

Jane Austen's Simpletons

Gender, Education, and Matrimony in Austen's Novels

English and Comparative Literature | Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction

Abstract

This study of Jane Austen's literary style analyzes the twelve total occurrences of the word 'simpleton' across Austen's mature body of work. It also supports assertions by Mary Lascelles, Norman Page, and Stuart Tave, among others, that Austen was consistently intentional with her diction.

Literature Review

- Previous studies on Austen's word choice
- Manuscript corrections (Lascelles)
- Commentary through character design (Lascelles)
- Key words (Page; Tave)

Etymology

- 'Simple' + 'ton'
- Allegorical character
- Insult/ "low word"

Definition

- An unintelligent, ignorant, or gullible person; a fool. (*OED*)
- Simple Tony or Anthony, a foolish fellow. (Grose)
- A silly mortal; a trifler; a foolish fellow. A low word. (Johnson)

The Study

Methodology

Proceeding chronologically (in order of year written), this study shows that Austen's use of 'simpleton' became more complicated as her opinions of women's societal role became more nuanced.

Lady Susan

- 'Simpleton' used as a direct insult
- Used by one character
- Commentary on Lady Susan's problematic views of women's education

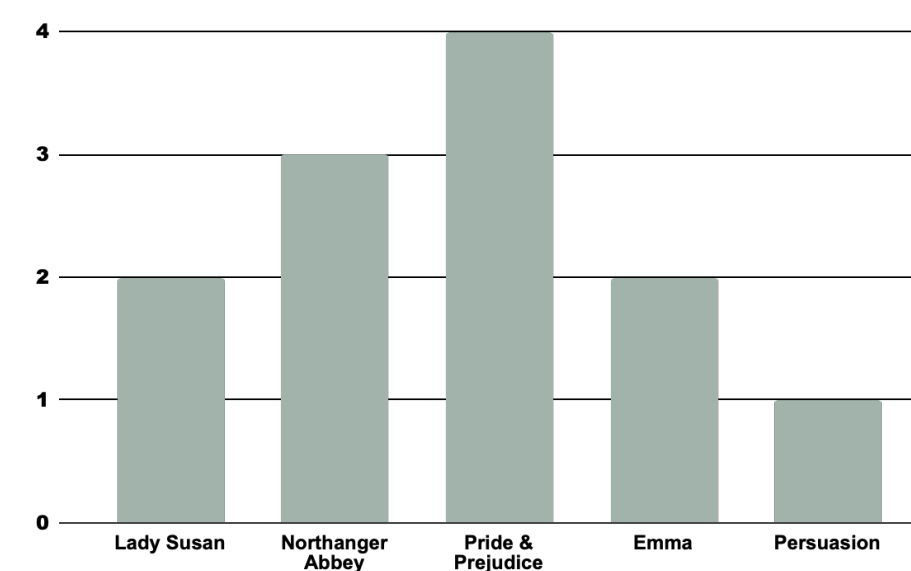
Northanger Abbey

- 'Simpleton' used ironically
- Used by three characters
- Commentary on "playing the game" of courtship and on the portrayal of women in Gothic novels

Pride and Prejudice

- 'Simpleton' used to develop nuance to Austen's moral views
- Used by three characters
- Commentary on the balance between artifice and unchecked emotion in courtship practices

Frequency



● Frequency of 'simpleton' across Austen's mature works

Analysis

Emma

- 'Simpleton' used to develop nuance to Austen's moral views
- Used by two characters
- Commentary on "playing the game" for ambition and marrying for security and affection

Persuasion

- 'Simpleton' used to invert the familiar trajectory of an Austenian heroine
- Used by one character
- Commentary on the dangers of being too prudent in courtship

Conclusion

Conclusion

As evidenced by Austen's strategic placement of 'simpleton,' she discourages her female readers to never compromise for a marriage that is not rich in both love and security. It is better to be a spinster than bound to a loveless or penniless marriage.

Discussion

Austen's treatment of the word 'simpleton' in context increases our understanding of her views on gender, education, and matrimony and her own positions as a woman writing in Regency England. Her use of 'simpleton' is reminiscent of various issues women still face today. As readers with the resources to incite change, we have a responsibility to read Austen and critically evaluate ways in which her world is reflected in our own.

References

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