

Ethics and aesthetics in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: contemporaneity and values

Nada Pahor & Carmen Romero Sánchez-Palencia

To cite this article: Nada Pahor & Carmen Romero Sánchez-Palencia (2026) Ethics and aesthetics in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: contemporaneity and values, Church, Communication and Culture, 11:2, 211-226, DOI: [10.1080/23753234.2026.2712926](https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2026.2712926)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2026.2712926>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 17 Aug 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 181



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



RESEARCH ARTICLE



Ethics and aesthetics in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: contemporaneity and values

Nada Pahor^a and Carmen Romero Sánchez-Palencia^b

^aUniversidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, España/Spain; ^bDepartment of Humanities, Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, España/Spain

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to relate the novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to the moral and philosophical thought of the twentieth century, allowing us to reread its author, Jane Austen (1775–1817), from a contemporary perspective. This study analyses the notions of ethics and aesthetics in the interpersonal and family relationships of the characters of the novel. The writer Jane Austen, born 250 years ago, remains a salient figure within popular and commercial culture, and can be considered a precursor of the modern novel and one of the pillars of the Western literary canon. According to the hypothesis of this study, Austen was a genuine intellectual of her time: beneath the appearance of stories typical of romantic literature, often told through parodies of the most popular literary genres of the era, Austen addresses fundamental human questions, such as individual responsibility and the search for a moral order based on beauty in its metaphysical sense of the true and the good.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 April 2026

Revised 23 July 2026

Accepted 27 July 2026

KEYWORDS

Austenian relationships;
legal prostitution of
marriage; female
Dialogues; personal
balances; moral humility

1. Introduction

This article is to analyse of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), from an ethical and aesthetic perspective, as these are key themes in the novel's conception, structure and meaning. The present study provides a hermeneutic analysis of the way in which the author engages with aesthetics and moral philosophy. Through love, well-being, family relationships, dances, meals, and walks, in all of which the female figure is always present in the background, the great conflicts of human action are explored. The novel does not contain scenes composed exclusively of male characters. This feature may be interpreted as a manifestation of Austen's characteristic narrative realism, which tends to confine the representation of events to spheres of experience with which she was directly familiar. Given that the social conventions of her time limited women's access to certain male-dominated

CONTACT Nada Pahor npahor@hotmail.com Universidad Francisco de Vitoria, Madrid, España/Spain.

This work is part of the "International Research Project: The Hermeneutic Horizon of Modern Experience: Reality, Philosophy, and Literature (HEFIL)"/"Proyecto de Investigación Internacional: El horizonte hermenéutico de la experiencia moderna: realidad, filosofía y literatura (HEFIL)"; UFV.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

spaces of sociability, Austen situates the action and dialogue in contexts that include female characters, thereby reinforcing the plausibility and coherence of the narrative.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, themes are intertwined and choreographed in a way that each element occupies its rightful place within the overall composition whereby complexity is conveyed with absolute clarity and precision. Beneath its apparent frivolity, the text reveals a profound understanding of human nature and the deepest human concerns. Without a doubt, the novel also represents a powerful social critique regarding the condition of women in general and the commodification of relationships between individuals, all veiled in witty reflections and humour, thanks to Austen's potent capacity for irony. For this reason, considering the time in which the work was written, Austen is rightly regarded as a revolutionary writer. Austen's critique of marriages based primarily on economic convenience is a recurring theme in her work and is particularly evident in the novel under analysis. Far from conceiving marriage as a merely financial arrangement, the author consistently presents the ideal of a union grounded in mutual affection, respect, and personal compatibility. This perspective reflects an integrated understanding of the human being, in which reason and emotion are not opposed but instead work together in the formation of moral judgment and personal fulfillment. In this sense, Austen moves beyond a purely emotivist conception of love, showing that authentic relationships arise from a balance between the affective and rational dimensions of the person. This is something Austen experienced firsthand through the real-life story of her aunt, Philadelphia Austen, who was forced to travel to India to marry a wealthy stranger. At that time, for a woman, marriage literally meant 'selling' her body and companionship for money as the only viable or possible future. This is clearly one of the central themes of the novel, starkly suggested by its famous opening line: *'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife'* (Austen 2012, 3).

Aesthetics are a fundamental theme throughout Austen's works, which were published anonymously for the simple reason that they were written by a woman. The need for a moral order grounded in beauty, and its metaphysical sense of goodness, appeals to revealed and tangible truths on both a theoretical and practical level. This is achieved through the pursuit of harmony and balance attuned to humility.

2. Beyond appearances

The composition of the narrative is highly complex yet disguised by a simple prose and straightforward style that reveals true mastery. An example of this is the way the protagonist, Elizabeth, describes herself while speaking with her sister Jane:

'Do not be afraid of my running into any excess, of my encroaching on your privilege of universal good will. You need not. There are few people whom I really love, and still fewer of whom I think well. The more I see of the world, the more am I dissatisfied with it, and every day confirms my belief of the inconsistency of all human characters, and of the little dependence that can be placed on the appearance of either merit or sense' (Austen 2012, 137).

However, even prominent intellectuals have offered a limited reading of her work, failing to grasp its depth. Thus, Jane Austen has at times been unjustly labelled a trivial author. For instance, the American writer Mark Twain, referring to the author E.A. Poe in a letter to his friend W.D. Howells dated January 18, 1909, spoke of Jane Austen in the following terms: *'To me his prose is unreadable-like Jane Austin's. No there is a difference. I could read his prose on salary, but not Jane's. Jane is entirely impossible. It seems a great pity that they allowed her to die a natural death'* (Twain 1960; 841). Twain's opinion, while not widespread in his time, contributed to the subsequent prejudices regarding the intellectual and literary value of Austen's work.

In each chapter of *Pride and Prejudice* there is a veiled but explicit reference to a thinker, difficult for the reader to directly identify, which reveal the complexity of the narrative composition and its aesthetic and moral depth. For example, in the figure of the clergyman Mr. Collins, a ridiculous and unpleasant character in whom can be seen the influence of the writer Robert Bage and his famous novel *Hermesprong*, written in 1796, and with which Jane Austen was perfectly familiar (Tomalin 1999, 150). In this work, set in the United States and based on the theme of the 'noble savage', the words *pride* and *prejudice* appear repeatedly. The work is a denunciation of the hypocrisy of British society and customs of the time, especially the class system and the clergy.

An avid reader of David Hume, Samuel Johnson, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke, Austen may be considered a truly enlightened intellectual of her time, although her thought flows beneath romantic stories often told through parodies of the most popular literature of her time in order to entertain a new readership living through an anxious time of war and fear of a French invasion. Austen's novels, with an exquisite technique and intelligent irony, also demonstrate excellent judgement and balance, revealing a keen understanding of the position of individuals within society and its shifting internal dynamics which can positive individual and collective change.

Another important theme in the novel is the relationship of the characters to nature, symbolising balance and serving as the only setting in which the individual can mediate with the collective; for example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, many of the most crucial moments of the novel take place outdoors, in a garden or forest: when Elizabeth reads the letter from Darcy, the arrival of Pemberley or the final conversation with Lady Catherine de Bourgh. In this regard, religion represents a balancing element, when not false or merely formal. The ethics of the Enlightenment, characterised chiefly by the primacy of reason, moral universalism and a belief in the autonomy of the individual, takes on a broader dimension in Austen's work. Her narrative engages with these principles, whilst at the same time nuancing them through a focus on concrete experience, authentic social relationships and the pursuit of a moral life that strikes a balance with an individual who thinks and feels, and who sees their life as a meaningful endeavour. Thus, the presence of beauty represents a new dimension which can elevate the individual toward fulfilment and also must be shared for the betterment of society. Researcher Michael Giffin, who has offered an in-depth analysis of Austen's work, argues that, within the framework of the English Enlightenment, the author exhibits a strong awareness of human purpose (telos). According to his interpretation, her novels unfold within social and

moral contexts (topoi) in which such purposes are explored through heroines who can be understood as representative figures. These characters are situated in a space of tension between Neoclassical and Romantic sensibilities, which structures the ethical and affective dynamics of the narrative: ‘*While Austen favored neoclassicism over romanticism, she maintained a strong sense of the different domains in which reason and feeling operate and a healthy awareness of the appropriate balance between the two*’ (Giffin 2013, 18). As Professor Lozano has observed, true art is characterised by the harmony between the rational and affective dimensions, which can also be seen clearly in Austen:

No human activity can escape the rational critique of a human being who seeks their freedom understood as emancipation – as full autonomy to develop their natural faculties, as balance, as self-mastery – including artistic activity or the phenomenon that arises when a human being seeks to create or enjoy beauty. For sensitivity and feelings are also part of the human being and must therefore be harmonised with reason in order to bring about a fully emancipated human being, in harmony with themselves and with others, free and happy. In fact, aesthetics and art in general are assigned an educational function (Lozano Díaz 2022, 228).

This passage adapts perfectly to the *modus operandi* of Jane Austen, whose ability to harmonise reason and emotion, human behaviour and feelings within an artistic and literary creation is also seen in her characters: for example, the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet, who struggles to contain her emotions through thinking, able to discern only at the end of the novel the emotional through reason and full understanding and awareness. The protagonist is also a reflection of Jane Austen herself, sharing many things with the author such as strong bond between sisters, a similar age, a keen ability for observation, irony, bravery and a search for authentic relationships as explained by the P. Pallares Yabur in the essay: ‘*Why read Jane Austen? Authenticity, identity, and harmony: ‘In certain passages of *Pride and Prejudice*, the characters seem to inherit the biographical reactions of their author*’ (Pallares Yabur 2022, 132). The novel demands the reader’s participation in an aesthetic interplay which involves use directly and completely. In the words of Virginia Woolf:

Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader’s mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial (Woolf 1925; pp. 22-23).

Beneath its apparent luminous simplicity, ‘*Austenian*’ writing reveals itself to be complex and ambiguous, dialectical and dialogical, requiring attentive reading that draws us into seemingly banal topics of money and wealth, education systems, or the condition of women in society. According to Woolf, Austen explores the fundamental aspects of the human person in a way that is exceptional: ‘*Never did any novelist make more use of an impeccable sense of human values*’ (Woolf 1925; pp. 23–24). Another revolutionary aspect of the novel and of the world created by the author, is the portrayal of an almost entirely feminine universe, the only world that women were typically permitted to know in depth. However, Austen does not use this unique perspective to dismiss or diminish her male characters. Although perhaps less sharply portrayed and often presented as objects of desire or external elements,

male characters nonetheless play a fundamental role in the lives of her protagonists. In fact, within her own family, the author had a strong relationship with her father, who passed on his passion for literature and granted her access to his extensive library, and with her brothers, with whom she maintained close relationships throughout her life. Despite the predominantly feminine universe, Austen does not relegate men to a secondary position; they are neither portrayed as antagonists nor excluded: *‘The writer casts an unflinching, untraditional, indeed thoroughly modern, gaze upon men, for she appeals not to the logic of the complementarity of the sexes, but to that of exchange. And this is another decisive element of her originality that must be immediately emphasised’* (Rampello 2014, 13). The world depicted by Jane Austen is one of relationships between daughters and fathers, between sisters, between women and their husbands, between mothers and daughters, or between female friends. Yet, in her stories, the protagonist is always a female character situated in a predominantly feminine reality, where she carries out her daily tasks and simple occupations such as reading, music, embroidery, conversation, study and dancing. While describing these everyday activities, the narrative simultaneously engages with moral dilemmas, economic concerns, and feelings and emotions. It is important to recall that this world had never been previously presented in literature, and even up to the twentieth century, examples remain rare. The narratively revolutionary device the author uses to describe this reality is the dialogue between women, who are, in most cases, sisters or friends, anticipating the interior monologues of the modernist James Joyce. This groundbreaking technique could almost be described as a forerunner of the later ‘Joycean stream of consciousness’ which could be termed ‘free indirect discourse’ (Quattrocchi 2017, 21). A narration of the protagonist’s thoughts in which the voice of the narrator and that of the heroine become interwoven and ultimately indistinguishable:

As for Elizabeth her thoughts were at Pemberley this evening more than the last, and the evening, though as it passed it seemed long, was not long enough to determine her feelings towards one in that mansion; and she lay awake two whole hours, endeavouring to make them out. She certainly did not hate him. No; hatred had vanished long ago, and she had almost as long been ashamed of ever feeling a dislike against him, that could be so called (Austen 2012, 266).

This technique, essential for portraying the state of mind of the protagonist, is innovative due to the author’s ability to characterise each character by allowing them to speak in their own voice. Such use of dialogue contributes to the structural perfection of *Pride and Prejudice*, the most exemplary of her novels. Another noteworthy aspect is that Jane Austen is not a materialistic writer. This is evident throughout the dialogue and in Mr. Collins’s marriage proposal to Elizabeth, which she firmly rejects, refusing to accept a husband for the sake of financial security:

To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the 4 per cents. which will not be yours till after your mother’s decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to (Austen 2012, 107).

The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre himself, a great scholar of Austen’s works, observes in his famous essay titled: *After virtue. A study in moral theory*: ‘We learn

somewhere in all her novels about where the money of her main characters comes from; we see a great deal of the economic self-seeking, of the pleonexia which is central to Cobbett's vision. So much so indeed that David Daiches once described her as a 'Marxist before Marx' (MacIntyre 1981, 239). On the other hand, far from treating goodness and truth as relative concepts, her books consistently reflect a persistent search for what is true and good as absolute values. Her writings are an unflinching and realistic portrayal of a society rigidly divided by class as played out in relationships between two individuals, either between sisters or between a man and a woman. Austen depicts these relationships without bias toward either sex and reveals the importance and intrinsic value of what is essential, that which, despite apparent changes, endures. In her novels, the desire for happiness can only be fulfilled through the pursuit of truth, and this pursuit can only be realised in union with the other, never alone. In the 'Austenian' microcosms, relationships are fundamentally based on transactions, often symbolic, that transcend what appears merely material: 'Her theater is not one of romantic sentimentalism, but a theater of economy that brings together and juxtaposes men and women, as well as different social classes' (Rampello 2014, 29). And it is precisely this relationship between two individualities that forms the foundation of a system that is not only economic, but above all moral: 'Austen brings into play the relationship and conflict between the sexes, that is, the sexual contract that underlies the social contract (and, consequently, the structural importance of the marriage market)' (Rampello 2017, 13). As revealed by the conversation between Mr. Collins and Elizabeth, where his proposal is motivated primarily by her income and future inheritance, serves as the *incipit* of the novel. Contrary to the works by other female writers of her time, such as *Cecilia* (1782) by Fanny Burney, for Austen marriage is an essential narrative element in constructing a moral journey. Also known as a *Bildungsroman*, the coming-of-age novel is a narrative genre characterised by a depiction of the protagonist's personal growth. Austen's style can be clearly associated with this genre, as it pursues the progression and consolidation of moral thought. According to researcher Sara Poledrelli: 'The plot, which essentially presents a moral story, stages the protagonists' genuine inner growth, thus forming a kind of *Bildungsroman*' (Poledrelli 2011, 29). Although the *Bildungsroman* is a genre of the German Romantic novel, it is not exclusively so and is also present in the literature of other countries. Jane Austen's novels are historically situated at a moment of transition between two very different conceptions of humanity and the world: the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Consequently, her thinking lies between two forms, two distinct artistic expressions represented by the two most important English novelists of the eighteenth century, Samuel Richardson (1689–1761) and Henry Fielding (1707–1754). This same century saw the birth of the modern bourgeois novel, which gave literary expression to an emerging social class in which individualism was gaining importance. The forerunners of the then-incipient modern novel were very different genres, such as medieval *fabliaux* or chivalric romances in verse. However, what distinguished this new genre was undoubtedly a clear interest in the psychological and moral aspects of its characters. If the protagonist of *Don Quixote*, an impoverished *hidalgo*, inaugurated the art of the novel in 1605, as the writer Milan Kundera affirms (Kundera 2005, 120 and 132), we might say that Jane Austen's art represents a clear evolution of this genre.

For the first time in Western literature, the intimacies of everyday feminine life, previously confined to diaries or epistolary works, is elevated to a new literary genre. The late eighteenth century romantic ‘female education’ novel is a literary genre that finds different expressive modalities in subgenres such as the Gothic novel and *novel of manners*.

3. Being and aesthetic language

Pride and Prejudice is Jane Austen’s most famous novel. Its first version, written between 1796 and 1797 under the title *First Impressions*, was published after *Sense and Sensibility*. However, the author did not revise it until the winter of 1811, when she prepared it for publication under a different title, *Pride and Prejudice*, in order to avoid confusion with another novel titled *First Impressions*, written by Margaret Holford and published in 1801. The final version of *Pride and Prejudice* was published anonymously in 1813 by the publisher Thomas Egerton (Worsley 2017, 322). *Pride and Prejudice* narrates the romantic entanglements of two young couples and the unpleasant consequences that affect a small rural community as a result of misunderstandings caused by prejudice and by Elizabeth Bennet’s mistaken interpretation of events. It is Jane Austen’s best-known novel, and its two protagonists, Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam Darcy, grow and learn from their mistakes to build a future together. The events take place in the English countryside, over the course of one year during the reign of George III, and each character is highly recognisable and described with great intelligence and irony, such as the vivid portrayals of Mr. Collins, Elizabeth’s mother, Mrs. Bennet, and her sisters Lydia and Kitty.

In the first description of the protagonists of *Pride and Prejudice*, we are presented with a sensitive perception of beauty. Based on the notion of a relation between subject and object, beauty attracts us because it characterises the protagonists, revealing their personalities and thoughts. A similar case will occur in the description of Fanny Price, the protagonist of Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814). When Elizabeth Bennet arrives at Pemberley Woods, the magnificent estate of Mr. Darcy, she recognizes herself in the balance, symmetry, and order of the beauty of the natural surroundings, a reflection of the first description we are given of its owner:

(...) but his friend Mr Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien (...) The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half of the evening (Austen 2012, 10).

In philosophical systems from ancient times to Thomas Aquinas, transcendentals were understood as interrelated and inseparable, then beauty was considered the form in which goodness is given and understood as truth: ‘(...) *the person learns to act by emulating the presence, meaning, and harmony of nature, which awakens the attention of the agent who contemplates its beauty*’ (Pallares Yabur 2022, 104). But it is the relationship between being and language where these concepts can be expressed and which appear as central throughout Austen’s writing in which she creates narrative structures of ‘implicit truthfulness’ (Pallares Yabur 2022, 17). The aim of these works goes beyond mere entertainment to subtly and subliminally

address ethical and aesthetic issues involving a society, describing clear human traits and both social and personal dynamics. What follows is a more detailed exploration of these themes.

3.1. *The beauty of the hidden*

It is personal experience that allows us to access what is hidden: *‘So I think, Hippias, that I have been benefitted by this interaction with both of you, for I think I now understand the precise meaning of the proverb, ‘Whatever is beautiful is difficult’* (Platón, 1985, 304e, 441). Beauty reveals itself to us through continuous contact with reality, finding its roots in thought itself. The admiration that Fitzwilliam Darcy’s noble appearance awakens in us as readers will quickly dissolve due to his prideful attitude. Thus, it will be the characters Charles Bingley, a wealthy and kind young man, though somewhat naïve and in love with Jane, Elizabeth’s sister, and George Wickham, a handsome and well-mannered, but manipulative and deceitful young man, who appear as the more favorable characters in this first part of the novel. In the description of Mr. Darcy and the adjective *handsome*, which the author frequently uses for places, men and women, and which in this case refers to ‘beautiful features’, there is a reference to what is particularly beautiful and to beauty in general. Similarly, in the description of Jane Bennet, the eldest Bennet sister and Elizabeth’s confidante, which follows shortly after in the text, he perceives her beauty: *“You are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room”, said Mr Darcy, looking at the eldest Miss Bennet. ‘Oh! She is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld!’* (Austen 2012, 11). Jane Bennet, possessing great beauty and kindness, and always able to see the good in those around her, will also fall victim to misunderstandings and the malice of Mr. Bingley’s sisters, putting her love at risk. However, thanks in part to Mr. Darcy’s support, everything will be resolved.

It is interesting to note how, in the first description Austen gives of Mr. Wickham, the character who will sow lies and prejudice in Elizabeth and throughout the small community, beauty is not spoken of in the same way as with the other two characters. It is not by chance that the author uses different adjectives to describe the perception of beauty, as superficial and apparent yet not indicative of any inner beauty.

But the attention of every lady was soon caught by a young man, whom they had never seen before, of most gentlemanlike appearance (...). His appearance was greatly in his favour; he had all the best part of beauty, a fine countenance, a good figure, and very pleasing address (Austen 2012, 73).

A description in which the word *beauty* appears, but almost in contrast to the adjective *handsome*, which is deeper, richer and more nuanced and previously used to describe Mr. Darcy, his Pemberley estate, and Jane Bennet, is explained by the scholar Franco Moretti: *‘Beautiful? Not exactly. Jane Austen, who chose her words with legendary precision, attributes the adjective beautiful only to the ‘natural’ beauty of the estate’* (Moretti 1987, 37). Austen describes Pemberley Woods when Elizabeth arrives at Pemberley Woods for the first time, a place she had so often tried to picture in her mind: *‘They entered it in one of its lowest points, and drove for some time through a beautiful wood, stretching over a wide extent’* (Austen 2012, 247).

Austen uses the adjective *handsome* to describe Mr. Darcy's house, its rooms, and the decor, giving a broader and ethically positive connotation to the description of these spaces: *'It was a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising grounds, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills (...). It was a large, well-proportioned room, handsomely fitted up'* (Austen 2012, 247). According to the critic Franco Moretti, this adjective, repeated many times throughout the chapter, carries the meaning of a deeper and less threatening kind of beauty: *'Handsome: a beauty that is not in the least threatening or disconcerting, not in the least autonomous. It envelops the ideal of a golden mean, of a clear and reciprocal translatability between the individual and his context'* (Moretti 1987, 37). The beauty of nature invites non-possessive contemplation and becomes an act of generosity. While beauty is a concept that resists precise definition, we can offer however examples of beauty in its deepest sense. As H. Gadamer expresses it: *'The beautiful, by being full of meaning, becomes "evident"'* (Gadamer 1977, 579). In the novel, this occurs primarily with Elizabeth's sister and confidante, Jane Bennet, and with Mr. Darcy, characters who are ethically irreproachable and generous, and whose outward behavior reflects a rich inner life. Beauty is of course one of the central themes of the novel and every event holds a deeper layer of meaning. Thus, beauty, in its most spiritual sense, plays a vital role. In referring to the beauty of Mr. Darcy and Jane Bennet, there is also the notion of moral beauty, symbolized in their outward appearance, a beauty that reflects the profound being of two persons who, over the course of the narrative, are revealed to possess crystal-clear morality, generosity, and goodness. From the very beginning, the author describes the protagonist's sister, Jane Bennet, as a deeply good, humble, and balanced human being in her outward beauty: *'One must encounter the beautiful before beauty itself (...). Now the importance of the starting point is understood. It underpins and conditions the entire process'* (Lobato 2005; pp. 74–75). In this case, Austen seems to put this concept into practice. Beauty is also present at the end of the novel, in the generous actions of Mr. Darcy, who resolves the seemingly hopeless situation of Lydia and Mr. Wickham by secretly persuading the latter to marry her, disbursing a large sum of money and covering all the wedding expenses. Mr. Darcy combines ethical values and an outward appearance that bring us closer to this definition: *'(...) the intuition of the deep affinity between beauty and goodness (which) led the Greeks to unite the beautiful (kalós) and the good (agathós) into a single word: kalokagathía'* (Lopez Quintás, 2016, 42). The French writer Gustave Thibon, in his essay *Le Pain de Chaque Jour*, also speaks of the 'beautiful' in the sense of the 'good': *'To nobility and heroism belongs the task of uniting beauty and goodness on high, and, at the summit, achieving the synthesis of the beautiful and the good'* (Thibon 1952, 49).

3.2. Ethics: thought and action

The ethical responsibility of the individual in relation to society and to others is central to the narrative of Jane Austen, as is also the importance of family in a profoundly changing society. In her portrayal of the emerging bourgeoisie, characterised by dynamism and in opposition to a static and decadent aristocratic elite, Austen highlights the importance of acting and conducting oneself correctly: *'(...)*

a new kind of nobility, no longer based on bloodline, but on respect for the moral values of Christianity and, more broadly, a shared social ethic (Poledrelli 2011, 22). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen portrays all the characters with precise attention to their characteristics as moral beings, who are such thanks to their own rational faculties, manifested in human intelligence and freedom. Each character makes use of these dimensions in different ways, which Austen describes with great skill and wit. Particularly noteworthy is the portrayal of Mr. Collins:

Mr Collins was not a sensible man, and the deficiency of nature had been but little assisted by education or society; the greatest part of his life having been spent under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father; and though he belonged to one of the universities, he had merely kept the necessary terms, without forming at it any useful acquaintance. The subjection in which his father had brought him up, had given him originally great humility of manner, but it was now a good deal counteracted by the self-conceit of a weak head, living in retirement, and the consequential feelings of early and unexpected prosperity (Austen 2012, 71).

The novel is filled with human acts that constitute the material object of ethics. The formal object consists of the morality of these acts, that is, their orientation toward the good and their alignment with the character's nature: *'In the study of man, of his truth, we will find the norm for our actions'* (Agejas 2007, 126). The character of Elizabeth Bennet illustrates how easily one can fall into injustice through a mistaken application of the first principle of practical reason, *synderesis*, the natural capacity to judge rightly and to feel indignation in the face of moral evil. At a ball with Mr. Darcy that Elizabeth vehemently defends Mr. Wickham, who at that point in the story is regarded as the 'supposed victim' of her companion's arrogance: *'He has been so unlucky as to lose your friendship', replied Elizabeth with emphasis, 'and in a manner which he is likely to suffer from all his life'* (Austen 2012, 93). Elizabeth defends Mr. Wickham's version of events as regards Mr. Darcy because, in some way, she feels compelled to prevent the harm that the latter has allegedly caused and to protect the apparent victim of deplorable conduct: *'The possibility of his having really endured such unkindness, was enough to interest all her tender feelings'* (Austen 2012, 86). Her indignation in the face of evil, and her inability to accept it, in some sense motivates the formulation of the good as a guiding criterion. It is here that the first moral virtue, prudence, as an anchor of personality, finds its origin. But Elizabeth does not realize this and, instead of reflecting on what happened, ends up believing the falsehoods told by Mr. Wickham, thus setting aside the truth and the objectivity of the facts. Elizabeth misjudges Mr. Darcy, she begins by making a mistake and embarks on a path that will lead her into a growing spiral of misunderstandings, causing suffering both to herself and to others. The following passage is the reflection of our protagonist after a conversation with Mr. Darcy in which he proposes to her for the first time:

(...) it was gratifying to have inspired unconsciously so strong an affection. But his pride, his abominable pride, his shameless avowal of what he had done with respect to Jane, his unpardonable assurance in acknowledging, though he could not justify it, and the unfeeling manner in which he had mentioned Mr Wickham, his cruelty towards whom he had not attempted to deny, soon overcame the pity which the consideration of his attachment had for a moment excited (Austen 2012, 195).

Throughout the narrative, Elizabeth gradually acquires new information thanks to other virtues she comes to embody, such as caution and humility. Thus, she is gradually able to attain the desired goodness and truth

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. -Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. 'How despicably have I acted! She cried. - 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! - I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust. - How humiliating is this discovery! - Yet, how just a humiliation! - Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. - Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself (Austen 2012, 210).

The question of truth and falsehood emerges as a matter of central importance in late eighteenth century society (Tomalin 1999, 169) and is a central theme, with personal and social implications, in the development of the narrative. Italian philosopher Maria Bettetini, in her historical reconstruction of this concept, starts with St. Thomas Aquinas's definition of truth as the conformity between the object and the intellect, establishing that lying and falsehood consist in the deliberate intention to mislead another.

(...) the issue concerning lying itself is different: in reality, the matter of lying is not about what can be defined as true or false, but rather the will to deceive on the part of a subject (...) that is, the desire for the other to believe something true or false that is not, regardless of whether it actually is or not. Consequently, there is lying when someone intends to deceive others (Bettetini 2001, p. 3).

But alongside lying, we also encounter a lack of insight, a temporary intellectual blindness on the part of the protagonist. Elizabeth Bennet falls into a trap deliberately set by the character of Mr. Wickham. Disguising his misconduct under the appearance of false courtesy, he tells a version of his life that is entirely different from the truth. Only at the end of the novel will this entanglement be resolved, and the true personalities of the two male antagonists, Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, become clear: *'What Wickham had said of the living was fresh in her memory, and as she recalled his very words, it was impossible not to feel that there was gross duplicity on one side or the other'* (Austen 2012, 207). The lie fits perfectly into Mr. Wickham's plan, as he uses Elizabeth, among others, to try to dishonor Mr. Darcy's name and reputation in order to conceal his own misdeeds, including his past attempt to court Mr. Darcy's sister and his eventual seduction and secret elopement with Lydia, Elizabeth's younger sister, thereby bringing disgrace upon the entire Bennet family. He tells Elizabeth his own misleading and manipulative version of the truth about his relationship with Mr. Darcy: *'A man of honour could not have doubted the intention, but Mr Darcy chose to doubt it [...] But the fact is, that we are very different sort of men, and that he hates me'* (Austen 2012, 80). If we accept the classical Aristotelian definition of virtue as *'(...) a mean in regard to the passions and actions'* (Aristóteles, 2023, 1106b35-1107a1, 169), we can consider, along with

the virtue of prudence, the virtue of humility. Both virtues are present in this novel, particularly in the character of Elizabeth Bennet:

But above all, above respect and esteem, there was a motive within her of good will which could not be overlooked. It was gratitude. - Gratitude, not merely for having one loved her, but for loving her still well enough, to forgive all the petulance and acrimony of her manner in rejecting him, and all the unjust accusations accompanying her rejection (Austen 2012, 266).

It is precisely the moral challenge of attaining the virtue of humility, the central focus of the novel and the anchor point through which love, truth, and beauty, understood as fundamental concepts of salvation, can be achieved. Philosophy and literature can serve to reveal the nature of morality, and great novelists act as ‘vehicles’ of truth through their perceptive abilities. If the ethics guides us toward a reality ‘without deceit’ few writers have been as successful as Jane Austen in their portrayal, particularly through her character descriptions which are so recognizable precisely because of their truth. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist who, in keeping with the Platonic notion of a journey from shadows to light, from falsehood to the Idea of the Good, comes to attain truth after having been misled by falsehood. We must look beyond appearances and unveil what is hidden. Mr. Darcy embodies this gradual revelation of truth:

Oh! How heartily did she grieve over every ungracious sensation she had ever encouraged, every saucy speech she had ever directed towards him. For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him. Proud that in a case of compassion and honour, he had been able to get the better of himself (Austen 2012, 328).

Art and morality are thus two aspects of the same struggle. The arts combine seamlessly together because they reflect life and literature allows for the broadening of human perspective, enabling us to move beyond appearances. The concepts of vision and attention, as defined by writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch, prove illuminating in understanding the behavior of the novel’s main characters Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy. Vision is the first and most important act of the will, whose ultimate result is action. But in order to reach this point, one must transcend selfishness and become a moral being, the most important task of human life. Along this path, humility emerges as the most essential virtue. When Murdoch uses the term ‘attention’ she does so in the same sense as Simone Weil: ‘*I have used the word ‘attention’, which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed toward individual reality*’ (Murdoch 2019, 121). Understanding the verb ‘attend’ as ‘to behold’ rather than merely ‘to see’ love goes beyond the simple perception of the individual. Love, as the ability to see that which will liberate us from the selfish ego, to reveal a reality beyond oneself. This is the path Elizabeth undertakes, who, through various experiences, reaches goodness and truth, despite her initial defense of Mr. Wickham. Following Murdoch, Mauri explains: ‘*Self-deception protects pride (...) and pride, which is the flip side of humility, loudly proclaims its inability to care about anything other than itself, or to see others outside the lens of its own interests*’ (Mauri 2018, 38). Here, aesthetics and ethics are unified in thought and action. Goodness, related to the acceptance of reality as it is, and not as we wish it to be, is precisely the path of Elizabeth Bennet, where self-knowledge

is also essential and where morality is necessarily tied to both the truth and to aesthetics.

4. Moral power: from the individual to the communal

The individual is a microcosm of all the dynamics and mechanisms of society as a whole. Each person, in their own way and with their particular traits, represents the world they inhabit. Individual actions carry ethical responsibility because they directly impact the community. In this sense, the role Jane Austen assigns to her heroines is to practice a morality that positively influences the group. But there is a conflict between individual morality and social morality, the communal constraints that women endure and against which they seem to have no alternatives. Consider, for example, marriage as seen through the lens of the author, as a form of legal prostitution and the only viable path to social advancement for women. This bleak condition is portrayed in *Pride and Prejudice* through the character of Charlotte Lucas, Elizabeth's friend, who agrees to marry a man she does not love out of self-interest:

(...) - without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want (Austen 2012, 123).

This subtle thread of rebellion in her protagonists, whose intelligence and irony serve to reflect the society of their time, finds resolution in the pacifying balance between reason and feeling. The protagonists' personal journeys also serve as examples for the wider community. Austen's genius lies above all in her deep understanding of human nature and in the complexity of her richly nuanced characters. Austen also has a remarkable ability to show us just how well she understands the reasons behind her characters' behavior. This is revealed in the dialogues, almost always between two characters who reflect or share information. The actions depicted follow a dialogical structure and often take place while the characters are dancing or walking. The paired conversation is an important element of the narrative, which may even serve a 'rhythmic function' according to the critic Mario Praz: '*That dance was Jane Austen's supreme experience in the realm of amusement is also suggested by the rhythmic quality of her novels, which unfold like carefully woven intertwinings of dance figures*' (Praz 1975, 19). For this kind of narration to unfold, human relationships are essential. No character remains alone in our memory; each is always accompanied, either by a sister, friend, father or mother, or a suitor.

As noted above, it is evident that the true focus of Jane Austen's novels is not the individual, but relationships between individuals, between men and women. The narrative often departs from tradition by focusing on individuals who choose to remain true to their own values, fostering mutual growth through their differences. This may also explain Austen's enduring relevance and how her works, despite the passage of time, continue to resonate with readers today. The human being is a continuous becoming, and the essence of the human is an openness to others. Thus, Elizabeth Bennet represents a human being who, after a series of trials, comes to

accept her limitations and her need to open herself to the other, overcoming her initial and superficial prejudices. The human being is fundamentally open, intrinsically independent of matter. This openness is expressed (and lived) in *Pride and Prejudice* and in Jane Austen's other works, where the importance of 'one-on-one' relationships serves as the foundation of the narrative. This 'narrative device' allows Austen to convey content and values in a highly original way. In doing so, she succeeds in fully engaging the reader, enabling them to identify with the protagonist and to experience her doubts and emotions alongside her. This openness to reality makes every other form of openness possible.

5. Conclusions

The key to salvation and the guarantee of order for the human being in *Pride and Prejudice* lies in the humility of the novel's protagonist. Through a journey that begins with a flawed perception, Elizabeth Bennet reaches an awareness of a complete vision of reality, one that she had initially misinterpreted. In a way, she initially leans toward wrongdoing and fails to exercise the virtue of prudence. Ultimately, she returns to goodness through a renewed awareness of the true meaning of truth, what things truly are, through a series of trials that challenge her to progressively relinquish her pride and prejudice by exercising greater attentiveness toward others through practical intelligence. The lack of humility is also the cause of Mr. Darcy's guilty silence regarding the true nature of Mr. Wickham, which leads to many misunderstandings. But it is also the written word, in the many letters exchanged by the characters, or found in the books they read, that speaks to us of a passionate search for truth based on the knowledge of human nature. The relationship with the other, in the form of dialogues, is the main form of narration within the plot. Dialogues and letters have the power to change the personal path of each character as well as that of the community. At the same time, the protagonist progressively draws closer to the truth of the events. All these conversations bring about profound inner transformations in relation to others, and they take place in well-defined, familiar settings such as drawing rooms or gardens. Internal monologues of an isolated self are entirely absent.

In Jane Austen's purely linguistic world, irony is one of the keys that allows the reader to enter her 'playing field'. Yet it is love, as in all her novels, that serves as the guiding thread of her plots. The awareness Elizabeth ultimately gains about her suitor, Mr. Darcy, is a surrender in which her will is affirmed:

She began now to comprehend that he was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance (Austen 2012, 312).

Love manifests the free existence of the person. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the protagonist speaks to us of a freedom grounded in love and in the faculties of human intelligence and will. If love is the answer, one could say it is more so now than

ever. In our hectic and confused times, where science and technology have taken charge and seem to be the only disciplines capable of offering solutions to humanity's greatest challenges, objective truth is more necessary than ever. As Jane Austen demonstrates through the simple lives and small events she narrates, the answer lies above all in the human capacity to rethink oneself, that is, to take a step back with the humility needed to recognize mistakes and open oneself to others through small acts. Ultimately, it is about stepping outside ourselves and opening up to the understanding of the other, present in different faces. Beneath the appearance of a romantic novel, the purpose of this work goes beyond merely entertaining a new audience, an emerging bourgeoisie, and seems to respond to a demand to reaffirm ethical values threatened by the social and economic upheavals in a rapidly changing world. This work reveals that the language and culture of a microcosm, seemingly confined in space and time, can become a timeless and universal paradigm. At the same time, this connects with contemporary philosophical thought and the search for meaning in our world.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Nada Pahor**: Investigation; **Carmen Romero Sánchez-Palencia**: Investigation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Universidad Francisco de Vitoria.

ORCID

Nada Pahor  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8407-6915>

Carmen Romero Sánchez-Palencia  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1460-605X>

References

- Agejas, J. A. 2007. *La tarea de ser mejor*. Madrid: Universidad Francisco de Vitoria.
- Aristóteles. 2023. *Ética a Nicómaco*. Translated by J. Pallí Bonet, Barcelona: Gredos.
- Austen, J. 2012. *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Bettetini, M. 2001. *Breve storia Della Bugia*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Gadamer, H. G. 1977. *Verdad y método*. Salamanca: Sígueme.
- Giffin, M. 2013. *Jane Austen's Religious Imagination*. Privately published edition. Bretigny-sur-Orge: Amazon.
- Kundera, M. 2005. *Il Sipario*. Milano: Adelphi.
- Lobato, A. 2005. *Ser y Belleza*. Madrid: Unión Editorial S. A.
- Lopez Quintás, A. 2016. *El enigma de la belleza*. Bilbao: Desclee de Brower, S.A.
- Lozano Díaz, V. 2022. *Encontrarse y comprender: La búsqueda de sentido*. Madrid: Dykinson.
- MacIntyre, A. 1981. *After virtue. A study in moral theory*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

- Mauri, M. 2018. *Iris Murdoch. Una ética de la atención*. Roma: Aracne.
- Moretti, F. 1987. *The way of the world: the Bildungsroman in European culture*. London: Verso.
- Murdoch, I. 2019. *La soberanía del bien*, Translated by A. Jaume. Madrid: Taurus.
- Pallares Yabur, P. 2022. *¿Por qué leer a Jane Austen? Autenticidad, identidad y armonía*. Pamplona: Eunsa.
- Platón. 1985. Hippias Mayor. In: *Diálogos I*, Translated by J. Calonge. Madrid: Gredos.
- Poledrelli, S. 2011. Introduzione In *Orgoglio e pregiudizio (Italian translation)*. Milan: Feltrinelli.
- Praz, M. 1975. *La letteratura inglese dai romantici al Novecento*. Milano: Sansoni/Accademia.
- Quattrocchi, A. 2017. Un Mondo di Donne In: *Leggendaria*, n. 123, Roma: Colophon.
- Rampello, L. 2014. *Sei romanzi perfetti*. Milano: Il Saggiatore.
- Rampello, L. 2017. La Possibilità di Essere in Due (interview by: Crispino, A. M.). In: *Leggendaria*, n. 123. Roma: Colophon.
- Thibon, G. 1952. *El pan de cada día*. Madrid: Rialp.
- Tomalin, C. 1999. *Jane Austen. Una vida*. Barcelona: Circe Ediciones S.L.U.
- Twain, M. 1960. *Mark Twain-Howells Letters (1872-1910)*. The Correspondence of Clemens, S. L., and Howelles, W. D. edited by Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Woolf, V. 1925. *El lector común*. Jersey: Freededitorial.
- Worsley, L. 2017. *Jane Austen at Home: A Biography*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.