything gets out of her control.

In *The Jane Austen Book Club* the narrator complains about "Jocelyn's inability to see what had never been hidden eventually became offensive" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 4). This same attitude is also true in Austen's *Emma*. Both Emma and Jocelyn fail to grasp how life works. They interfere in their friend's lives believing that they are doing them good. However, both forget that in some moments in our lives it is necessary to undergo some suffering in order to grow. Emma is blind to Mr. Elton's real intentions about her; she thinks he is interested in Harriet, when she herself is the target of his interest. Although Mr. Knightley tried to warn her about Mr. Elton's possible intentions, she refuses to listen to him. Jocelyn and Emma are blind to the things they do not want to see. They create an imaginary truth and believe in that truth. Emma fantasies that Mr. Elton is interested in Harriet Smith, and also that Jane Fairfax has a secret interest in her friend's husband, Mr. Dixon. And she is completely sure Mr. Frank Churchill is in love with her. In the end, Emma discovers that she was wrong in everything. Whereas Jocelyn pretends many things: to begin with, as a young girl, she starts flirting with two best friends, Mike and Steven, at the same time. They end up becoming enemies because of Jocelyn. This adventure leads her into a difficult situation. Brian, Mike's eldest brother, abused Jocelyn, and later said: "You asked for this...you know you did" (FOWLER, 2004, p.

19). In face with this situation, Jocelyn from then on “pretended she was someone innocent, someone who hadn’t asked for anything. She pretended she was a deer ... She pretended she was on the Trail of Tears, an event Sylvia had recounted in vivid if erroneous detail” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 20). A similar circumstance happened when Jocelyn was dating Daniel, and Sylvia was dating Tony. One day, Sylvia’s boyfriend Tony offered Jocelyn a ride in his car because it was raining. Tony took advantage of the situation and declared his interest in Jocelyn. “Jocelyn was dumbstruck. She couldn’t think of a single thing she’d done that might give that impression” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 24). But later on she realized that “once again she was barely dressed – short, short tennis skirt, sleeveless shirt cut away from the shoulders. Why, in these situations, was she always so disadvantageously clothed?” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 24). Tony took advantage of that situation and forced Jocelyn to kiss him. When we transfer this passage to *Emma*’s story we would have that scene in which Emma and Mr. Elton were in a carriage returning home from the Westons’ house. In that scene, Mr. Elton takes advantage of the fact that they are alone and declares his love for Emma, who felt insulted at being thus addressed by someone who is socially her inferior. Emma hides the episode from Mr. Knightley, because she knows he would say something disparaging about her inability to foresee the consequences of her own deeds. Emma and Jocelyn were not totally innocent, they provoked the disagreeable situations they ended up trapped in. Mr. Knightley tried to tell Emma about Mr. Elton’s character and intention, but she refused to listen to him. In Jocelyn’s case, she already had a similar experience, thus she could be more cautious and dress more appropriately.

Another interesting approximation to *Emma* in *The Jane Austen Book Club* is the scene in Box Hill in which Emma insults Miss Bates. As Maaja A. Stewart puts it, this scene marks the climax of *Emma*,

This act shocks Emma out of her self-indulgent posture, leads her to try to establish a selfless relationship not only with Miss Bates but also with Jane Fairfax, and forms a prelude to her recognition of the meaning of self in relationship to the other as her nature yields itself to love (STEWART, 1986, p. 75).

In Fowler’s novel it is difficult to conclude that the similar situation has the same function as a climax for the story as a whole, because the narrative structure and the story are

different. But it can be seen as a climax to Jocelyn's life story. In this modern version, the mistreated person was Jocelyn's mother. One day Jocelyn, her mother, Daniel, Sylvia, Tony and Pridey (Jocelyn's dog) went for a picnic. Jocelyn was disturbed by the presence of her mother among them. Thus, she inquired of her mother "Don't you have somewhere to be?" (...) "Errands to run? A life?" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 31). Jocelyn's mother is totally distraught with this rough treatment and leaves them immediately. Daniel, similar to Mr. Knightley, calls Jocelyn's attention to what she had done with her mother.

Here I stop to mark a division between these apparently so similar scenes. All the episodes mentioned in reference to Emma's solid time are simple. The mistake made by Mr. Elton is clearly a misunderstanding. He presumed Emma was interested in him, and she imagined he was interested in Harriet. The reader and Mr. Knightley are well aware of what is happening. The whole episode reminds us of the structure of a comedy of errors. Mr. Elton and Emma are a bit shaken in their pride, but both soon recover. As to the relationship involving Emma and Mr. Knightley, it is constant and transparent. When she avoids telling his best friend what happened in the carriage with Mr. Elton, that happens because she does not want acknowledge the fact that (as usual) he was right and she was wrong. Also, in the scene involving Miss and Mrs. Bates, when Mr. Knightley reprehends Emma, we all know that his sole reason is to bring her to reason. There are no darker hidden shades in the solid fiction of Jane Austen. In Fowler, on the other hand, the reticence involving Brian's revenge, added to Jocelyn's sense of guilt, may refer to a case of sexual assault. Jocelyn will not complain because she considers herself guilty of double-dating the two friends. Later, when Tony (Sylvia's boyfriend) tries to seduce her, she puts the blame on herself and on the kind of clothes she is wearing. In liquid times it is more difficult to tell what and who is right from what and who is wrong. Finally, when Daniel scolds her for being rude to her mother, he uses the opportunity to break with her, profiting from the fact that she is so struck by her own guilt that she will not have the strength to realize how base his hidden intention possibly is. Those facts changed Jocelyn's life; not because they change couples, but because here we have the roots to Jocelyn drawbacks, the reasons why she eventually preferred to remain unmarried – or, to put it in Austen's vocabulary, to become a spinster.

A final approximation in those stories is the fact that both Austen and Fowler put their characters Emma and Jocelyn at the center of the stories. In Austen's case as put forth by the American historian and critic Arthur Walton Litz,

By placing Emma's fine and interesting mind at the center of the novel Jane Austen assured herself of our sympathy, since we experience the life of Highbury through Emma's consciousness; but at the same time she made certain that we would understand and criticize every aspect of Emma's self-deception by establishing a context of ironic qualifications and explicit judgments (LITZ, 2000, p.380).

Some details in Fowler's story lead me to the conclusion that Jocelyn is also at the center of *The Jane Austen Book Club*. She is the one who forms the book club, chooses the author to be read, and decides the order of the readings. Taking into account that the book club is the title of the story and also the main motif of the narrative, Jocelyn is a character that is in more evidence in Fowler's story. As mentioned above, Emma was Austen's favorite. Similarly, Jocelyn might be Fowler's favorite. In effect, Jocelyn is highlighted by her weaknesses, like Emma, and this makes her more prone to be judged than the others.

4. 2 APRIL: ADVENTURES WITH ALLEGRA AND *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserved; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to commonplace and mistaken notions.

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*

Allegra sometimes felt things so deeply you ended up consoling her even when the tragedy was entirely your own.

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

Literature is filled with magical territories, such as Wonderland, Neverland, Narnia, Hogwarts, or even Austenland. Characters who inhabit such worlds live some incredible adventures in there. In those places, they fight enemies, make friends, acquire experience and eventually grow up. Arguably, the term adventure can present a different meaning for different people. What is adventure for someone can be considered dangerous or irresponsible

by others. Two dictionary entries¹⁶ to the word adventure define the word as “an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks” or “an exciting or remarkable experience”. Some people are more willing to take risks than others, to take part in an adventure, than others. In Austen and Fowler it is possible to find some characters who love an adventure, such as: Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and Allegra in *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

Although Allegra’s and Marianne’s adventures are not set in magical lands, they sometimes put their lives in risk. But they also contribute to their growth. Their adventures center on actions that defy social rules and conventions. Allegra is a woman in her thirties, in the 21st century, whereas Marianne is seventeen in the 18th century, which allows us to say they are in an equivalent position¹⁷, all things considered. In Allegra’s world rules are not so well established anymore, which grants her more mobility to live according to her own principles. Marianne’s range of options is not so wide. In spite of the different contexts, they are similar women, who like adventure, who want to take the most out of life, and who do not care much about what others think or say about them and about their attitudes. They do what they feel like doing, a philosophy that is more difficult for Marianne to stand up to in her context than for Allegra.

In Fowler’s narrative the book club gets together in April to discuss *Sense and Sensibility*. “It was cold out, wet, the way it gets in April just when you’ve convinced yourself that spring is here. Winter’s last laugh” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 44). From this brief description it is possible to see that the new season has not settled down yet. This inconstancy of the weather can be related to the story that is being read, and seen as an echo of Marianne Dashwood’s process of growth, which intertwines moments of turbulence and calmness. The narrative point of view agrees more with Elinor, the sensible sister, than with Marianne, who is more intense and reckless. Marianne represents a minority in Austen’s fictional society, but she occupies a space in it, and she is deeply loved by her family, friends and why not to say the readers. Having one eccentric character like her in a solid well established society may even grant charm and personality into that community. Still, her romantic and individualistic demeanor can be also interpreted as an anticipation of the new times to come, as a first symptom of modernity, individuality and independence. She sees life differently, and may defy social conventions for the sake of standing to her beliefs. Because of this attitude,

¹⁶ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/adventure>

¹⁷ They are equivalent, if we consider that in the nineteenth century a girl of eighteen is considered ready to get married and form a family, and that in the twenty first century, thirty years old is an average age in which some women get married.

Marianne almost destroys her reputation as a decent girl. As I have mentioned before, in Austen's society women's circumstances are very limited; even more so in the case of the Dashwood women, whose financial circumstances are very limited. Marianne risked everything when she embarked on her adventurous relationship with Willoughby, a man whose irresponsibility was as strong as his charm. Everything begins "on a memorable morning ... with partial sunshine of a showery sky ... The weather was not tempting enough", but Marianne and her younger sister Margaret decided to walk around Barton Park. After an hour of walking a "driving rain set full on their face" and they were obliged to turn back home (AUSTEN, 2002, p. 32). This way, they ran down the hill towards their house. On the way there, due to a false step, Marianne falls down and suddenly,

A gentlemen carrying a gun, with two pointers round him, was passing up the hill and within a few yards of Marianne, when her accident happened. He put down his gun and ran to her assistance. She had raised herself from the ground, but her foot had been twisted in the fall, and she was scarcely able to stand. The gentlemen offered his services, and perceiving that her modesty declined what her situation rendered necessary, took her up in his arms without farther delay, and carried her down the hill (AUSTEN, 2002, P. 33).

This dramatic entrance of handsome Willoughby, like in a fairy tale scene, triggered the whole distress that was brought into Marianne's life. Their relation initiates in a very romantic way, and for an adventurous young girl this certainly meant a lot. She becomes very attached to him, and their closeness gave hints of a real engagement; this way, all her friends and relations create high expectations about the couple, and end up forgetting that – adorable as she was – Marianne lacked the fortune which would allow her to be seriously considered as a suitable match. When the moment came for Willoughby to honor the unuttered promises, the news came that he was engaged to a wealthy woman and about to be married. Marianne was left alone, broken-hearted and, what is worse, with her reputation shaken, because she had exposed herself too much while Willoughby was around. According to Claudia L Johnson, Marianne confronted the "reigning standards of female manners". Johnson observes that "the extent to which women could with propriety reveal their attachments to men prior to a formal engagement was intensely and acrimoniously debated during the 1790s" (JOHNSON, 2002, p. 41). From this perspective, Marianne is a woman ahead of her time, who ended up entrapped in a web of social conventions. Marianne's first relation initiates

beautifully, but ends painfully. After she realizes how traumatic the experience of behaving naturally can prove, Marianne loses the will to be so spontaneous, adapting socially and doing the things she was expected to do.

That said, we can turn our attention to Fowler's heroine Allegra, who is also in the spring of her life, if we consider that the concepts about being young or old changed considerably in the last two centuries. In Marianne's time, a thirty year old woman did not have much left to expect from life; in Allegra's time you can have a whole life ahead of you when you are thirty, you can start a career, a profession, maybe a family.

Allegra is Sylvia's daughter, "a creature of extremes – either stuffed or starving, freezing or boiling, exhausted or electric with energy" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 44). In addition, like Marianne, "she felt things very deeply. It was one of her delightful qualities; she wept with those who wept... When happy, she was uncontrollable, when sad, inconsolable, until she changed – fast as a finger snap – long after you'd given up" (Idem, p. 45). Also,

While Allegra liked to describe herself as a garden-variety lesbian, she knew that the truth was more complicated. Sexuality is rarely as simple as it is natural. Allegra was not entirely indifferent to men, just to men's bodies. She was often attracted to the men in books; they seemed, as a rule, more passionate than the women in books, though actual women seemed more passionate than actual men. As a rule (Ibidem, p. 52-53).

From what has been said above we gather that Allegra is really intense, and goes deep into her emotions, as deep as Marianne, who fell ill and almost died after Willoughby left her. Allegra's strong emotional relationship involves Corinne, whom Allegra met for the first time on the day of her birthday, when she had had given herself a parachute jump as a gift. The jump did not go as expected, and Allegra seriously hurt her elbow when she reached the floor. "The next time she awoke, she was in Corinne's arms. It was an irresistible way to meet. By the time they got to the hospital they were partners in crime" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 54). Allegra's adventure was a secret, she did not tell to her mother or dad that she would go parachuting, and during the jump she broke her elbow. Corinne was there, watching everything, and she went in Allegra's rescue. The first thing Allegra asked Corinne was not to tell the truth about the circumstances of the accident to her mother. This way, "the only part of Corinne that Allegra had seen clearly in those hours at the hospital when she was flying on

painkillers and falling falling falling in love was the lying” (Idem, p. 56). Corinne not only omits the real story, but also creates a new one to tell Sylvia and Daniel.

Both Marianne and Allegra meet their lovers under painful situations: one twisted her ankle and the other one an elbow, and are helped by them. In the end, Willoughby proves to be a liar; Corinne starts by telling a white lie. Similarly, their relations also end painfully. Let us briefly consider the different reading audiences contemporary to Austen’s solid and Fowler’s liquid society. Only the readers who prove able to transport themselves into the code of each fictional universe will manage to understand some aspects of the heroines’ circumstances. An 18th century reader might fail to understand the fact that Allegra and Corinne form a couple, so unexpected this subject would seem to be addressed in a novel at that time. A 21st century reader, on the other hand, would probably find the fact that a 30 year old woman is hiding some waywardness from her mother stranger than the fact that she is having a homosexual relationship. Conversely, many present-day readers may find Marianne’s problems silly, failing to realize how dangerous, daring and courageous her attitude has been, and how close she got to being shunned into social ostracism for the rest of her life. The concept of “having a good reputation” probably does not mean anything anymore nowadays, but in a world like Marianne’s sometimes a good reputation is the only positive attribute that a girl can count on – especially in the case of women like the Dashwoods, who lack a substantial income and a male relative to look after them. In such cases, putting one’s reputation in risk means destroying all your future possibilities.

In Allegra’s time, depending on the place and the kind of people one lives with, homosexual couples can lead a pretty ordinary life, both personally and professionally. It is easier to be the different one in the liquid 21st century than it was in the solid 18th century society. This does not mean to say that we have evolved past prejudice. As Allegra points it, “she new that the truth was more complicated. Sexuality is rarely as simple as it is natural” (FOWLER, 2002, p. 52). Even nowadays to reveal as homosexual requires great courage. Also, the metaphor “falling falling falling in love” well illustrates that, as Allegra risks her life jumping from a parachute. Later she will learn that it is very easy for Corinne to lie, and will get as hurt emotionally as she has been physically hurt in the parachute jump. Each in her context, Marianne and Allegra are very honest women who invest in what they believe and want. To do that, they go against the social practices of their time, and have the bad luck to get involved with partners who are not able to behave in the same way. Corinne turns Allegra’s personal stories into a book, without asking for her permission or even telling her

about it. When Allegra discovered the truth she became extremely disappointed and decided to break up with Corinne. When Marianne discovered the real character of Willoughby she did something similar and decided to forget him.

As we are reaching the end of these adventures lived by Allegra and Marianne it is possible to understand that these lovely heroines demonstrate to be strong in many situations, but in others they demonstrate to be very naïve and over sensitive, as happens to most of the heroes and heroines who undergo their adventurous journeys mentioned at the opening of this chapter.

4.3 MAY: PRETENDING PRUDIE AND *MANSFIELD PARK*

“Fanny Price was at this time just ten years old, and though there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate, there was, at least, nothing to disgust her relations.”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*

“Prudie wasn’t pretty. She just pretended to be”

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

The act of pretending is intrinsically part of human life. People do that in some cases to be accepted or admired in a given social group. Others pretend as a mechanism to survive. Once in awhile everybody enters in the game and starts to perform a role. This happens to characters in Austen and Fowler’s stories, as to Fanny Price and Prudie. As it is possible to see from the excerpt above, the first description we have from Fanny Price makes it clear that she is an ordinary person, she is what Jane Austen calls plain (meaning neither beautiful nor ugly). In fact, Fanny herself feels she is different from the others, as she says, “I am unlike other people” (AUSTEN, 1998, p. 136). The same happens with Prudie, who does not possess any especial attributes to indicate that she is beautiful, as the epigraph above shows.

However, Prudie knows as much as to pretend to be pretty. And this is not her only pretense. We are informed by the narrator that Prudie did not have an ordinary childhood. Since very young, her life is full of mysteries. She inquires her mother about some topics about her infancy and does not receive reasonable answers, as if the history of her childhood has been made up, a creation of her mother's imagination, or of her own. At first, Prudie doubts the veracity of the things her mother tells her; thus, she decides to enter her mother's game of pretending and starts to pretend herself. Prudie even wonders if she could have been adopted, but the liquid narration will not solve this gap for the readers, as it is possible to see here,

It was especially hard to be honest about her own behavior, and she began to feel, long before she could put it into words, that there was something manufactured about her, not just in the diaries, but in the real world. (Whatever the hell that was.) The years receded behind her like a map with no landmarks, a handful of air, another of water. Of all the things she had to make up, the hardest was herself (FOWLER, 2004, p. 97).

Fanny Price's story, on the other hand, is conveyed to the reader by a reliable narrator, who informs us that the girl was raised by her wealthy aunt, Lady Bertram (Fanny's mother's sister), and Sir Thomas Bertram, from the age of ten years old. Fanny is quite aware of her position in the family. In fact, there is a moment in the story in which she feels the need of going back home in order to find out who she really is. Or, putting it in another way, Sir Thomas Bertram (who is disappointed with Fanny when she refuses Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage) decides to send Fanny home so that she can live for a while with her parents in order to think about her real condition as a poor girl. Prudie's view of this passage runs as thus,

Mansfield Park seemed a cold, uneasy place to Fanny until she was banished back to her parents'. The Bertram estate became Fanny's home only when she was no longer in it. Until then, she'd never understood that the affection of her aunt and uncle would prove more real in the end than that of her mother and father (Idem, p. 113).

It seems that the same happens to Prudie, who only understands the real importance of her mother in her life when her mother dies and she becomes an orphan. Still, when Prudie learns about her mother's accident, her first reaction is to keep in the act of pretending, as we see here, "Everything was fine. Her mother was perfect *sain et sauf*, and Prudie absolutely refused to be sucked into pretending otherwise" (Ibid., 2004, p. 115).

When Jane Austen conceived her novel *Emma* (as previously mentioned), she imagined that nobody but herself would like her heroine. On the other hand, when Austen conceived *Mansfield Park* she expected everybody to like both her novel and her heroine. In both cases, her predictions failed: *Emma*, the novel as well as the character, were well accepted and appreciated by Austen's audience, and few people felt enthusiastic about either *Mansfield Park* or Fanny Price during Austen's lifetime. Claudia L. Johnson says that "posterity has found it far harder to like Fanny Price, with all her self-doubt and modesty. For some Fanny Price is a prig, and the novel the very acme of sanctimoniousness" (JOHNSON, 1998, p. xii). That might be one of the reasons why Fowler does not present a proper discussion of *Mansfield Park* in the chapter expected to be used to focus on that novel. All sorts of things happen in that chapter, except the discussion of *Mansfield Park*. We are informed that even Prudie – who likes to be described as a true Janeite, "found the character of Fanny Price hard going" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 83). However, "her opinion improved over the years" and she volunteered to host the discussion of *Mansfield Park*. This might happen because Prudie, similarly to Fanny, is also a hard going character in Fowler's novel.

According to Prudie, *Mansfield Park* was picked for May. This month is considered the month of the brides, since many marriages take place in May; also, it is a month in which spring is in its full bloom. In a sense this chapter revisits the story of Prudie's marriage, as she reports to us how Dean conquered her, and how they ended up married. This same chapter deals differently with the description of the weather. In the first two chapters of *The Jane Austen Book Club*, the weather is presented as something positive, which has a subtle influence upon the characters' lives. However, that changes in the third chapter, and weather is presented as something devastating: "the climate in the Valley was classified as Mediterranean, which meant that everything died in the summer. The native grasses went brown and stiff. The creeks disappeared. The oaks turned gray" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 110). This description seemed to be engendering a feeling of discomfort, or of annoyance, as a premonition of something that would happen. After all, it is not summer yet, it is the middle of spring. According to Prudie, "it is hard to keep the students' attention in May" (FOWLER,

2004, p. 85). She is also affected by the weather, her head aches because it is so hot. Prudie spends all her day complaining about the weather and how it affects her activities. In fact, that is the day of one of the meetings of the book club, and Prudie is preparing her discussion on *Mansfield Park*. However, when she is at home, resting before the meeting, Dean awakes her with the sad news about her mother's accident, telling Prudie that she should go to her mother immediately. This way, the premonitory function of the weather is fulfilled. Something terrible really happens.

In Austen, the weather also influences Fanny's health and mood. Fanny is described as having a weak health. And there is a day in which she has a terrible headache because her aunt makes her walk in the sun for a long period. Then, when spring comes, Fanny loses the company of her beloved pony, which was more than a friendly animal, it was also a helping hand to her weak health, as the excerpt shows,

The ensuing spring deprived her of her valued friend the old grey poney, and for some time [Fanny] was in danger of feeling the loss in her health as well as in her affections, for in spite of the acknowledged importance of her riding on horseback, no measures were taken for mounting her again, "because", as it was observed by her aunts, "she might ride one of her cousins' horses at any time when they did not want them (AUSTEN, 1998, p. 27).

We can say that the main approximation between Fanny Price and Prudie has to do with the fact that both show to be displaced within their environment. In *Mansfield Park* it is possible to share this feeling of not pertaining with Fanny, a person was raised within a family that makes a point of declaring that she does not belong. This same sensation of displacement is felt in Prudie's story, when she reports about her infancy. The feeling of displacement felt by both heroines is rooted in their infancies, due to the fact that both have absent mothers or stepmothers. In Austen's novel Fanny's mother is symbolically dead, and in Fowler's the death really happens.

Also, both stories are very theatrical. Both characters use representation as a form of survival, as a way of enduring life. In both stories, there is also a sensual tension instigated by the performance of a play which is being rehearsed. In Austen such rehearsal is at the root of

Mary Bertram and Henry Crawford's love affair. In Fowler, the sensual tension takes place between Prudie and one of her students.

Both Fanny and Prudie make similar choices in relation to their partners. Although they live in different (solid and liquid) social environments, their ideas in relation to marriage seem similar. Both root their choices on husbands who provide them solid a marriage. In Prudie's liquid life, a solid husband has its worth. This is felt in Prudie's mother's opinion about Dean: "There's a young man with his feet on the ground." Prudie's relation with her mother is so difficult that she did not realize her mother is agreeing with her about Dean. Thus, she inquires, "What is wrong with a solid sort of guy?" and the answers she receives are "Did you want a marriage full of surprises, or did you want a guy you could depend on? Someone who, when you looked at him, you knew what he'd be like in fifty years?" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 101). Although she always disagrees with her mother in relation to her marriage, Prudie did for once something in consonance with her mother's opinion. Maybe this is what bothers her so much.

In Austen's novel Fanny has two different possibilities: a solid husband in Edmund and a changeable one in Henry Crawford. She ends up choosing Edmund. In Fowler's story the only option Prudie considers is Dean. In her mother's words in the excerpt above we know they are both aware of how swiftly things change concerning human bonds in their society. For this reason, it is possible to say that she makes her option for a solid connection consciously, "Prudie had married Dean, who, for no reason that Prudie could see, thought he was lucky to get her. She was still learning how lucky she was. Dean was much more than solid. He was generous, friendly, easygoing, hardworking, good-looking" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 102).

In spite of the distance in time and values those characters, Fanny Price and Prudie share the same idea in relation to their problems and priorities. They seem to agree that a foot on the ground is still the best option.

4.4 JUNE: THE MYSTERIES OF GRIGG AND *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

“No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all against her.”

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

“No one who’d known Grigg since infancy could have doubted he was born to be a heroine.”

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

Stories which portray mysteries developed along the plot tend to hold the audience’s attention and to instigate the reading. Some readers like such stories more than others; this is the case with two especial readers: Catherine Morland, from *Northanger Abbey*, who is fond of Gothic novels, and Grigg, from *The Jane Austen Book Club*, a fan of science fiction. As readers, both share these characteristics of getting so much involved with what they read, that they bring the plot of the fiction they read in contact with their actual life, and sometimes the frontiers that separate the two realms seem blurred. In this sense, they remind me of what Umberto Eco calls “model readers” because “they are willing to accept something that goes beyond the commonsensical and reasonable” (ECO, 2004, p. 9). Catherine and Grigg demonstrate to be so involved in the stories they read that, in some moments, they have difficulties in telling what is real from what lies in their imagination.

In Gothic narratives, heroines are generally characterized as the most beautiful ones, with a weak health. They are sensible and accomplished, and some of them have lost their mothers in childhood. And the heroes, on the other hand, are men of distinguished courage or ability, admired for their brave deeds and noble qualities. However, in *Northanger Abbey*, as Austen was parodying the way women were presented in literature, instead of creating a passive traditional heroine she creates a pro-active heroine, who does not follow the pattern. Catherine lacks several attributes expected from a standard heroine. She is not the most beautiful, she is not weak, nor very sensible, she has not lost her mother in childhood, and she is not accomplished. Catherine has a mother, a father and nine brothers and sisters. As a matter of fact, she is more boyish than girlish, as the narrator shows, “she was fond of all boys’ plays, and greatly preferred cricket not merely to dolls, but to the more heroic

enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush” (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 5).

Following the same reversal structure, Fowler creates Grigg as everything but a hero, as the epigraph above shows. Grigg does not fulfill the expectations concerning the behavior of a successful male. He is too sensitive to be aggressive, too gentle to be prominent. In the book club he is the only male, as much of a social minority as women are, socially speaking, in Austen’s world. Grigg is the outsider, the one who has never read Austen before, the one who buys the *Complete Works*, the one mocked for his weird literary taste. Liking sci-fi, nowadays, may be as derogatory a characteristic as liking Gothic romances was in Austen’s time.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is presented to us by a good-humored, yet ironic narrator, who stresses how naïve she is, because she is so involved in her stories of ghosts and mysteries. As Catherine comes from a big family of limited means, what is omitted by this narrator may be even more relevant than what is said. Initially she is presented as an innocent girl playing freely with her brothers and sisters, “but from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for a heroine; she read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 7). In the world she inhabited, maybe it would be more profitable for Catherine if she were training to find a suitable match than training to become a romance heroine. When she is 17, Catherine is invited by Mr. and Mrs. Allen, to spend a season in Bath. That was a common practice at that time. Wealthier families in the communities helped the young people from the poorer families to find their matches, even if this meant taking them to trips to London and to other fashionable places such as Bath, because unmarried spinsters at that time represented a load to be carried by their families and, sometimes, by the local community.

In her trip with the Allen, Catherine meets Isabella Thorpe and her brother, two people who mistake Catherine for a wealthy young woman and want to profit from that. They cause Catherine to be involved in some circumstances that bring into action her trainings to be a heroine. Although she does not have anyone to guide her, she manages to succeed. As the narrator informs us, nobody can go against their fate: “when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way” (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 8). In Bath, Catherine also meets the

siblings Henry and Eleanor Tilney with whom she develops a sincere relationship. Catherine becomes so close to the Tilneys that they invite her to spend a time in their propriety, called Northanger Abbey. She becomes excited with the invitation and writes to her parents asking permission to go with them. When the permission comes she is very happy. As she arrives in Northanger Abbey she starts to search for some mysteries that those kinds of residences would promote. The mysteries Catherine searches in Northanger Abbey evoke the ones she finds in her favorite book *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by Mrs. Ann Radcliffe. She allows herself to be carried away by the idea that Mrs. Tilney had been murdered by her husband, General Tilney. She becomes very ashamed when she discovers she was wrong.

In *The Jane Austen Book Club* the narrator presents us Grigg, apparently as innocent and naïve as Catherine in Austen's novel. Both Grigg and Catherine are strangers among their peers. Grigg was raised in a predominantly female environment, with his mother and three sisters. This situation worried his mother and father, because Grigg might end up having a different behavior from what was expected from a boy. Once, Grigg is invited by his father to enter a new universe and to live a different experience. His father gives him some magazines, which he calls "strictly boy stuff", and "top-secret" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 125). However, what attracts the boy's attention is not the naked woman on the cover of the magazine:

But best of all, unbelievably best, was the thing unhooking the bra. It had eight tentacle arms and a torso shaped like a Coke can. It was blue. The look on its face – what an artist to convey so much emotion on a creature with so few features! – was hungry. This was the afternoon that made a reader out of Grigg... and what Grigg liked best about science fiction was that it seemed to be a place where he was neither alone nor surrounded by girls (Idem).

In a second attempt, Grigg's father invites him to go camping. And he warns Grigg that their adventure would be different because girls could not participate; actually what Grigg's father really means is that Grigg's sisters and mother cannot go with them, because they are going to do male things together. In his naivety, Grigg understands that no girls are allowed. On their journey to the camping place they meet two girls, and Grigg's father offers them a ride. This circumstance disturbs Grigg. The girls lead them to a mansion in Bel Air. They are invited into the house, where they meet people enjoying life, drinking alcoholic drinks, smoking, listening to music, using drugs. That is the first time Grigg is away from his

mother and sisters. Being exposed to such adventures, he is at the same time scared and instigated in his curiosity. At home, he is not allowed to enter his sisters' world, which means to enter their room alone, and see their private things, like notebooks, wardrobes and boxes. Now, being in this unknown house, opens an opportunity for him to enter the mysteries of the feminine world. In a way, Grigg loose in this mansion symbolizes Catherine loose in Northanger Abbey. Each of them releases his/her imagination as the greedy readers they are. As such, Grigg starts searching inside the house for things which pertain, exclusively, to women's environment, things that are forbidden territory in his own house. What he finds out there, however, is sex.

As it is possible to realize, Grigg is as much of an outsider in Fowler's universe as Catherine is in Austen's. In his family he is the only male among three sisters, and in the book club he is the only male member. Grigg, so much fond of science fiction, is himself the alien in that group. He even gives his opinion about Austen's novel "I just love it's all about reading novels. Who's a heroine, what's an adventure? Austen poses these questions very directly. There's something very pomo going on there" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 138). Even so, the other members of the group see him with suspicion.

Grigg and Catherine undermine the expectations of their readers in respect to sex and sexuality. They have their own time to follow in this respect. When people (family, social group) expect that they behave in a conventional way, they seem to be interested in investigating other things. Neither Catherine is searching for a husband, nor is Grigg interested in what other people might think about his sexual orientation. They are both immersed into their personal adventures, exploring new interesting places. They do not seem to be competing with anyone, although they might:

But Catherine did not know her own advantages – did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man, unless circumstances are particular untoward. (AUSTEN, 2004, p. 76).

The Thorpes attempt to prevent Catherine from having a relationship with Henry Tilney, and so does his father when he finds out that she does not have a fortune. But none of these adversities would prevent the heroine from succeeding in the end or from having the

hero falling in love with her. None as much would Grigg be prevented from succeeding in his attempts at being accepted in the group, to the point that he also gets a heroine to fall in love with him at the end.

When Jocelyn invites Grigg to be part of the group, her intention is to introduce him to Sylvia. Jocelyn would never imagine that she herself would end up interested in him. Although Grigg and Jocelyn are completely different, they feel a natural attraction for each other. Grigg has a black cat, and couldn't have dogs when he was a child because of his father. Jocelyn is allergic to cats, and has several dogs. In the meeting of the club held at Grigg's house his cat chooses Jocelyn's lap to sit on, a "large black cat with a small head, very sphinxlike wound around our legs and then made for Jocelyn's lap" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 136-137), and Jocelyn ends up liking that. It is possible to say that their differences are what propel them towards a strong attraction.

What Catherine and Grigg have in common, in the end, is the fact that both possess a very rich imagination, and an internal force capable of propelling them to move from the position of outsiders into a position of being accepted and well liked in their social group.

4.5 JULY: FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*

“Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humored as Lydia.”

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

“Being first stair actually made me a better person. Kinder, more tolerant. All that attention turned me good. It didn’t last. I didn’t grow and the second stair did, and the next summer we switched places. I learned that the girls in between the first stair and the last stair, well, they’re just the girls in between.”

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

According to an old English proverb “first impressions are the most lasting.”¹⁸ It is possible to say that this saying can be applied only in certain cases. First impressions can be decisive when one applies for a job, a place at university, and in situations when the candidate has only one opportunity to prove his or her competence. However, when it comes to relationships, first impressions should not be taken so seriously, because it is very hard, I would say almost impossible to know the character of a person in a single meeting. And this is the case with Fowler’s Bernadette and Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet. Of course in Austen’s case Lizzy’s development spreads through the whole book, whereas in Fowler’s story Bernadette’s plot is concentrated in Chapter 5. As Lizzy Bennet is the protagonist in *Pride and Prejudice*, the main focus of the novel is the process through which she transcends the prejudice caused by her first impressions. Fowler’s story deals differently with the same subject. In different chapters the narrator presents us with different perspectives of the same characters. In the beginning of the novel Bernadette (who is responsible for leading the discussion of *Pride and Prejudice*) is presented to us as somewhat sloppy, a person who does not care much about her appearance; but later she is described as a very kind woman. In the meeting promoted by the members of the book club at Library Galleria, Bernadette surprises everybody, “Bernadette had set aside her no-effort dress policy in honor of the black-tie occasion and was *très magnifique* in a silver shirt and pants, with her silver hair moussed up from her forehead. Her glasses had been repaired and the lenses cleaned” (FOWLER, 2004 p. 160). As a matter of fact, the one most surprised by Bernadette’s appearance and attitudes is

¹⁸ Available at <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/proverbs.html>

Prudie, who used to see Bernadette with suspicion and prejudice. When she has the opportunity to spend some time alone with Bernadette, and know her better, Prudie's first impression changes. The same happens with other characters along the story like Jocelyn and Grigg, Allegra and Corinne to mention but a few.

Bernadette is the hostess of the chapter dedicated to *Pride and Prejudice*, and the person hosting the discussion of a novel, in Fowler's story, always shares some similarities with the main character of the chosen novel. Both Elizabeth and Bernadette have some opportunities of engagement and marriage. Elizabeth, for instance, had three suitors, Mr. Wickham, Mr. Collins, and Mr. Darcy. She even had the opportunity of refusing two of the proposals. Here we have what she says to Mr. Darcy:

From the very beginning, from the first moment I may almost say, of my acquaintance with you, your manners impressing me with the fullest belief of your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others, were such as to form that ground-work of disapprobation, on which succeeding events have built so immovable a dislike; and I had not known you a month before I felt that you were the last man in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry. (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 128)

Although Elizabeth is not economically in a comfortable position to refuse a proposal of marriage, she is too proud and determined to accept a proposal just because she needs it. Had she accepted Mr. Collins' proposal, she would have saved her family's property. And if she married Mr. Darcy she would have become a very rich woman. Elizabeth's pride prevents her from being practical; as she says, "there is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me" (AUSTEN, 2001, p.115). When Elizabeth visits Charlotte's new home, she is acquainted with Colonel Fitzwilliam, a gentleman who she started to admire. During a meeting with Colonel Fitzwilliam, she is warned by him about the importance of money in marriage, "our habits of expense make us too dependent, and there are not many in rank of life who can afford to marry without some attention to money" (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 121). But this warning does not seem to change Elizabeth's mind, because, later on, when Mr. Darcy proposes to her, she refuses him at once. In fact for Elizabeth, "happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 16). And this chance falls upon her when she finally manages to

change her mind about a number of things, starting by considering Darcy under a different perspective and (after visiting Pemberley) manages to fall in love with him.

Bernadette has been married several times. For her, “happiness in marriage is mostly a matter of chance” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 160). Bernadette – who lives in a different time, when there are other economic solutions available outside the realm of marriage – does not see wedding as an end; on the contrary she sees it as a beginning. Bernadette’s idea is similar to Bauman’s idea of liquid love, as a succession of ends and new beginnings,

My husbands weren’t any of the problem. Marriage seemed like such a small space whenever I was in it. I liked the getting married. Courtship has a plotline. But there’s no plot to being married. Just the same things over and over again. Same fights, same friends, same things you do on a Saturday. The repetition would start to get to me.

And then I couldn’t fit my whole self into a marriage, no matter who my husband was. There were parts of me that John liked, and different parts for the others, but no one could deal with all of me. So I’d lop some part off, but then I’d start missing it, wanting it back. I didn’t really fall in love until I had that first child (FOWLER, 2004, p. 193).

For Bernadette the worse part of marriage is routine. And in order to escape routine she searches for novelties, and marries several times.

Another point in common between these two stories is the role of mothers. According to Marianne Hirsch “mothers tend to be absent, silent, or devaluated in novels by Jane Austen” (HIRSCH, 1989, p.14). This has already been underlined in section 3.3 above, in a comment about Prudie. If in *Mansfield Park* we have absent mothers, in *Pride and Prejudice* we can say that mothers are devaluated. In spite of being shaped as a caricature, Lizzy’s mother is fighting for the future of her daughters. That is why her major goal in life is to marry all her five girls. She fills her time in searching for suitable matches. If we transpose that in time and space, in *The Jane Austen Book Club* we learn that Bernadette’s mother’s goal was to turn her daughter into a pop star. In a liquid world in which marriage is not the solution for all problems anymore, a successful career might be the answer. The intention of these mothers is helping their daughters, and that is acceptable, because every mother wants the best for her children. The problem lies in how they handle that, because both mothers demonstrate to be unreasonable. They do inappropriate things so as to reach their goals,

without pondering if they are going too far or not. And their unreasonable doings are not supported either by Elizabeth's or by Bernadette's fathers. In Austen's story, Mr. Bennet criticizes his wife when she decides that Lizzy must marry Mr. Collins. And in Bernadette's case, it is her father who stops her mother from exposing Bernadette to his patients. Bernadette, a middle-aged woman now, says she did not mind her mother's behavior, "I didn't really care. I always had a lot of self-confidence". (FOWLER, 2004, p. 167) However, it is impossible not to read the shame when Bernadette's mother makes her dance in many places,

Mother was turning desperate. She made me perform everywhere, family gatherings, cocktail parties. She even made me dance for Dad's patients, because she said, you just never know who's going to turn out to *be* someone. Can you imagine? You go to have a tooth pulled and there's a top-hat-and-cane number thrown in? Dad finally put a stop to it, thank the Lord. Though some of those patients were very appreciative. People will sit through anything if it puts off a tooth extraction (FOWLER, 2004, p. 169).

In *Pride and Prejudice* Lizzy feels ashamed of her mother in many occasions, especially because of her lack of etiquette. In the ball at Netherfield, for example, Mrs. Bennet talks out loud in front of the whole party about the possibility of Jane's marrying Mr. Bingley.

As far as the couples are concerned, there are also similarities with the couples Elizabeth and Darcy and Jocelyn and Grigg, as their relationship starts under the veil of pride and prejudice. Although Grigg is not so arrogant as Mr. Darcy (on the contrary: he is as nice and kind as Mr. Bingley), he is rejected at first because of Jocelyn's prejudice against science fiction. This can be verified on the excerpt below, from a conversation between Grigg and Jocelyn in which she gives him her opinion about science fiction,

‘I like books about real people,’ Jocelyn said.

‘I don't understand the distinction.’ – Grigg's eyes had returned to the road – ‘Elizabeth Bennet is a real person, but the people in science fiction books aren't?’

‘Science fiction books have people in them, but they’re not about the people. Real people are really complicated.’

‘There’s all kinds of science fiction,’ – Grigg said – ‘When you’ve read some I’ll be interested in your opinion’ (FOWLER, 2004 p.173).

It is interesting to see the elegant way in which Grigg answers to Jocelyn’s prejudice: as a reader and an expert in the subject, he suggests to her read a science fiction book first, and then give her opinion about it.

Initially, Jocelyn’s intention is to introduce Grigg to Sylvia, who is undergoing a moment of sadness because of the end of her marriage. Although Jocelyn does not seem to be aware of that, she demonstrates to feel attracted to Grigg from their first meeting. At the root of Jocelyn’s prejudice there might be the fact that Grigg is younger than her. Since they first meet, their relationship has its ups and downs. This inconstancy is underlined in the scene when Jocelyn is waiting for Grigg to take her to the meeting at the Library Gallery. Initially, she ponders that Grigg is a man of good heart,

Here he was, buying a pricey ticket, putting on a gray suit in the dreadful summer heat, and spending a whole evening with a bunch of old women, and married women, and lesbians, just from the goodness of his heart. What a good heart that was!” (FOWLER, 2004 p. 163).

Then, because of Grigg’s delay, Jocelyn changes her opinion completely “Arriving late was a way of saying that your own time was more valuable than the time of the person who waited for you” (FOWLER, 2004 p. 163). Grigg’s and Jocelyn’s relation in Fowler’s novel is filled with misunderstandings, similar to Elizabeth and Darcy’s in *Pride and Prejudice*. It takes time for Jocelyn and Elizabeth to get into the pace of Grigg and Darcy.

As this chapter proposes a reading of Fowler’s and Austen’s novels under the influence of seasons, another characteristic which can be highlighted in this section is the intensity of the heat. That reminds us that the story takes place in California, a state with hot weather, and in the summer. There is a scene in which Jocelyn has to walk a long distance in the sun because Grigg forgot to fill the tank of the car. Jocelyn is irritated with Grigg, who

first arrived late, and then led her into this predicament. So, she decides to walk instead of waiting for another solution. As a consequence, she arrives at the gallery sweating and with a shaggy hair. Arguably, a similar scene happens in *Pride and Prejudice* when Elizabeth walks four miles to Netherfield, to see her sister Jane who is sick. The weather in that scene is described as “dirty weather”, and due to that Elizabeth arrived at Netherfield “with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise” (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 23). As her mother had warned her “You will not be fit to be seen when you get there” (Idem, p. 22). In that given scene Elizabeth is also angry because her mother sent Jane to Netherfield riding a horse under a bad weather on purpose. This way, “Elizabeth feeling really anxious, [because of her sister’s illness], was determined to go to her, though the carriage was not to be had; and as she was no horsewoman, walking was her only alternative. She declared her resolution” (AUSTEN, 2001, p. 22). When we connect the two scenes we realize, first, that in both cases the characters acted under the influence of anger and pride. Jocelyn and Elizabeth are aware of the conditions of the weather and the consequences of a walk under those conditions, but in both cases their stubbornness prevents them from acting differently. Secondly, the very fact that they are disheveled, angry and burnt by the sun (characteristics that should be socially seen as negative) ends up being the element that makes them different and attractive.

As in this section both Bernadette and Jocelyn have been appreciated in relation to the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, we can conclude that the three women, Elizabeth Bennet, Bernadette and Jocelyn tend to be influenced by their first impressions. Bernadette – perhaps because she is older – seems to have learned to be more willing to change and surpass prejudice than the others. Yet, Elizabeth and Jocelyn are still sort of proud of admitting their weaknesses and limitations. Therefore it is possible to say that these characteristics make them suffer a little more than Bernadette.

4.6 AUGUST: SYLVIA'S SECOND CHANCE AND *PERSUASION*

“Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way; - she was only Anne.”

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*

“Sylvia seemed very grown up compared with me. She knew stuff you would never have imagined a little girl would know. History and medicine. She could tell you more about comas.”

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

Occasionally we tend to think that once a mistake is made there is no way out. The first idea that comes to our minds is: this is an insurmountable problem. However, second chances do exist. They can really happen; sometimes, it is just a matter of time. Literature has given us many examples of successful cases of a second chance, as in Charlotte Brönte’s *Jane Eyre*, Langston Hughes’s *Thank you Ma’am*, Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club*, to mention but a few. In each story mentioned here there is a moment in which a believed insurmountable problem is surpassed and another chance is presented. In the short story *Thank you Ma’am* we learn that maturity provides wisdom and enhances solidarity and forgiveness. Everything happens when an old lady named Mrs. Jones is almost robbed by a boy named Roger. The second chance in that story happens in the form of forgiveness and solidarity. Mrs. Jones not only forgives the boy, but also gives him a chance to think about his deeds and a way of avoiding such behavior. The novels *Jane Eyre*, *Persuasion*, and *The Jane Austen Book Club* demonstrate that true affection can lead one to overcome all sorts of hardships and former mistakes.

The motif of a second chance is the fuel that leads the narrative in both Austen’s *Persuasion*, and Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club*. In these stories the heroines Anne Elliot and Sylvia experience love, make mistakes, regret their doings, and get a second chance. The major hindrance in Sylvia’s marriage is religious diversity, taking into account that Sylvia’s mother is a devout Catholic and Daniel (Sylvia’s boyfriend) is not. As this

excerpt shows, the first thing her mother wants to know about Daniel is, “‘Is he a Catholic?’ her mother asked the first time Daniel drove her home from school” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 212). This information is important because for the Catholic Church divorce is forbidden. As her mother says, “Non-Catholics, on the other hand, *they* believed in divorce” (Ibidem).

In *Persuasion* the difficulty that prevented – eight years previous to the opening of the novel – Anne Elliot from marrying the man she loves has to do with social rank. Anne is the daughter of a baronet, and her fiancé was but a young sailor then. In the past, Anne’s aristocratic family would not accept such an abyssal difference in their status. Anne’s father, Sir Walter, remembers the man she loves as this: “Mr. Wentworth was nobody, I remember; quite unconnected; nothing to do with the Stradford family” (AUSTEN, 1995, p.17). Nevertheless, as the story opens, things have changed drastically. The baronet has gone bankrupt and Anne is turning into a spinster, while the young man became a Captain in the navy, defeated Napoleon Bonaparte and became a hero and a very wealthy man. Now, at his prime, he returns to the same vicinity from which he had once been expelled. Anne Elliot was so young and inexperienced in the past so as to be persuaded to remain with her family, and now she regrets that fact. In *The Jane Austen Book Club*, Sylvia marries Daniel in spite of her family’s complaints. But now, many years later, they are going through a divorce. Sylvia’s father is as prejudiced as Anne’s, and he too is trying to avoid acknowledging the fact that he has gone bankrupt.

No one in Sylvia’s family knew that her father had stopped drawing a paycheck and started putting their money into the paper until the money was gone. They moved then to the Bay Area, where Sylvia’s uncle gave her father a job working at his restaurant. Sylvia and her brothers traded their two-story Victorian for a small apartment, private school for the large public ones. Her older sister was already married and stayed behind in Sacramento to have babies her parents complained they now never saw” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 211).

Anne’s family tries similar procedures. The married sister lives on a farm with her husband’s family. Sir Walter rents his manor house and retreats into a smaller place in Bath with his older daughter, whereas Anne keeps moving among these three places. According to Deirdre Le Faye “1814 is the year when Sir Walter Elliot’s extravagant way of life has

brought him so deeply into debt that even he realizes that some economizing is essential” (LE FAYE, 2002, p. 282). However, he does not admit before society that he is facing financial problems. This way, the business of letting his house for rental was done discretely. In spite of his dislike of the navy, Sir Walter rents his property, Kellynch Hall, to Admiral Croft, who is Captain Frederick Wentworth’s brother in law.

Both Anne, eight years later, and Sylvia, thirty years later, allow themselves the luxury of a second chance. Their stories follow an opposite pattern, one relation initiates with a negative response, and has to undergo a long and slow movement towards a conciliation; the other relation starts well, and then deteriorated along the years, ending up in sadness. The title of Austen’s novel consists of one word: persuasion. Anne was *persuaded* by her family to say no to Wentworth’s proposal. She was too weak and inexperienced, too dependent on her family’s opinion, to fight for what she wanted. That was a circumstance common enough in the context of the 18th century, no doubt. Sylvia, on the other hand, as a modern young woman in the 1970’s maybe was influenced by the opposite mood: one should be independent and do things one’s own way. Sylvia was young, and so in love with Daniel that she overlooked the cultural differences that separated them. Neither did she realize that if Daniel had given up a relation with her best friend, Jocelyn, to start dating her – he could also leave her, in the future, to date someone else. In the two stories, both female protagonists undergo a journey towards maturity and self-discovery, and come up wiser in the end.

Anne’s and Sylvia’s processes of self-reconciliation initiate in a moment of distress, and end in gladness. In *Persuasion*, it starts when Anne’s nephew has a bad fall and, “his collar-bone was found to be dislocated, and such injury received in the back, as roused the most alarming ideas” (AUSTEN, 1995, p. 36). In this moment of affliction Captain Wentworth arrives at Anne’s sister’s house. They barely look at each other, because everybody is involved in helping out the sick boy. This event marks the reunion of Anne and Capitan Wentworth after eight years; but what is decisive for their reconciliation is a second moment of distress caused by another accident, Louisa Musgrave’s accident. Louisa is sister-in-law to Anne’s sister Mary. When Captain Wentworth starts visiting the Musgraves, he seems to become very close to Louisa. During a visit of the group to Lyme Regis, on the Dorset coast, Louisa had a near-fatal accident,

There was too much wind to make the high part of the new Cobb pleasant for the ladies, and they agreed to get down the steps to the lower, and all were contented to pass quietly and carefully down the steep flight, excepting Louisa; she must be jumped down them by Captain Wentworth... He advised her against it, thought the jar too great... she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless! (AUSTEN, 1995, p. 73).

This second accident, and all the necessary movements of calling a doctor, warning the family, all the turmoil provides Anne and Wentworth the change to get close to each other and to talk in a natural way. The solid social conventions in Austen's time concerning the proper behavior to be followed by people made it almost impossible for a man and a woman to sit down and talk. That is why Austen's love stories rely so heavily on chance, hidden written notes, accidents and a number of *deus ex machina*¹⁹ expedients so that the solutions to the plot can be triggered. Those events brought to Anne

the record of many sensations of pain, once severe, but now softened; and of some instances of which could never be looked for again, and which could never cease to be dear. She left it all behind her; all but the recollection that such things had been (AUSTEN, 1995, p. 81).

In *The Jane Austen Book Club* the accident involving Allegra – Sylvia and Daniel's daughter – contribute to bring them together, starting a process of reconciliation. The accident happens when Allegra has a bad fall while practicing climbing in a club. Sylvia and Daniel go together to help their daughter. Sylvia feels insecure at such moments,

Sylvia believed in being careful, though she also believed that being careful was often not enough. She saw the world as an obstacle course. You picked your way across it while the terrain slipped about and things fell or exploded or both. Disasters arrived in the form of accidents, murders, earthquakes, disease, and divorce (FOWLER, 2004, p. 53).

¹⁹ **deus ex machina**, (Latin: "god from the machine") a person or thing that appears or is introduced into a situation suddenly and unexpectedly and provides an artificial or contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty. Available at <http://global.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/159659/deus-ex-machina>. Accessed on March 22nd, 2014.

Also, as it is possible to see from the excerpt above Sylvia sees the divorce as a disaster which happened in her life. If, on the one hand, Sylvia once mentions she had forgotten that marriage could end in divorce, on the other hand it seems as if she has been expecting that from the beginning of her relation with Daniel. It looks as if she has not forgiven herself for the fact of having taken Daniel from Jocelyn.

At the end of the story, Sylvia and Daniel decide to get together and try again. This echoes her Catholic background, and reminds us of a scene that happened in the first stages of her marriage,

After their wedding, on the night when Sylvia and Daniel had had their first big fight and she'd driven to her parents' house and stood on the doorstep with tears on her face and an overnight bag in her hand, her father wouldn't even let her in. "You live there now. Work things out" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 212).

Accordingly, the reunion of these lovers Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth, Sylvia and Daniel, is marked by ups and downs, encounters and partings, misunderstandings, agreements and disagreements. Actually what these two couples show us in the end is that second chances are possible, and that the real enemy to be won is our enemy within.

4.7 NOVEMBER: THE EPILOGUE

We'd let Austen into our lives, and now we were all either married or dating.

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

The novels of Jane Austen did not usually have an epilogue at the end. However, when Austen ended her novels it did not seem to be the end of her characters' stories. Actually, she

used to mention them to her family, now and then, as if they sent her news about their lives' development. Two biographers, Claire Tomalin and James Edward Austen-Leigh, say that Austen talked about her characters as if they were members of her own family. At the end of each story, it seems as if the protagonists have an open road in front of them, and this triggers the imagination not only of their author, but of the readers as well. It is possible to say that these peculiarities may have opened space to what we nowadays call derivative novels. Many contemporary writers have written stories about Austen's characters, some of them even present a continuation of Austen's novels as in, for instance, *Death Comes to Pemberley* by P.D. James. In this novel, James presents the life of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet after their marriage.

Fowler, on the other hand, decided to follow the traditional path and to write an epilogue to her novel. Along three pages she updates her readers about what has happened to her characters after the end of the book club. Bernadette has found another husband and moved to Costa Rica. Prudie maintains her marriage with Dean. Grigg and Jocelyn are in a happy relationship, she has even rendered herself to science fiction. Sylvia and Daniel have decided to give another chance to their marriage and are well. Allegra also resumes her relationship with Corinne, but this time she is wiser and does not open all her stories to Corinne.



5 CONCLUSION

Everyone has a private Austen. Mine is the Austen who showed her work to her friends and family and took such obvious pleasure in their responses. Thanks most of all to her, then, for those renewable, rereadable, endlessly fascinating books and everything that's been written about them.

Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*

When I embarked into this adventure, four years ago, I had no idea about how the journey would end. I just felt the urge to plunge into the fascinating fictional universes of Fowler and Austen and – as Bernadette suggests – “let things go” (FOWLER, 2004, p. 2). Initially, there were several questions to pursue and to be answered: Why did Fowler (a sci fi author) choose Jane Austen? What are Fowler’s characters searching for in Austenland? How is Fowler’s society different from Austen’s? What still remains the same? In what sense Fowler’s characters are similar to Austen’s? Thus, during the development of the dissertation, I tried to answer them. I do not know if I have succeeded in fulfilling the readers’ expectations, however, I can affirm that this journey within these fictional universes was, at least for me, worthwhile.

This research allowed me the opportunity of meeting Karen Joy Fowler’s fictional world by reading all of her novels. I could also revisit Jane Austen’s novels. I had my first contact with Austen as an undergraduate student. However, it was during my master’s experience that I really became interested in her work, when I had the opportunity of reading Austen’s six novels in a discipline named *Seminário de Autor: Jane Austen and the Provincial Novel*, taught by Prof. Sandra Maggio. Since then, I have been wondering how I, a Brazilian student of English Literature, could contribute to such a strong and ample critical fortune as Jane Austen’s. Then, when I came across Fowler’s novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*, I decided to unite my previous knowledge about Austen and research on these two authors, Fowler and Austen. Therefore, when my research started I realized that the proximity of these two rich universes is so significant to me that I cannot skip being as sensitive as Marianne Dashwood and Allegra are. Each detail in Fowler’s and Austen’s stories is

important, and I did my best to examine them as carefully as possible along this work. Of course, I know that this is just one more humble contribution to their work; however, to me, it means a lot.

As the title proposes the intention of this dissertation is to revisit Jane Austen's fictional universe through Karen Joy Fowler's novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*. This means to explore *The Jane Austen Book Club*'s plot, (1) to establish a relation to Austen's novels in order to show how Fowler's text represents or contradicts the world view we find in Austen's fiction; (2) to approximate the novels to Zygmunt Bauman's contrast between solid and liquid times, making of *The Jane Austen Book Club* a literary example of what life is like in a liquid society, especially in what respects personal relations and emotional bonds; (3) to use Austen's fictional world as a counterpart that represents the personal and social values in a solid society; and (4) to examine specifically the different kinds of relationships presented by Fowler, on the bases of the Austen novel each of them cherishes most.

Therefore, these distant and complementary fictional universes of Fowler and Austen have fueled the development of this research. My first impression was that Austen's universe was so dear and important to Fowler's characters that they use Austen's characters as guides to their real (fictional) lives. Most of them identify themselves with Austen's stories. The reading of Austen's characters through the eyes of Fowler's characters makes them come to life more modern and up to date. The circumstances of the famous Austen's characters, transported into the twentieth first century's discussion, change their meaning and reveal much about the state of art as it is now, regarding issues such as sexuality, economy, freedom and love. As such, the reader meets Jocelyn, a dog breeder, as a modern representation of the matchmaker Emma Woodhouse; a lesbian duo Allegra and Corinne mirroring the aweless couple Marianne and Willoughby; a candid Science Fiction reader (Grigg) representing the gullible Gothic reader Catherine Morland; a well resolved middle aged woman (Bernadette) substituting for the young and challenging Elizabeth Bennet; and a recently divorced couple (Sylvia and Daniel) representing the famous case of second chance Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth. While reading these transpositions it is possible to perceive that there is little difference between one fictional universe and another.

Concerning the contrast involving liquid and solid society, I tried to use the concept without using judgment values. The fact that the author representing the past is Jane Austen, a well known author in English Literature, does not make things easier. Still, the terms of

comparison tend to indicate that both solid and liquid societies have their strong and weak points. Life, and relationships, have changed, evolved, for the good and for the bad, but still human relations continue to have a similar value now as they had in solid times. Only in a different way. Marriage is not the universal solution anymore. It is possible to perceive that Karen Joy Fowler's novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* presents a contemporary study of a theory that approaches questions from the current perspective and that presents new ways of interpretation to a text (Austen's work) that never ends, because it deals with human emotions and feelings and for this reason never loses its value, and its importance.

Furthermore, in order to answer the question "How do personal relations stand amid all such changes?" I come up with the given idea. The reading of Fowler's and Austen's characters' stories made me perceive that they deal differently with their biographical stories. Jane Austen's characters have name, surname, rank and address. Also, everything makes sense and has a fundamental importance in the solid world that they inhabit. Yet, in *The Jane Austen Book Club* the surnames are rarely mentioned and social rank is not an issue. Except in the cases where the friendship is an old one, the only bonds that interest the members of the book club are the books they read. This kind of relationship is very common in liquid society, which has an informal core, the people we meet at school, at a health club, at a restaurant in which we have lunch regularly, or at work. These are tenuous cohabitation, with only one point of reference. It is possible to find workmates, for example, who interact for decades, and form strong emotional bonds, without knowing many details about the other's life, or being interested in knowing about that. This would never happen in Austen's solid countryside, in which everybody knew everything about the life and finances of the others. Bauman calls the individuals who live in a liquid society 'Aliens'. This means, with few exceptions, that we rarely know much about the others. This ignorance brings out something negative, fear and uncertainty, and something positive, freedom and independence.

Finally, I would like to say something about the Qualifiers Exam, which takes place in the third year of the doctoral course. By getting an informed feedback several months before the end of the process of writing, the author of a dissertation still has time to incorporate helpful suggestions, and evaluate if the response of knowledgeable readers is heading towards the expected direction. Thus, the comments made by the members of the Committee set me thinking about the difference in the literary status of these two authors, which caused me to incorporate a number of considerations about that along the work. All in all, there are two things I would like to say about this subject. The first is that the terms in which this work is

structured do not include comparing the two authors in terms of their literary stature. The second is that each author comes as a representative of their time, and this includes the aesthetics of their time as well. Neoclassical Jane Austen comes as an instance of solid literature, written and read under a set of well established criteria and conventions. Conversely, there is the contemporary liquid fiction of Karen Joy Fowler. Nowadays even the time available for us to read a book has diminished. In our hectic life, time is short. We have less time available for leisure and entertainment than the rural English gentility of the 18th century had. And also, a greater variety of options to be selected from, when a book competes with television program, internet files, films, and so much more. In Austen's time books could be thicker. In Fowler we have one short chapter to discuss issues that, in Austen, ranged over six novels of about three hundred pages each. The worlds of Austen and Fowler are different, with different questions and goals. In Austen the individuals search for individuation. Their psychological questions have to do with restriction and claustrophobia within a world filled with inflexible rules. In Fowler individuals search for re-insertion, which means to be part of the world again. Initially, what we had was a human being who was so much integrated in the world that he could not breath and craved for individuality. Now we are at the other extreme, therefore the human being initiates another search, which is to be part of a group again. This applies to characters in *The Jane Austen Book Club*. They need a reference to be in the world again, and the reference they choose to follow is Austen.

We could even invite Jocelyn and Grigg to represent Austen and Fowler respectively. This idea was developed throughout my several readings of Fowler's novel. While I was reading her story many hints appeared, as an example, there is a passage in which the narrator describes a dream that Prudie had, "in Prudie's dream, Jane Austen is showing her through the rooms of a large estate. Jane doesn't look anything like her portrait. She looks more like Jocelyn and sometimes she is Jocelyn, but mostly she's Jane. She's blonde, neat, modern" (FOWLER, 2004, p. 115). Secondly, the descriptions we have about Grigg and Jocelyn fit the information we have about Fowler's and Austen's biographical characteristics. On the one hand, there is a description of Grigg as a voracious reader and fancier of Science Fiction, similar to Fowler's. Still, he is young and has less experience than Jocelyn, so as Fowler literary career in terms of time and space differs from Austen. On the other hand, there is Jocelyn, a spinster as Austen, described as older than Grigg, conservative and creative as Austen. In this sense two distant fictional universes meet and offer a rich content to this dissertation.

While I am writing the closing lines of this work two hundred years have passed since Jane Austen initiated her career as a writer. And ten years have passed since Fowler published *The Jane Austen Book Club*. For the reasons mentioned above, I think Austen's and Fowler's relation, through this novel, may stand as a bridge connecting past and present, the eighteenth century solid rural English society and the twentieth-first century contemporary liquid society.



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APPENDIX A

Re: Doctoral dissertation about *The Jane Austen Book Club*

De: kjfowler@aol.com Este remetente está na lista de contatos.
 Enviada: sábado, 10 de novembro de 2012 17:29:14
 Para: lu.muller@hotmail.com

Yes, of course! Good luck! kj

-----Original Message-----

From: LUCIANE MULLER <lu.muller@hotmail.com>
 To: Karen Joy Fowler <kjfowler@aol.com>
 Sent: Sat, Nov 10, 2012 11:08 am
 Subject: RE: Doctoral dissertation about The Jane Austen Book Club

Dear Ms Fowler,

Thanks a lot for your time and your answers!

As soon as my work is complete I will let you know. I have just one more question that you did not answer: if you allow me to add this interview as an appendix to the dissertation.

Sincerely,
 Luciane

To: lu.muller@hotmail.com
 Subject: Re: Doctoral dissertation about The Jane Austen Book Club
 From: kjfowler@aol.com
 Date: Sat, 10 Nov 2012 13:49:15 -0500

Hello -- here are my answers. I'm happy to provide more if needed. Thanks!

01 - Was it your intention to discuss human relationship in our times, or is it just a coincidence?

I suppose it's theoretically possible to write a novel that's not about human relationship in our times (even historical or futuristic novels provide commentary on the time in which they were written) but I can't imagine what that would look like and I'm not sure I've ever read one. I did want to examine Austen's sense of family and romantic possibility by looking at our own more expansive possibilities -- to look at connections across class, age, race, to include same-sex, etc. And to deal with divorce and spinsterhood not as the catastrophes of an earlier age, but as robust possibilities, things people might choose. So I was very consciously thinking about what things are impossible in an Austen book that have become possible today.

02 - Why did you choose Jane Austen? Was this meant as homage to her, or because you identify something in 18th C Rural England that 21st C Urban California is in need of?

I don't long for 18th C Rural England at all! I know some of Austen's readers do, and I do agree that our own lives are far too busy, too virtual, too frantic, but Austen's main characters often have little on their schedules beyond playing the pianoforte and drawing someone's portrait. Occasionally they take a walk. Austen's women are constrained and their choices very limited. It would bore me to tears. (Not to mention that I would have been one of those mothers in the Austen books who died in childbirth.) So I'm happy to live when and where I do. Having said that, I do love Austen's books -- their wit, their brilliance, their characters, and most of all, Miss Austen herself -- that amazing voice that still, 200 years later, reaches across the page with such an intimate connection to the reader. She is just an amazing writer.

03 - Do you think Jane Austen influenced your style as a writer?

Austen is the master of creating characters whose interior sense of themselves does not match the way the rest of the world sees them. She uses this mismatch to great comic effect. So I think I learned from her to think of the people I create in my books in these ways -- I ask myself who the character thinks s/he is, who the character would like to be, and who other people think the character is. I braid these three strands together when I create a person. I've also been very influenced by her narrative voice. I can't or won't try to recreate it when I write, but I also don't try to disappear from the page the way many modern novelists do. I allow myself to be present, to be telling the story in such a way that the reader can guess what I think about some of the characters or some of the events. Austen's example is a great encouragement in that. And I never write a book that doesn't have some funny bits. I reread Austen more for the funny bits than for the romances.

04 - Are you aware of other academic works that are being written about *The Jane Austen Book Club*?

No, I'm not. I'm surprised and thrilled that you are doing so.

05 - What book do you consider to be the most important in your career, so far?

Do you mean out my own books, the books I've written? If so, then I'm most proud of my first and my most recent. My first was the novel SARAH CANARY. My most recent has not been published yet, but is scheduled for May of 2013. Also a novel, its title is WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES.

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 1 de 3 26/11/2012 21:40

-----Original Message-----

From: LUCIANE MULLER <lu.muller@hotmail.com>
 To: kjfowler <kjfowler@aol.com>
 Sent: Tue, Oct 30, 2012 4:15 pm
 Subject: RE: Doctoral dissertation about *The Jane Austen Book Club*

Dear Ms. Fowler,

The focus of my dissertation on your novel *The Jane Austen Book Club* lies on personal relations, especially in what concerns family relations. As a theoretical support I use the ideas of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who creates the terminology "liquid times" to refer to our contemporary context, where most of the social structures are melting. This has an impact on people's lives, and even relationships. The point I raise is that the fictional world of Jane Austen works as a solid counterpart, as a memory of solid times, when things were fixed.

Neither of these worlds is better or worse than the other, each has its good and bad aspects. But, in your novel, it seems to me that the love the six characters share for Jane Austen helps them to shape their strategies to deal with their complicated personal lives. I know that now that the work is published, you, the author, is in a sense just one more reader. Anyway, as concerning the act of creation, I would love to know about five points. If you could answer one, or some, or all of these questions I will be very happy. And, if you allow me to, I would love to add this interview as an appendix to the dissertation.

01 - Was it your intention to discuss human relationship in our times, or is it just a coincidence?

02 - Why did you choose Jane Austen? Was this meant as homage to her, or because you identify something in 18th C Rural England that 21st C Urban California is in need of?

03 - Do you think Jane Austen influenced your style as a writer?

04 - Are you aware of other academic works that are being written about *The Jane Austen Book Club*?

05 - What book do you consider to be the most important in your career, so far?

Thank you very much for your kindness and helpfulness.

All the best,

Luciane.

Mensagem de Impressão do Outlook
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 2 de 3 26/11/2012 21:40

To: lu.muller@hotmail.com
 Subject: Re: Doctoral dissertation about The Jane Austen Book Club
 From: kjfowler@aol.com
 Date: Tue, 16 Oct 2012 19:33:34 -0400

Absolutely. Send your questions to me here -- yours, Karen

-----Original Message-----

From: LUCIANE MULLER <lu.muller@hotmail.com>
 To: karen <karen@karenjoyfowler.com>
 Sent: Tue, Oct 9, 2012 5:00 pm
 Subject: Doctoral diissertation about The Jane Austen Book Club

Dear Fowler:

My name is Luciane Müller and I am a student from Brazil who is writing a doctoral dissertation about your fourth novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*. If possible I would like to ask you some questions in relation to your biography, your practice as a writer, and the novel *The Jane Austen Book Club*.

Thanks for your attention,

Sincerely,

Luciane

Mensagem de Impressão do Outlook
<https://blu002.mail.live.com/mail/PrintMessages.aspx?cpids=e803746f...>
 3 de 3 26/11/2012 21:40

Re: Doctoral diissertation about The Jane Austen Book Club

De: Karen Fowler (kjfowler@aol.com) Este remetente está na lista de contatos.
 Enviada: sexta-feira, 17 de janeiro de 2014 21:10:53
 Para: lu.muller@hotmail.com

Absolutely. Be my guest -- thanks for asking, kj

-----Original Message-----

From: LUCIANE MULLER <lu.muller@hotmail.com>
 To: Karen Joy Fowler <kjfowler@aol.com>
 Sent: Fri, Jan 17, 2014 1:12 pm

Subject: RE: Doctoral diissertation about The Jane Austen Book CLub

Dear Ms Fowler,

My dissertation about *The Jane Austen Book Club* is reaching its end. As you were so kind to me, answering all those questions in relation to you and your novel during the process of my work, I'd like to ask you one last favor. I found a beautiful picture of you in your site, near some flowers. Would you allow me to use that *Picture* in my dissertation, to show you to the Brazilian readers?

Thanks in advance,

Luciane

ANNEXES



This is a picture of Karen Joy Fowler which was taken from her site on internet. And it is here with her permission expressed on the e-mail above. Available at: <http://www.karenjoyfowler.com/fowler-media.htm> Access: April 5th, 2013.

ANNEX 1

©Luciane Oliveira Müller, England, 2010

Everyone has a private Austen. Mine is the Austen who showed her work to her friends and family and took such obvious pleasure in their responses. Thanks most of all to her, then, for those renewable, rereadable, endlessly fascinating books and everything that's been written about them.

(Karen Joy Fowler, *The Jane Austen Book Club*)