Figures of Isolation in Jane Austen's Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion

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Figures of Isolation in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*

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1. Introduction

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen is ironic about English societal structure that reduces women to objects of financial transaction: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (Austen, *Pride* 5). Later, in *Emma*, she describes the reality of a woman who, while still an object of financial exchange, is also a symbol of isolation: "a single woman, with a very narrow income, must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! - the proper sport of boys and girls - but a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else" (Austen, *Emma* 67). The novels of Jane Austen reflect on the society in which she lived, where class and marriage are paramount to women and where the fear of social exclusion is always present. While the themes of social isolation and confinement to the private sphere are important for understanding the complexity of women's position, the portrayal of female isolation in Austen's novels transcends domestic confinement. Through a detailed analysis of her female characters, this paper aims to explore different kinds of isolation indexed by female characters, as well as the social, emotional, moral, and intellectual dimensions of isolation.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part provides historical context. The unequal position of women in society is explained in terms of their legal status, rights to inheritance, their roles, and expectations. The possibilities of education and employment of women is also discussed. The second and central part of the thesis includes a comprehensive analysis of *Mansfield Park*, *Emma,* and *Persuasion*. The three heroines, as well as other female characters, will be analysed as figures of isolation. The characters differ in terms of social status, financial position, and the nature of their isolation. Fanny Price is taken in by her wealthy relatives and, throughout the novel, occupies a marginal role in the family. Her lower social rank, as well as moral superiority, isolates her from others. Emma Woodhouse occupies a central position in her social circle. Unlike other female protagonists, she does not depend on marriage to improve her means. It is her schemes that isolate her from the rest of the characters. Anne Elliot is isolated due to the financial troubles of her family and her unmarried status. Similarly to Fanny, Anne occupies a marginal role in her own family, and this can also be observed by analysing the narrative style of the novel. The third and final part of the paper focuses on the comparative analysis of the three protagonists and the ways in which they overcome their isolation.

2. Historical context

Tony Tanner observes that Austen was "aware of contemporary events, debates and issues, of the wars and domestic unrest, of the incipiently visible results of the Industrial Revolution, and of radical change taking place in the constitution of English society" (4). The Napoleonic Wars in particular "dominated English national concerns" (Tanner 4) and reshaped the political landscape of Britain.[1] Moreover, they caused a strain on British economy. Another significant event is the Industrial Revolution which resulted in migration to cities. The difference between city life and country life became more prominent as "Regency London, in particular, boomed and became, among other things, a great centre of fashion. On the other hand, England in 1813 was still predominantly a land of country towns and villages, a land of rural routines" (Tanner 144).

The distinction between the urban and rural lifestyle is important to Jane Austen and it is the countryside which interests her the most. In the words of David Herbert, "many of Jane Austen's places are truly rural and relatively isolated; her three or four families interact from well separated houses in rural space" (196). In her novels, Austen prioritizes the themes of human relationships and human nature over important historical events. Nigel Nicolson claims that Austen "wished us to consider goodness and badness, explore the qualities that make up the ideal man or woman (qualities which are never found complete in a single person), the flaws in human nature, and the small ways in which we reveal them and so give ourselves away" (173).

At the time, marriage was the primary means for the women to ensure financial stability and improve their social status. The women's roles were related to the family sphere, and women mostly spent their lives overshadowed by the authority of their husbands, or male relatives. According to Lawrence Stone, "the new ideal of womanhood involved total abnegation, making the wife a slave to convention, propriety, and her husband" (668). In terms of legal status, women did not have any control over their finances and property after marriage. Susan Moller Okin states that "the common law ruling that the wife's property became the husband's prevailed in all cases in which no settlement made explicit provision to the contrary" (129). Furthermore, compared to their brothers, women rarely inherited property. An example of this are Austen's novels, which "remind us of just how many 'genteel' women must have been severely burdened due to the fact

[1] See also Jukić 2022.

that their families' property had been entailed to or was otherwise inherited by their male relatives" (Okin 127). Marriage did not always ensure security for women, as they could find themselves in precarious positions. As for divorce, according to Stone, "full divorce and remarriage was possible by law for the very rich and by folk custom for the very poor, but impossible for the great majority in the middle who could not afford the cost of the one or the social stigma and remote risks of prosecution of the other" (41).

Unmarried women of upper middle class and gentry lacked opportunities in terms of work. Stone maintains that, "[b]ecause of their high social background, they could not work and were thus deprived of any independent social and economic function" (381). At the end of the eighteenth century, educated women could work as governesses. Governesses lived with the family; however, they were treated rather like servants. Their jobs did not ensure financial security as they did not earn enough money to be independent. Life of a governess was itself isolating as their ambiguous social position "deprived them of any companionship or sense of belonging" (Stone 384). A governess was also detached from the marriage market as she "was also treated as almost sexless. Not a lower-class servant and so open to seduction, not a daughter of the house and so open to marriage offers, she was nothing" (Stone 385).

In terms of education, "women at all levels of society were an educationally deprived group compared with men" (Stone 206). The education of girls of upper middle class and gentry was intended to ensure better prospects for marriage in the future. Girls were taught skills such as foreign languages, dancing and playing an instrument, while boys were provided with a more extensive education. There are exceptions when it comes to the education of girls, and one of those is Jane Austen. According to Nicolson, Austen's father, a vicar, "encouraged his sons and daughters without giving more attention to his boys' education than his girls'; he loved them and stimulated them" (175). Austen acquired knowledge from books in her father's library, as well as by observing the society around her; in Herbert's words, "when [she] placed her novels in the leisured English middle class, it was in a society she knew best" (205).

3. Figures of isolation

3.1. Fanny Price

Fanny Price is one of the most passive Austen heroines. Tanner describes her as "a girl who triumphs by doing nothing. She sits, she waits, she endures; and, when she is finally promoted, through marriage, into an unexpectedly high social position, it seems to be a reward not so much for her vitality as for her extraordinary immobility" (143). Fanny is isolated from the rest of the Bertram family from the start and is not an object of interest among her relatives. Although Sir Thomas takes care of Fanny financially, providing her with a better life and the education she would not have received in Portsmouth, she is neglected socially and emotionally.

Fanny's moral education is one of the most important elements in her character development. While her cousins mock her for the deficiencies in her education "and [find] her ignorant of many things with which they had been long familiar" (Austen, *Mansfield* 16), Fanny soon surpasses her cousins by gaining a strong moral compass, which ultimately sets her apart from the rest of the family. Through the guidance of her cousin Edmund, Fanny receives the most important type of education: "Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read the daily portion of history; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment: he made reading useful by talking to her of what she read" (Austen, *Mansfield* 21). Consequently, Fanny becomes the embodiment of morality and virtuous behaviour that often results in disapproval from others. In contrast, the Bertram girls lack integrity and inner strength, often engaging in morally dubious behaviour. They are described as "entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity and humility. In everything but disposition they were admirably taught" (Austen, *Mansfield* 18).

Fanny experiences social exclusion within the Bertram family largely as a result of her aunts' mistreatment. Lady Bertram is passive and disinterested. She mostly relies on Sir Thomas and her sister, Mrs. Norris in matters concerning Fanny and her welfare. Despite her lack of interest in Fanny's upbringing, "she saw no harm in the poor little thing, and always found her very handy and quick in carrying messages, and fetching what she wanted" (Austen, *Mansfield* 18-19). Her other aunt, Mrs. Norris, keeps Fanny confined to the house and treats her like a servant. Despite suggesting that Fanny should be taken into the family, Mrs. Norris is her main abuser. Throughout

the novel, she reminds Fanny of her inferior position in the family and tries to prevent any possibility of her social inclusion and happiness.

Fanny's own family contributes to her isolation. While its financial difficulties and social inferiority are the reason why Fanny is sent to Mansfield, the family, also, fails to provide emotional care and interest while she is away: "of the rest she saw nothing: nobody seemed to think of her ever going amongst them again, even for a visit, nobody at home seemed to want her" (Austen, *Mansfield* 20). Their absence and lack of communication result in Fanny becoming emotionally isolated and estranged from the Price family. Her insignificance in the family becomes most apparent upon Fanny's return to Portsmouth, highlighting the important question of where she truly belongs.

3.2. Fanny's isolation

Due to her ambiguous position in the two families, Fanny experiences social isolation as she is often left on the sidelines and excluded from events such as balls and parties. Throughout the novel, Fanny constantly assumes the role of observer as her aunts continuously require her assistance: "Fanny had no share in the festivities of the season; but she enjoyed being avowedly useful as her aunt's companion when they called away the rest of the family" (Austen, *Mansfield* 34). After the arrival of Maria and Henry Crawford, an important question is raised about Fanny and her position in society: "is she out, or is she not?" (Austen, *Mansfield* 48). Ann Banfield writes that "coming-out" is important since it "announces to the world that the young lady can legitimately command attention and is ready to accept a woman's responsibilities. In other words, she is marriageable" (14-15). Without being formally "out", Fanny is not allowed to attend the same functions and events like her cousins. Her promised but unfulfilled introduction into society underscores that she is not only isolated from the Bertram family but also from society at large. Consequently, Fanny does not have the same opportunities for social mobility as her cousins. Both her emotional and social development are threatened as she is prevented from establishing relationships and securing a better future for herself in terms of marriage. Therefore, Fanny is stuck between her subservient role in the Bertram family and the unfulfilled potential of being established in, potentially, her own household.

Fanny is constantly involved in her cousins' schemes that are not in line with the values of her uncle. With Sir Thomas gone, the Bertram girls undermine their father's authority and engage in inappropriate actions, not thinking of the repercussions. Although Edmund initially sides with Fanny and tries to act as a moral guide to others, he relents under Mary's influence. An example of this is Fanny's first social outing, the excursion to Sotherton. During the excursion, Tanner observes, "Fanny is still, silent, alone; not involved in the confused antics of all the others, who are variously pursuing their own desires and indulging their impulses" (161). Fanny is ignored by others and left alone while others participate in the morally questionable exploration of the estate. While Mary and Edmund venture alone into the woods despite the impropriety of such an action, Fanny "began to be surprised at being left so long, and to listen with an anxious desire of hearing their steps and their voices again" (Austen, *Mansfield* 99). Fanny is next abandoned by Maria and Henry Crawford whose curiosity leads them to climb over a locked gate. Fanny is shocked and tries to warn them of the wrongness of the action, but their impatience to see what lies behind overpowers Fanny's call for propriety. Therefore, Fanny is the only one who adheres to the rules imposed by Sir Thomas, which "has moral significance, for it is Fanny who embodies individually the values, esthetic and moral, of Mansfield Park" (Banfield 14).

Similarly, Fanny's isolation again comes to light during the play titled *Lovers' Vows.* While other characters are eager to perform, Fanny refuses to participate, because "some of the scenes could give rise to embarrassing situations and 'improper' confrontations" (Tanner 165). Fanny knows that Sir Thomas would not approve of the play and is the only concerned with his reaction. Because of her refusal to participate, she receives disapproval from others and again assumes the role of "audience, or at best prompter, observing the others, who are on the stage, during the Mansfield theatricals" (Moler 190). Fanny's moral superiority and integrity is what separates her from other characters, especially in moments when the values of Mansfield Park are in danger of corruption. Like Fanny, Edmund initially refuses to participate, but, persuaded by the others, he joins them, alienating her even further. Fanny's refusal to play is crucial because it is a step towards being truly accepted into the family by Sir Thomas: she is ultimately rewarded for it. As Tanner notes, "because Fanny does hold out, she will be the one who truly saves Mansfield Park when, at the end of the book, the disorder suggested by the theatricals becomes a moral chaos in real life" (166).

Fanny's marginal role isolates her, but also gives her an advantage in judgement of other characters. Having observed the morally dubious behaviour of the Crawford siblings, Fanny is aware of their true nature. As a result, once Henry proposes, Fanny decides to refuse him, even as, by doing so, she destroys her chance for social elevation and respect. The biggest opposition comes from Sir Thomas, who is disappointed in Fanny. He claims that Fanny is "throwing away … an opportunity of being settled in life, eligibly, honourably, nobly settled, as will, probably, never occur to [her] again" (Austen, *Mansfield* 321). Fanny displays strong integrity and inner strength by refusing to follow the social conventions and this is what saves her in the end. However, before she receives her happy end, Fanny is banished to Portsmouth by Sir Thomas. Fanny's return proves that she is even more isolated in Portsmouth than in Mansfield Park, although the nature of her isolation is different than in Mansfield. In the words of Valerie Shaw, "at Portsmouth Fanny meets her biggest challenge in having to face her own unimportance without being able to explain it in terms of inherited social position" (16).

From the moment of her arrival, Fanny is ignored and once again assumes a marginal role in her own family. Her mother and siblings barely pay attention to her. The detail that most vividly confirms her sense of insignificance is the reaction of her father: "There were soon only her father and herself remaining; and he taking out a newspaper - the accustomary loan of a neighbour, applied himself to studying it, without seeming to recollect her existence" (Austen, *Mansfield* 387). Mr. Price initially fails to recognize his daughter in the darkness of the room, and when he does, he does not take an interest in her.

Fanny's long absence is one of the reasons she cannot connect with her family on an emotional level, however, the main reason is the difference in values she acquired at Mansfield Park. Life in Portsmouth is chaotic and disorderly, and she soon starts longing for the peace and order of Mansfield. In the words of Kenneth L. Moler, "the bad manners and slovenly ways of Portsmouth show up the 'elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony' of Mansfield in a most favorable light" (191). In Fanny's opinion, "there were none within the circle of her father's and mother's acquaintance to afford her the smallest satisfaction: she saw nobody in whose favour she could wish to overcome her own shyness and reserve" (Austen, *Mansfield* 400).

3.3. Fanny's confinement

The physical space that Fanny occupies in Mansfield Park reflects her position in the family and serves as a symbol of her social and emotional isolation. Fanny is placed in the little white attic by Mrs. Norris who does not consider any other appropriate room for her. Lucy Schneider maintains that "the assignment of the attic as Fanny's room is symbolic of the household's pervasive attitude of condescending generosity to her, and of her inferiority as well" (228). The isolated and confined room serves as a physical symbol of Fanny's isolation and inferiority within the Bertram family. The attic room is significantly smaller than the rooms occupied by her cousins and its proximity to the servants is also intentional. Despite its limitations, the little attic room is also where the moral education of Fanny begins. Although excluded from the rest of the house, "it is on the attic stairs, the link between Fanny's world and that of Mansfield Park, that Edmund discovers Fanny crying one morning. His part in Fanny's educational process... begins here" (Schneider 228).

As Fanny's moral education progresses, she begins to take up more space within the household. The other important room that serves as "the most prominent metaphor expressive of Fanny's spiritual distance from the Mansfield world" (Moler 190) is the East room. Although the size of the room is an index of Fanny's rise in the family, she is only allowed to use this room since it is no longer of use to others. The room serves as a safe space for Fanny, so she fills it with various personal items and thus "constructs a substitutively maternal space where she can be happy; furnishing the East room with…carelessly donated gifts, she makes a fragile 'nest of comforts' that is an emotional as well as physical improvisation" (Wiltshire 60). The room can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the moral division between Fanny and the other characters since she uses the room to escape from unpleasant situations. However, the absence of fire in the room proves that she does not belong there. In the words of John Wiltshire, "this room which Fanny thinks of as 'her own', that she has made her own, is always actually marked as the room of a dependent, a transient, by the absence of a fire in the grate" (60). The absence of fire is therefore an important symbol of Fanny's position in the family, which does not change until Sir Thomas accepts her as his daughter. But before this happens, Fanny herself must accept Mansfield as her true home, which happens during her exile to Portsmouth.

During her stay in Portsmouth, Fanny longs for the safety and order of Mansfield and wishes to go back. Although it was a place of isolation and confinement, "she soon learned to think with respect of her own little attic at Mansfield Park, in that house reckoned too small for anybody's comfort" (Austen, *Mansfield* 393). Portsmouth is a symbol of filth and chaos, and this is also reflected in Fanny's physical health and appearance. As Birgitta Berglund observes, "the longer Fanny stays at Portsmouth, the more oppressive she finds her father's house. Fanny discovers the real evils of living in a house where order and harmony are completely lacking. She grows pale and ill" (149). Both her mental and physical health are at risk by her stay in Portsmouth. Mary also warns her about the physical consequences of such an environment in her letter: "My dear little creature, do not stay at Portsmouth to lose your pretty looks. Those vile sea-breezes are the ruin of beauty and health" (Austen, *Mansfield* 422).

The room that Funny occupies in Portsmouth is reminiscent of the East room. According to Moler, "Fanny's bedroom at Portsmouth comes to function in the same way as the East room at Mansfield. Fanny retreats upstairs from the noise, disorder, and vulgarity of Portsmouth, just as she had retreated from the very different unpleasantnesses of Mansfield" (192). Fanny is comforted by this small room, and she spends a lot of time there taking care of the moral education of her sister. According to Schneider, "this cramped chamber at Portsmouth becomes Fanny's regular refuge from the disturbance of the floor below. Here she begins Susan's 'improvement' by means of conversation, needlework, and reading" (234-235). The room is separated from the rest of the house as the East Room is separated from Mansfield Park. Moreover, her room is once again marked by the absence of fire which proves she is once again not considered as an important part of the family: "they sat without a fire; but that was a privation familiar even to Fanny, and she suffered the less because reminded by it of the East room" (Austen, *Mansfield* 404).

Fanny's return to Mansfield signifies her transition from the margins to a central position in the family. Her return is a moment of elation as "she is finally recognised as the true preserver of the values represented by Mansfield Park" (Tanner 157). In the end, Fanny's strong adherence to moral values wins the admiration of Sir Thomas who realizes his mistakes regarding the upbringing of his daughters and his treatment of Fanny. Where he failed as the main authority of the family, Fanny becomes their saviour. Fanny's integrity and resilience result in Mansfield Park no longer being in danger of outside corruption. By the novel's conclusion, Sir Thomas accepts

Fanny as "the daughter that he wanted" (Austen, *Mansfield* 477), marking the end of her subservient role in the family.

Tellingly, Fanny's moral superiority is initially the reason for her isolation, but it is also the key to overcoming it. Unlike her cousins, Fanny is the only character who follows the values of Mansfield Park and does not succumb to external influence. With Maria and Julia gone, *and* Mrs. Norris, Fanny no longer occupies a marginal role in the household and becomes its most important member. With Sir Thomas's final acceptance, Fanny is rewarded with marriage, to Edmund, whom she had always loved and admired; this ends her social and emotional isolation. As Berglund summarises, "Fanny in fact manages to escape the physical confinement of her parents' squalid home in Portsmouth as well as the spiritual confinement of a marriage without affection" (233).

3.4. Emma Woodhouse

Following *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen introduces one of her most unique female protagonists, in *Emma*. Emma Woodhouse is the central character of the novel and the opening line of the novel explains her position: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen, *Emma* 5). She is the opposite of the shy and timid Fanny Price who never makes mistakes, because her story is in many ways defined by the overconfident mistakes she has made. Also, she is "perfectly and satisfactorily defined in every way – money, class, position – and she has a wit and a discourse which are equal to anyone she might meet in her limited circle" (Tanner 182). Emma is blessed with a privileged life without much hardship and her only problem is "the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (Austen, *Emma* 5).

Unlike Fanny, Emma is presented as a central figure in her social circle from the first: "Highbury, the large and populous village, almost amounting to a town … afforded her no equals. The Woodhouses were first in consequence there. All looked up to them" (Austen, *Emma* 6-7). Emma and her father enjoy entertaining guests and hosting gatherings; however, much of the novel is confined to Hartfield due to Mr. Woodhouse's hypochondria. His confinement to the house also

restricts Emma and she hardly leaves the house so as not to upset him. Mr. Woodhouse is described as "a nervous man, easily depressed; fond of everybody that he was used to, and hating to part with them; hating change of every kind. Matrimony, as the origin of change, was always disagreeable" (Austen, *Emma* 7).

Following her mother's death and her sister's marriage, Emma becomes the mistress of Hartfield. In assuming this responsibility, she fulfils the duties of both mother and wife, attending to household matters and taking care of her father. Also, Emma is aware of her privilege not to depend on marriage to stay relevant in society. Consequently, Emma does not consider it for herself:

> I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry ... Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's. (Austen, *Emma* 66-67)

Marriage is not a necessity for her, but rather "a game she can play with other people" (Tanner 180); she assumes the role of matchmaker and, by doing so, disrupts the society around her. Tanner claims that playfulness is what sets Emma apart from others who are not given the same opportunity (197). However, she does not realize that her games could have dire consequences for others who do not possess the privilege she has.

Emma's character is shaped by her father and her permissive governess, Miss Taylor, who was no match for Emma either socially or intellectually. In the words of Laura E. Thomason, "Her loyalty was tied to a professional position in a way that barred friendship but mimicked marriage" (234-235). Their neighbour, Mr. Knightley, is aware of the limitations of Miss Taylor's influence on Emma's education. As he points out to her: "you might not give Emma such a complete education as your powers would seem to promise; but you were receiving a very good education from her, on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid" (Austen, *Emma* 30). Mr. Knightley is the only person who reprimands Emma and encourages her to behave more appropriately. On the other hand, Emma's father and Miss Taylor are insufficient in instilling a strong moral compass in Emma. Consequently, Emma always does

as she desires, often disregarding the feelings and needs of others. Moreover, she develops a sense of superiority that prevents her from forming deeper connections with those she deems inferior.

3.5. Emma's isolation

Emma's character is the reason for her isolation, and this is what sets her apart from other Austen heroines. Tanner observes that "whereas in previous novels the potential threat to the given social order tends to come from outside … it is in fact Emma herself, the central [eccentric], who is potentially most disruptive figure in the society of this novel" (189). Emma is in a position of power and can control other people for her own entertainment – but in a confined group of people. According to Susan J. Morgan, "Emma's desire to be first restricts her to the limited relations where she can be first and conflicts with her desire to be at the [centre] of Highbury affairs" (42). Although Emma is surrounded by people, she has little true company. Already at the beginning of the novel, Emma is in danger of intellectual isolation. After Miss Taylor marries, "she was … in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude. She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful" (Austen, *Emma* 6).

As her next companion, Emma chooses Harriet Smith, a seventeen-year-old girl who piques Emma's interest for her beauty rather than mind. Harriet is inferior to Emma in terms of rank, fortune and intellect. Emma quickly invents a story of her being a gentleman's daughter so she they could be associated. Once again assuming the role of matchmaker, Emma plans to improve Harriet's life and position in society: "She would notice her; she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintance and introduce her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners. It would be an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking" (Austen, *Emma* 19). Emma sees Harriet as an exciting new project rather than a true friend and equal.

A character presented as an ideal friend for Emma is Jane Fairfax. Although equal to Emma in terms of age and style, Jane is not wealthy like Emma, and her unmarried status puts her at risk of becoming a governess. Jane's social isolation is the most poignant difference between her and Emma. Despite her financial hardships, Jane surpasses Emma's skills. Morgan claims that "[o]nly Jane is truly close to Emma: in age, in accomplishments, in consciousness. In fact, it is embarrassingly clear to Emma that Jane is not just the only girl around who is not her inferior -

she is superior" (42). A friendship with Jane would be beneficial to her moral and intellectual development. However, Emma's desire to be first in every relationship leaves her without any deeper connections. Consequently, Emma befriends Harriet over Jane, recognizing that she cannot exert the same level of control over Jane. In the words of Morgan, "Jane, to Emma's outrage, thinks for herself and feels for herself and so controls herself. She does not hand her character over to Emma" (36).

Jane's accomplishments invoke jealousy in Emma: "Why she did not like Jane Fairfax might be a difficult question to answer; Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought herself" (Austen, *Emma* 125). An example of this is Jane's superior performance on the pianoforte. Although Emma has unlimited opportunities to improve her skills, she is not dedicated and patient enough to perfect them. As Mr. Knightley observes, "I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to anything requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding" (Austen, *Emma* 29). In the words of Tanner, Emma's "'powers' cannot be discerned in particular accomplishments and activities. In fact, what she has is 'power' – the power of money and rank or position" (185).

This results in Emma's being isolated from her social circle. According to Eugene Goodheart, "Emma is not an outsider at war with society. But she possesses a quality that sets her apart from her community. In Emma the apartness manifests itself in the judgments she passes on her neighbors" (600). Emma's sense of superiority and her hypocrisy is evident after she receives a proposal from Mr. Elton. She is shocked to receive a proposal from someone who is socially inferior to her: "Perhaps it was not fair to expect him to feel how very much he was her inferior in talent, and all the elegancies of mind. The very want of such equality might prevent his perception of it; but he must know that in fortune and consequence she was greatly his superior" (Austen, *Emma* 105).

Another example of Emma's social exclusion is the party hosted by the Cole family. Emma decides to teach them a lesson by refusing their invitation: "The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them. This lesson, she very much feared, they would receive only

from herself" (Austen, *Emma* 156). However, Emma does not prove to be as influential as she thinks she is. While other good families are invited, Emma and her father are not. Once Emma realises that they are going to attend the party, she wishes to attend as well because she does not want to be excluded. In the words of Morgan, "her snobbery is counteracted by the fact that she initially is not invited, and it is overcome by the thought that her friends – and Frank Churchill – will be there" (Morgan 42).

The outing to Box Hill is the pivotal moment for Emma's isolation. According to Edgar F. Shannon, Jr., "[g]uilty of much past error, but with just instincts and growing awareness of the complexity of human relationships, Emma begins her transformation at Box Hill" (640). The outing results in Emma's unkind remark to Miss Bates. Emma dislikes visiting Mrs and Miss Bates as she does not wish to associate with the inferior company they keep. Mr. Knightley warns Emma about the necessity of treating them with kindness; he also admonishes Emma for her being unkind to Miss Bates:

> She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed! You, whom she had known from an infant, whom she had seen grow up from a period when her notice was an honour, to have you now, in thoughtless spirits, and the pride of the moment, laugh at her, humble her – and before her niece, too – and before others, many of whom (certainly *some*,) would be entirely guided by your treatment of her. (Austen, *Emma* 283-284)

After Box Hill, Emma is isolated from Mr. Knightley, the person she regards the most, he being the only one who provides Emma with the intellectual stimulation she needs. What follows is Emma's emotional maturation since she "at last recognizes that her intelligence, wealth, and social pre-eminence require kindness, rather than contempt, toward Miss Bates" (Shannon Jr. 641). For the first time, Emma feels true remorse and acknowledges the pain she has caused to others. The Box Hill episode marks a shift from her playful and reckless demeanour to a more considerate behaviour that ultimately earns Mr. Knightley's respect and results in their marriage.

3.6. Emma's confinement

A closer observation of Highbury society proves that this society is itself extremely confined; in Tanner's words, "there is no room for manoeuvre, no room for rearrangement, no room for any kind of escape" (190). A prominent example of this is the tension between Emma, Harriet, and Mr. Elton after Emma's failed courtship scheme. The event causes a lot of embarrassment to the three: "Their being fixed, so absolutely fixed, in the same place, was bad for each, for all three. Not one of them had the power of removal, or of effecting any material change of society. They must encounter each other and make the best of it" (Austen, *Emma* 110). Yet, the options of the three differ significantly. Soon after his failed proposal, Mr. Elton escapes Highbury and travels to Bath. Therefore, as Berglund asserts, "[i]t is the women who are forced to stay; they are the ones who are 'absolutely fixed'" (205). Emma and Harriet are forced to stay at home and deal with the embarrassment of the situation. The only place Emma can escape to is the comfort of her room. Wiltshire also notices that in *Emma*, "[s]pace is … gendered: and the various dimensions of confinement interrelated: confinement to the indoors, to a restricted sphere of influence, to a small community" (69). Men are free to travel: Mr. Elton and Frank Churchill can travel to London just to have a picture framed or have a haircut.

Women on the other hand are confined to the domestic sphere with limited mobility. The most striking example of women's confinement is Jane's solitary walk to the post office. The fact causes great outrage from the other characters who claim that it is dangerous and harmful for her to walk alone. Mr. Woodhouse claims that "[y]oung ladies should take care of themselves. – Young ladies are delicate plants. They should take care of their health and their complexion" (Austen, *Emma* 222). Yet Jane refuses to stop taking walks because it is the only way to escape the confinement of her room. She says: "I cannot give up my early walk. I am advised to be out of doors as much as I can, I must walk somewhere, and the post-office is an object; and upon my word, I have scarcely ever had a bad morning before" (Austen, *Emma* 223). Walking is crucial for women because they scarcely have an opportunity to travel. In the words of Berglund, the walks "constitute a way for the young women to escape the pressures of society and acquire this solitude which is an absolute necessity for spiritual survival – but not always easy to obtain" (214).

Despite her rank and privilege, Emma is one of the most confined characters of Jane Austen as she spends most of the novel at Hartfield. Her desire to travel and escape her narrow social circle is at its most obvious when she begs the others not to talk about the sea: "I must beg you not to talk of the sea. It makes me envious and miserable; — I who have never seen it! South End is prohibited, if you please" (Austen, *Emma* 79). Emma has never visited her family in London, and has never been to Bath. In fact, her only outing ends up a disaster.

In the end, Emma marries Mr. Knightley, the only possible match in her social circle; she is rewarded with a companion who will stimulate her mind and further her moral education. The conclusion, however, is cynical to say the least and a corroboration of her isolation: "What had she to wish for? Nothing, but to grow more worthy of him, whose intentions and judgment had been ever so superior to her own. Nothing, but that the lessons of her past folly might teach her humility and circumspection in future" (Austen, *Emma* 360).

3.7. Anne Elliot

In *Persuasion*, the reader is first introduced to Sir Walter Elliot, a vain baronet who is "only interested in himself and what reflects him – mirrors or daughters" (Tanner 209). His greatest hope is to see his daughter Elizabeth, who is "very handsome, and very like himself" (Austen, *Persuasion* 3) recorded in the *Baronetage*, his favourite reading material. His other two daughters are of little consequence to Sir Walter. Anne, the novel's focalizing consciousness, is Sir Walter's middle and least favourite child and she is first introduced as a daughter "of very inferior value" (Austen, *Persuasion* 3). Unlike Emma, who is highly regarded by her father, Anne is a comparatively late introduction into the novel, an indication of her position in the family. Despite possessing admirable traits, she is marginalised and overlooked: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character … was nobody with either father or sister; her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way – she was only Anne" (Austen, *Persuasion* 4).

Despite their high social standing, the Elliots are facing financial difficulties. The family is no longer able to sustain their luxurious lifestyle and is advised to retrench. Although Anne is not considered "by the others as having any interest in the question" (Austen, *Persuasion* 10), she proposes practical solutions to reduce the debts. However, Anne's opinion is ignored, as Sir Walter Elliot decides to move his family to Bath until their financial situation improves. While Anne

disapproves, the family friend, Lady Russell, advocates their removal to Bath as "Anne had been too little from home, too little seen. Her spirits were not high. A larger society would improve them. She wanted her to be more known" (Austen, *Persuasion* 13). Lady Russell shares Sir Walter Elliot's prejudice against people without rank and fortune and wishes Anne to be associated with more refined society.

Anne's position in the family and social circle is ambiguous. With her older sister assuming the role of mistress of the house, and her younger sister Mary married, Anne is "the girl on the threshold, existing in that limboid space between the house of the father which has to be left and the house of the husband which has yet to be found. No longer a child and not yet a wife, Anne is, precisely, in between, and she lives in in-betweenness" (Tanner 209). Similarly to Fanny, Anne's role is to be useful to other people. As her words bear no importance to others, Anne puts the desires and needs of other people over her own, at the expense of her own happiness. As a result, "she knows what it is to 'converse' without 'communicating'. She also knows what it is like to talk without being heard" (Tanner 236). Before leaving for Bath, Anne is asked to stay with Mary, and nobody considers her having her own leftovers to attend to: "Dear me! what can you possibly have to do?" (Austen, *Persuasion* 36). With her needs once again disregarded, Anne has no choice but to take care of her sister and offer her emotional support. Moreover, she is everybody's confidante and advisor, and is constantly being asked to persuade others on different matters since she is "treated with too much confidence by all parties, and … too much in the secret of the complaints of each house" (Austen, *Persuasion* 42).

3.8. Anne's Isolation

After having lost first her mother and then her fiancé, Captain Bentworth, Anne has lost the privilege of being listened to. According to Tatjana Jukić, "as the novel opens, Anne is locked in a stern, melancholy contemplation of the eight years that have passed since she broke an engagement to Captain Wentworth" (Jukić 75). Wiltshire notices that "it is through negatives, absences, understatements … that Anne Elliot becomes for the reader a presence in her world" (Wiltshire 76). Anne feels excluded, even when she is surrounded by other people. For instance, when others are talking, she is playing the piano, yet nobody is listening to her: "Excepting one short period of her life, she had never, since the age of fourteen, never since the loss of her dear

mother, known the happiness of being listened to, or encouraged by any just appreciation or real taste" (Austen, *Persuasion* 45).

Anne's muted suffering is further emphasized by the return of Captain Wentworth. The mere thought of his presence prompts Anne to seek solitary confinement: "to seek the comfort of cool air for her flushed cheeks; and as she walked along a favourite grove, said, with a gentle sigh, 'A few months more, and he, perhaps, may be walking here'" (Austen, *Persuasion* 23). Wentworth's return is a source of pain for Anne because it is a reminder of their past together and what could have been. The mere mention of his name is associated with suffering that she will have to learn to endure: "To hear them talking so much of Captain Wentworth, repeating his name so often, puzzling over past years … was a new sort of trial to Anne's nerves. She found, however, that it was one to which she must inure herself" (Austen, *Persuasion* 50). Anne's emotional isolation is deepened by her inability to confide in others about the manner of their separation. The only people who are familiar with the situation, her father and Lady Rusell, are unable to provide the emotional support Anne needs.

The return of Captain Wentworth further isolates Anne as she rejects any possibility of their reconciliation. According to Jukić, "what he brings to Anne, and to the novel, is not repetition but the shocking, hurtful knowledge that they meet as strangers – more so than if they were meeting for the first time" (Jukić 76). Anne is often in his presence; however, they do not speak to one another. Their first interaction is marked by minimal exchange: "Her eye half met Captain Wentworth's, a bow, a curtsey passed; she heard his voice" (Austen, *Persuasion* 58). Anne is shocked by their lack of conversation, which reinforces her belief that his affection for her is gone: "They had no conversation together, no intercourse but what the commonest civility required. Once so much to each other! Now nothing! There had been a time, when … they would have found it most difficult to cease to speak to one another" (Austen, *Persuasion* 61).

Anne's role in her social circle does not change until the accident at Lyme. The accident marks the shift from Anne's observational role to a more active one, which is also reflected in the narrative style. According to Wiltshire, "Anne's becoming increasingly an object of regard in her circle is thus paralleled and matched by her increasing presence as a speaker and performer in the text" (80). Anne starts taking up more space in the novel as others around her listen to her

instructions. The incident at Lyme is also pivotal for the relationship between Anne and Captain Wentworth, since he "addresses her as if they were bound to concur – and she is consulted, not merely assumed to be useful" (Wiltshire 80). This is the first time Anne is truly really regarded by him after their separation. He was now speaking to her "with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past" (Austen, *Persuasion* 114). The attention that Wentworth provides gives Anne a sense of importance, which serves as an essential step towards overcoming her emotional isolation. Anne values the change in their dynamics as it marks an improvement in their relationship: "the remembrance of the appeal remained a pleasure to her, as a proof of friendship, and of deference for her judgement, a great pleasure; and when it became a sort of parting proof, its value did not lessen" (Austen, *Persuasion* 117).

Anne's conversation with Captain Harville is the crucial moment in the novel as "Jane Austen … gives her heroine the initiative, and gives her, finally, the heroine's place" (Wiltshire 82). For the first time, Anne does not diminish her voice but talks passionately about the nature of love. She argues that men are first to forget their loved ones and that women's love lasts longer: "We certainly do not forget you as soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves" (Austen, *Persuasion* 233). The sequence marks a shift from Anne's usual style of communication, limited to glances and short answers, to active expression. Wiltshire claims that "[t]he sequence is designed here to release, step by step, the energies of articulation that Anne has been forced to keep bound up, hemmed in, throughout so much of the novel" (82). Anne finally expresses her true feelings, and she is rewarded with Wentworth's love letter. The letter serves as proof of his love and regard for her, marking the end of her being overlooked and unheard: "You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice when they would be lost on others" (Austen, *Persuasion* 239). The letter also offers Anne an escape from her neglectful family, promising her life in a new social circle.

3.9. Anne's confinement

Anne's emotional isolation is reinforced by her confinement in the domestic sphere. In her conversation with Captain Harville, Anne argues that women lack mobility and opportunities: "We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions" (Austen,

Persuasion 233-234). As in the earlier Austen novels, in the world of *Persuasion* women are attached to the domestic sphere and men are free to do as they want. Anne adds that men have the privilege of education *and* story-telling: "Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands" (Austen, *Persuasion* 235). Anne and Captain Wentworth had different possibilities during their time apart. They both suffered after their engagement was broken, but those years affected them differently. While Captain Wentworth was free to travel the world, Anne was limited. The difference is also reflected in their physical appearance. Anne's looks are ruined: "Her attachment and regrets had, for a long time, clouded every enjoyment of youth, and an early loss of bloom and spirits had been their lasting effect" (Austen, *Persuasion* 26). He, on the other hand, has not changed a lot as the time spent traveling "had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages" (Austen, *Persuasion* 59).

Even wealthy married women are limited: the comparison of Mary and Charles Musgrove indicates that "Anne's brother-in-law … is always active, always on the move, almost always outdoors, whereas his wife … seems to fret away her life on a sofa, suffering from endless headaches and general discontent" (Berglund 205-206). After their child gets sick:

> Charles Musgrove began, consequently, to feel no necessity for longer confinement. The child was to be kept in bed and amused as quietly as possible; but what was there for a father to do? This was quite a female case, and it would be highly absurd in him, who could be of no use at home, to shut himself up. (Austen, *Persuasion* 53)

Mary is nervous and slightly hypochondriac, a lot of it the symptom of a sheltered life. Another example of female confinement is Mrs. Smith. As a poor widow "[s]he had come to Bath … and was now in lodgings near the hot baths, living in a very humble way, unable even to afford herself the comfort of a servant, and of course almost excluded from society" (Austen, *Persuasion* 150). The novel sets Anne apart from Mrs. Smith even though they were once friends and equals: Anne is now her superior. Mrs. Smith is the *Persuasion's* Miss Bates: her existence is "limited to a noisy parlour, and a dark bedroom behind, with no possibility of moving from one to the other without assistance, which there was only one servant in the house to afford, and she never quitted the house

but to be conveyed into the warm bath" (Austen, *Persuasion* 152). Mrs. Smith depends on the will of others to survive as she cannot sustain herself as a woman of lower income and rank.

An important female character who opposes the notion of female confinement is Mrs. Croft. Tanner notices that she represents a "new kind of woman in Jane Austen's world" (232). She travels with her husband and does not think that women should be confined in the house: "I hate to hear you talking so like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days" (Austen, *Persuasion* 68). According to Beth Lau, Mrs Croft "makes clear the connection between stasis and depression, travel and contentment for women" (98). Once Mary travels to Bath, her mental health improves, and she no longer feels ill. Anne's appearance also improves as she increases her mobility. The fresh air and regular exercise in Lyme give her a more youthful appearance and demeanour. She is described as "looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced" (Austen, *Persuasion* 103).

Anne needs to escape the isolating and confining environment of her family to end her long period of emotional isolation and she seems to succeed by getting married. However, *Persuasion* "ends not so much with Anne's marriage to Captain Wentworth as with the fact that Anne's marriage is to the naval world" (Jukić 77). Unlike Fanny and Emma, Anne rejects the authority and domesticity of her father, and opts for "a family of (naval) brothers and sisters, to which fathers and sons are not prerogative" (Jukić 77). According to Lau, she "ultimately rejects this opportunity to return to her original home and perpetuate family and social tradition. Instead, she prefers to marry the 'new man' Captain Wentworth, who is allied with the sea rather than a landed estate" (Lau 99). Anne is transferred to a new type of domesticity as *Persuasion* depicts a society that is in the state of change. As Tanner asserts, "established society and domesticity are now … 'all at sea' – metaphorically (they are in a state of chronic confusion, chaotic flux) but also literally" (245). In Austen's words, Anne "gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (Austen, *Persuasion* 254).

4. Conclusion

Despite their different social positions, the female characters in the three Austen novels under investigation all underscore the theme of isolation. In contrast to Emma, Fanny and Anne "are not only separated from the men they love – and know for certain they love – they are at odds with the societies in which they live and act" (Shaw 290). Both are also outsiders in their own families. Their observational roles provide them with a deeper understanding of their surroundings and stronger moral codes. Emma is closer to earlier Austen heroines. According to Shaw, "though isolated, these heroines could never be said to be tragically alone ... They may be humbled in their own or even in their lovers' eyes, but they never cease to be 'somebody' in their families and villages" (298). Emma's position in her social circle stays secure throughout the novel, despite her wrongdoings.

Emma is initially a flawed character compared to Fanny and Anne. According to Shaw, "Austen was to present again a heroine who is the most wide-awake character in the novel, but who, emotionally, is sound asleep" (289). Emma suffers from intellectual isolation as she lacks an appropriate friend of similar rank and intellect. Her father and governess do not provide her with moral guidance she needs, resulting in deficiencies in her moral education. It is through Mr. Knightley's guidance that she becomes a better person and overcomes her isolation.

Anne and Fanny begin by being useful and available to others. They are constantly providing emotional care and companionship to others, their own needs notwithstanding. In Shaw's words, "[l]ike Fanny, Anne makes usefulness her rationale for living, and again Austen implicitly criticizes altruistic exertion by showing that lending oneself to the selfishness of others can be a way of dodging a natural desire to be wanted, not just needed" (298). Moreover, unlike Emma, whose position is fixed throughout the novel, Anne and Fanny are socially ambiguous. Both are offered a marital prospect other than the men they love which would significantly improve their social status. However, their observational roles allow them to judge others more accurately. Anne is thus the only one not blind to Mr. Elliot's true nature and his deception.

While the female characters become active parts of society by overcoming their isolation, it is important to note that society itself is in a process of change. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny ultimately becomes the most integral part of the house. Emma does not move into her husband's home after

marriage. Anne becomes part of a new type of society, where domesticity is connected to the navy. In Shaw's words, "Anne Elliot does not marry into safety and sameness, but into risk ... Although the emphasis is still on domestic virtues, the vista widens at the end of *Persuasion*; it is not narrowed to the confines of house or rectory. The impulse is not towards stasis and calm, but towards movement and change" (Shaw 301).

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Abstract

The paper deals with the different kinds of isolation indexed by female characters in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park, Emma and Persuasion*. Austen's novels reflect the society in which class and marriage are paramount to women and where the fear of social exclusion is always present. While the themes of social isolation and confinement to the private sphere are important for understanding the complexity of women's position, Austen's portrayal of female isolation transcends domestic confinement. Despite their different social positions, the female characters in the three Austen novels under investigation all underscore the theme of isolation, including social, emotional, moral, and intellectual dimensions of isolation. Fanny Price experiences social and emotional isolation due to her inferior position in the family. Most importantly, her strong moral integrity and adherence to Mansfield Park values are the reason for her isolation, but also the key to overcoming it. Emma Woodhouse is isolated because of her character, and her overconfident mistakes often lead to her social exclusion. The novel follows her maturation into a more considerate behaviour, which ultimately ends her isolation. Anne Elliot's position in the family is ambiguous, which often leads to social exclusion. Because of her past mistake, Anne experiences emotional isolation, which is further emphasized after the return of her former fiancé. The thesis concludes with the comparative analysis of the three protagonists and the ways in which they overcome their isolation.

Key words: Jane Austen, female isolation, social confinement, comparative analysis