

Parallels between Real and Fictional Women's Modes of Resistance...

Parallels between Real and Fictional Women's Modes of Resistance to Injustice and Oppression

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Abstract

The position of women in society has always been a sensitive topic as women have had to fight for their rights and recognition for centuries and this fight, evidently, has not reached its (happy) end yet. There were many rules, norms and laws limiting the rights and roles of women in families and in society, in general, determining every aspect of the society and its hierarchy and thus, making women's lives insecure.

In adopting a comparative approach, the paper aims at deciphering and identifying any inclinations to or attempts at resistance against the injustice that was generally accepted as natural, and against the long-established and deeply rooted stereotypes. To this purpose, it presents the fictional world of literature represented by the works of Jane Austen, more particularly by the way her fictional female characters inhabiting the English countryside struggled with the hardships brought upon them by the rules and limitations women were subject to in the real world and Austen's attempts at slipping in her own standpoints, which often did not conform with the generally accepted rules and views. This fictional world is then confronted with the real-world and personal experience of the writer Beatrix Potter who, though of a younger generation, had to fight hard for her personal and professional independence and recognition. The findings are briefly supported by references to other female writers by emphasizing the similarities in their lives.

Keywords: *laws, society, culture, class, struggle, independence, fiction, reality.*

1. Introduction

Throughout history, women have been oppressed by discriminatory laws, of which two were closely intertwined: the right of primogeniture and the entailment law. The first one was practised in Britain until 2015 when it was repealed, the latter limited the freedoms, options and opportunities of women¹ motivating that it was meant to prevent large estates of land from disintegration to protect the land “from fragmenting as it descended through the male line while supporting numerous family members” (Davidoff 1996: 73). Repealed in 1925, this feudal law was generally practised in such a way that the estate was passed on the nearest male descendant, no matter how distant a relative the man was. That was the case of many families in those times, though “[i]n special cases, daughters might inherit but only in default of male heirs.” (Davidoff 1996: 73)

The implementation of such laws had visible effects on the lives of people involved and even on every single aspect of society. However, it was always women who had to cope with all their limiting effects:

When a woman married, she passed from the control of her father, who ‘gave her away’ at the wedding to the control of her husband. Her property became her husband’s, despite his promise in the marriage ceremony, ‘with all my worldly goods I thee endow’. As a wife, she could not legally own land or have a separate source of income, unless set out in a specific contract – the marriage settlement. Such a settlement might entitle her to receive the interest from her dowry in her lifetime and to bequeath the dowry to her children or use it as income if her husband died. Otherwise, she effectively had no legal status, and any children belonged to her husband. (Adkins 2013: 4)

¹ In estate law, this is “the act or instance of restricting the inheritance or property to the owner’s lineal descendants or to a particular class thereof” (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*).

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One must not think that women bore the injustices without any attempts at resistance, however. As the human society progressed, attempts at resisting the unjust rules began to emerge, and in the early 20th century, the suffrage and suffragette movements, by which women tried to rebel against the constraints of life, managed to achieve some important goals, e.g. vote for women over thirty years of age (in 1918). They all required great courage and endurance. Even the most renowned women writers of the 19th century tried at least to 'smuggle' some of their frustrations in their literary characters, e.g. Molly Gibson (Elizabeth Gaskell), Jane Eyre (Charlotte Brontë). In real life, Mary Ann Evans definitely set an example by her own life, despite her having opted for a male pseudonym of George Eliot to help start her literary career. Having decided to live with her colleague and fellow writer and editor, G.H. Lewes out of wedlock, Eliot showed great courage and faced harsh consequences. Her entire family, prompted by her brother Isaac "had broken off all contact with her" (Hughes 2018: 162) Eliot had to live cut off from her family for over twenty years.

The information about the lives of some of the Victorian female authors makes one notice some striking similarities. One of the most telling aspects was their access to formal education. Thus, Jane Austen (1775-1817) was home-schooled in French, Italian, music, and needlework and encouraged by her father "to read widely" (Shattock 1993: 14), just like Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855), who was initially home-schooled, briefly sent to "school for daughters of the clergy ... a harsh, ill-equipped institution" (Shattock 1993: 63), only to be removed from it to be taught by her father. Compared to them, Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) went to "...local schools and then to a boarding school at Stratford-upon-Avon, where she was taught Latin, French and Italian." (Shattock 1993: 176-7). Despite going to different local schools and even a boarding school, George Eliot (1819-1880) ended up in becoming her father's housekeeper after her mother's death. Even more their junior Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) "was taught by governesses until she was fifteen, and had no formal education after the age of fifteen" (Shattock 1993: 346-7).

2. Wealth, entailment, and independence

When examining women's quest for social recognition, Jane Austen can definitely be considered a starting point. Through her novels, she managed to point at the absurdity of the above-mentioned laws and rules and their devastating impact on families, particularly women in such families, on the one hand, while on the other, she excelled at severe caricature of human greed, pride and snobbery. These motives are recurrent and resonate in all of Austen's novels. Other recurrent motives Austen worked into her novels are based on the real-life criteria applied when defining the level of 'accomplishments' to be achieved by young women. One such example may be taken from the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. According to Mr Bingley, to be considered 'accomplished', it was enough for women to be able to "paint tables, cover screens, and net purses" (Austen 2010: 36) and Miss Bingley adds:

... no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved. (Austen 2010: 36)

Much has been written about Jane Austen's life and her literary legacy. However, regardless of the views of literary scholars, people (particularly today) generally tend to read her major novels as romance literature about love pursuits and romantic entanglements. What mostly seems to escape the attention of readers is the background to all this. It is quite understandable that current readers will not be much preoccupied with such details - they can only too easily escape their attention - but what one really should realise is the fact that the undercurrent of Austen's witty, ironic, often sarcastic and amusing texts is much more serious, dealing with issues that troubled not only Austen's characters, but that in them she projected her own existential worries that

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never stopped troubling her or other women in the family, or her contemporaries in general.

3. Maturing under guidance, or unguarded

Though published posthumously, *Northanger Abbey* is Austen's first major work. This may be the reason for its seeming more restrained in dealing with issues concerning women and their position in the society when compared to the novels that followed. In *Northanger Abbey*, the character of Catherine Morland is identified by the author herself as not predetermined to become a heroine:

No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine. Her situation in life, the character of her father and mother, her own person and disposition, were all equally against her. (Austen 2008:3)

However, it is the character of Isabella Thorpe who is more intriguing. Isabella can be perceived as Catherine Morland's foil character. Contrary to naïve and inexperienced Catherine, who just enjoys the novelty of the world she has never encountered before, Isabella knows the purpose of her family's stay in Bath. Though middle class, the Thorpes are poor and neither she, nor her brother John has great chances to keep their current social standing by marrying well. This necessity explains Isabella's acting the way she does, i.e. her taking any opportunity that arises to attract any eligible man available. In other words, Isabella could be despised by readers for her uncontrolled behaviour; through Catherine, she is censured by the author herself and yet, one cannot help but understand the motives of her behaviour. She is insincere, manipulative and calculating but she has no choice. She is too well aware of her future fate. In this novel, Austen is not yet that open in her inclinations to criticism of the laws and rules that she herself views as unjust and limiting. Thus, she lets Catherine get through all her adventures and little misfortunes relatively unscathed but enlightened in the end while Isabella is quite severely punished for her deeds though she has just behaved in accordance with the

rules imposed by the society she wanted to retain her place within. It is Henry Tilney's persistent guidance that helps Catherine to see through the tangle of intrigue, insincerity and empty flattery while given the kind of family Isabella belongs to, there is no one to watch over her. This is the moment to point out the parallels in relationships of the characters in *Northanger Abbey* and another Austen's work, the novel *Emma*.

Emma Woodhouse gradually matures under the critical guidance of Mr. Knightley, who has the advantage of being on the long-lasting friendly terms with the Woodhouses, the relatively big age difference (16 years) between him and Emma, and corresponding life experience. Mr Knightley actually guides Emma (without realizing it) so that one day she could become his 'accomplished' wife. Henry Tilney, on the other hand, is only a few years older than Catherine. He tries to point out the dangers lurking around and manages to be tough when he finds out that Catherine has exceeded the limits of her own imagination fed by her novel reading. However, he is a new acquaintance and their relationship is not so intimate as to enable Henry to be as strict as Mr. Knightley. Austen is more lenient and uses irony and friendly teasing when dealing with Catherine and Henry's friendship. Henry's (Austen's) views indicate a progressively thinking man for whom women do not represent only ornamental pendants to men and their households. He does not perceive them only as child (son) bearers, for him women are men's equal partners which was a unique attitude in that period. Although Austen retains humour and irony throughout the novel, her criticism of the real status quo is evident and relentless. Isabella's volatility and hypocrisy bring her the most serious punishment even though the motives of her behaviour require some reflection. What made her exchange a man who loved her for the man who charmed her for a while and caused the loss of her good reputation? Typically for Austen, it is impossible to either clearly condemn Isabella or to identify with her. All Isabella's deeds have one dominant motive – to secure for herself comfortable and safe life of the standard she has been used to. Her situation is made more complicated by the fact that, as far as property is concerned, she herself has nothing to bring to the eventual marriage, which disqualifies her from becoming a potential wife even more. Even the most

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likeable characters are not faultless and when confronted with the consequences, they must face them and learn from them.

If Isabella serves as a foil character to Catherine, both John Thorpe and Frederick Tilney, Henry's rival and brother respectively, have the same role in relation to Henry. Captain Tilney is the 'bad boy'. He is a seducer, a fact confirmed by his own brother when he tells Catherine:

My brother is a lively, and perhaps sometimes a thoughtless young man; he has had about a week's acquaintance with your friend, and he has known her engagement almost as long as he has known her. (Austen 2008: 141)

Frederick is a selfish and irresponsible young man. In contrast to his brother, he uses to the full the double standards of assessing men's and women's behaviour. He behaves according his own will and the criteria set by the society by which behaviour he causes Isabella's ruin and makes her pay for her wantonness. We are confronted with the double interpretation of the character again. On the one hand Captain Tilney helps to reveal Isabella's real – irresponsible, reckless, greedy and selfish - nature, while on the other hand, when compared to him (a man) Isabella (a woman) is left to her own devices as, yet again, it is only the woman who has to pay for her deeds.

Some of Austen's other novels, more particularly *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*, are more daring. The three novels have in their centre families lacking one important precondition that would enable them to keep the standard of living they are used to – a son. While in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* the serious issue of being disinherited is so far a mere threat, in *Sense and Sensibility* it is harsh reality. If Mrs Bennet and her five daughters are threatened with being expelled from their family home after Mr Bennet's death due to the valid laws, the novel *Sense and Sensibility* introduces the reality in its entirety in the characters of the Dashwood ladies.

In the opening pages of *Sense and Sensibility*, we learn that:

The late owner of the estate was a single man ... he invited and received into his house the family of his nephew, Mr Henry Dashwood, the legal inheritor of the Norland estate..." (Austen 1994: 1) ... "...to his son, and his son's son ... it was secured, in such a way, as to leave to himself no power of providing for those who were the most dear to him, and who most needed a provision. (Austen 1994: 2)

Sense and Sensibility is also a novel that presents a character demonstrating some rebellious features. Of the two (adult) Dashwood sisters, representing either 'sense' (Elinor) or 'sensibility' (Marianne), it is Marianne who tries to rebel against the norms through the larger part of the novel and yet, it is this free-thinking sister who ends up giving up her rebellious inclinations and opting for the sedate life of a wife of a country gentleman.

4. Overcoming prejudice and fighting for integrity and self-esteem

The fact that Austen was ahead of her times is also clear in her next novel, *Emma*. She was not afraid to create an independent heroine who held opinions which were not very common in the society she belonged to, not even in the given historical period. On the other hand, Emma Woodhouse can afford to be herself because of her social status and her father's property. She is the heroine who is not going to descend down the social ladder after her father's death due to the entailment law. She became the mistress of her father's household at a very young age, she enjoys the privileged position within the Highbury society and she loves it. With this, however, come her shortcomings, too.

Though not willing to admit it to herself, she manipulates people around her to great extent. She finds a perfect target in the character of Harriet Smith, a young girl of a dubious origin whom Emma takes it into her head she must 'elevate' socially because of her unfounded belief that Harriet must be a gentleman's daughter. This particular line of the novel is important from the

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point of view of the changing times and values, as well as Austen's own attitude to them. Emma's conflict with Mr Knightley over Harriet Smith in the early stages of the novel perfectly illustrates the growing independence of woman's mind when she declares

'...it is always incomprehensible to a man that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. ... Mr Martin is a very respectable young man, but I cannot admit him to be Harriet's equal; and am rather surprized indeed that he should have ventured to address her.' ... 'Not Harriet's equal!' exclaimed Mr Knightley loudly and warmly; ... 'What are Harriet Smith's claims, either of birth, nature or education, to any connection higher than Robert Martin? She is the natural daughter of nobody knows whom ... and certainly no respectable relations.' ... [Emma]: 'The sphere in which she moves is much above his. – It would be a degradation. ... She is not to pay for the offence of others, by being held below the level of those with whom she is brought up.' (Austen 1994: 47-49)

There is an interesting parallel between what happens in the novel and Austen's own real-life view. In a letter to her niece Fanny Knight, Austen responds to Fanny's inability to decide whether to accept a proposal of marriage:

I shall ... entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection; and if his deficiencies of Manner &c &c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once. (Le Faye 2014: 292)

The letter was written in 1814 and it is clear where Austen looked for the inspiration when she was writing *Emma*, as she used her own real-life

advice when Emma tries to dissuade Harriet from accepting Mr Martin's proposal of marriage:

I lay it down as a general rule, Harriet, that if a woman doubts as to whether she would accept a man or not, she certainly ought to refuse him. If she can hesitate as to 'Yes', she ought to say 'No', directly. (Austen 1994: 41)

However, Emma's decided defence of Harriet's rights suffers a real blow and makes her change her views considerably after it transpires that Harriet hopes to marry Mr Knightley:

... [t]he moment [Harriet] was gone, this was the spontaneous burst of Emma's feelings: 'O God! That I had never seen her!' ... Mr Knightley and Harriet Smith! – Such an elevation on her side! Such a debasement on his! – It was horrible to Emma to think how it must sink him in the general opinion, to foresee the smiles, the sneers, the merriment it would prompt at his expense; ... Oh! Had she never brought Harriet forward! Had she left her where she ought, and where he had told her she ought! ... How Harriet could ever have had the presumption to raise her thoughts to Mr Knightley! ... Who had been at pains to give Harriet notions of self-consequence but herself? – Who but herself had taught her, that she was to elevate herself if possible...? (Austen 1994: 311-313)

The question that arises is – how serious was Austen in making Emma think this way and turn her initial revolutionary sounding ideas upside down? One must ask: was Austen progressive in her ideas but still only up to some limits or was she just pointing out the fact that however radical her views might have been, the rest of the society thought differently? In their book, *Eavesdropping on Jane Austen's England*, the authors illustrate the reality through stating, in different words, what Emma came to eventually understand when confronted with Harriet's ambition: marrying within the

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same social class was clearly more problematic than marrying into a different one (Adkins 2013: 4). However, Austen was more liberal when it comes to class distinctions. The author mocks her heroine's self-importance, while, at the same time, she points towards the social changes that are inevitable:

The Coles had been settled some years in Highbury, and were very good sort of people – friendly, liberal, and unpretending; but, on the other hand, they were of low origin, in trade, and only moderately genteel. ... With their wealth, their view increased; ... The regular and best families Emma could hardly suppose they would presume to invite – neither Donwell, nor Hartfield, nor Randalls. Nothing should tempt her to go, if they did; and she regretted that her father's known habits would be giving her refusal less meaning than she could wish. 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; she had little hope of Mr Knightley, none of Mr Weston. ... But she has made up her mind how to meet this presumption so many weeks before it appeared, that when the insult came at last, it found her very differently affected. Donwell and Randalls had received their invitation, and none had come for her father and herself; ... She felt that she should like to have had the power of refusal; and afterwards, as the idea of the party ... consisting precisely of those whose society was dearest to her, occurred again and again, she did not know that she might not have been tempted to accept. (Austen 1994: 156-7)

By finally accepting the invitation, Emma enters an unknown world which she had deliberately avoided; on this occasion, she discovers how blinded by prejudice she has been. Similarly, such social climbing is recognized in Austen's best loved novel, *Pride and Prejudice*. The character of

Elizabeth Bennet, who manages to win her fight for the right to love and live decent life without being forced to make compromises, was unique in the time of her origin and by creating her, Austen proved to be quite daring. The social circumstances, laws and rules, and strict class distinctions made the kind of relationship she had created between Elizabeth and Darcy quite impossible (unwished for by many) in real life. However, these rules provided Austen with space for their criticism.

...even in *Pride and Prejudice* Austen celebrates her most upwardly mobile heroine in Elizabeth Bennet, and mocks the almost anachronistic social pride of the well-born Mr Darcy. She shows herself to be sympathetic to the claims of the rising middle classes, and gains much comic mileage from contrasts and comparisons between 'high' and 'low' characters. (Byrne 2017: 150-151)

In attempting to find connection between two writers whose lives were separated by almost a century and yet – they had much in common. Beatrix Potter was born some nine years shy of a century after Jane Austen. It could be expected that this separation in time would bring some changes into the lives of women in Great Britain, that they would be allowed more freedom in all areas and aspects of life. However, the life story of Potter proves the opposite – evidently not much had changed.

Beatrix Potter was the author of fairy stories about animals, which she also illustrated. Her books have not lost their attraction and appeal and are read by children round the world even today. There is one question to be asked then – why is she so overlooked by literary experts thus making it so difficult to learn more about this unusual woman? Filmmakers present this author in the film *Miss Potter*². The film presents her as a girl (in flashbacks) and as a young woman living at home in London with her parents, spending summer holidays with them and her brother, getting to know the nature

² *Miss Potter* (2006) presents a cinematic biography of Beatrix Potter, starring Renée Zellweger, Ewan McGregor, Lloyd Owen, Bill Paterson and Emily Watson.

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around Lake District and later moving there for good. Moreover, her family background is depicted in such a way as if her life was – if not idyllic then, say, harmonious – with a mother observing typical Victorian values and father who is portrayed as more understanding and more supporting as far as his daughter's interests are concerned. However, after studying more material about Potter, it transpires that this portrayal is quite one-sided. In later phases of her life, Potter more or less gave up her writing career after she had settled in Lake District and started fighting for preserving the area and its natural beauty by buying the farmland around with the money she had earned with her books. When this moment is encountered for the first time onscreen, her position among the farmers as that of a stranger and woman is hard and she has to fight and be really persuasive to win over the farm she is about to buy. Her first experience of trying to purchase a piece of land reminds one strongly about the situation Thomas Hardy's (fictional) Bathsheba Everdene³ finds herself in as an independent woman-farmer when she is confronted with the same prejudice and haughtiness of fellow farmers:

Among these heavy yeomen a feminine figure glided, the single one of her sex that the room contained. ... It had required a little determination – far more than she had at first imagined – to take up a position here, for at the first entry the lumbering dialogues had ceased, nearly every face had been turned towards her, and those that were already turned rigidly fixed there. ... (Hardy 1972: 104-105)

5. Solitary childhood and its impact upon Beatrix's adult life

Beatrix Potter (1866-1943) was born into a typical well-off Victorian family in London where she experienced "privileged and sheltered upbringing" (Cohen: vi). Her early life was so sheltered that it resulted in Beatrix's becoming "increasingly shy, dreading having to make conversation on the rare occasions she did happen to encounter anyone." (Cohen 2021: 14)

³ Bathsheba Everdene is the central character of Thomas Hardy's novel *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874).

Despite the difficulties, she loved going to museums as well as drawing and painting, in which art she also tried to perfect her skills. She was the kind of person who longed for knowledge, craved information and suffered under the restrictions of the late Victorian society which she found so limiting for women. If we were to refer to the idea of an accomplished woman mentioned above, voiced by Mr Bingley and his sister (see above), here is an example of a correspondence between fiction and life. Education and knowledge were simply not meant for women. Whatever Beatrix ever learned was hard earned and mostly achieved in secret.

At one point, she decided to start sending illustrated letters to people she knew. This did not escape the attention of Canon Rawnsley⁴, a family acquaintance from Lake District on whose suggestion Beatrix attempted to collect her old illustrated letters and use them to make a book for children. After being rejected by several publishers, she decided to publish the book “entirely at her own expense” which meant that “she was in complete charge of every aspect of the project and could therefore ensure that it looked exactly as she wanted it to.” (Cohen 2021: 41) Thus the *Tale of Peter Rabbit*, first published in December 1901, marked the beginning of the successful writing career of the woman whose starting position was worse than unfavourable. When she was later approached by the Warnes⁵, one of the publishers who had originally rejected her book, Beatrix became a recognized writer. Moreover, the daughter that never fully accepted the social norms and a future based on them had to be eventually taken notice of by her parents. Her father helped her in all matters legal and even her mother “began to take interest in her daughter’s achievements when she appreciated its potential financial value.” (Cohen 2021: 43) On the other hand, however, “Beatrix was not thinking about the money, she was simply delighted to be busy for the first time in her life...” (Cohen 2021: 43) Her life thus changed after her early success, “[a] new person seemed to be emerging: a demanding, hard-

⁴ Canon Rawnsley (1851-1920) – an Anglican priest, poet and conservationist and co-founder of the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty.

⁵ Frederick Warne and Co. – a British publisher founded in 1865 who originally published twenty-three books by Beatrix Potter.

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headed woman who had no qualms when it came to asking for precisely what she wanted..." (Cohen 2021: 44)

After the initial success of the *Tale of Peter Rabbit*, Potter came up with more ideas and more books which meant more success⁶. This, however, brought a new drawback – her parents who initially seemed to support their daughter's ambitions suddenly "began to fear that they might lose her to powerful outside influences." (Cohen 2021: 59)

Among other aspects of her career that Potter's parents disliked was her growing intimacy with her publisher, Norman Warne - "...the Potters, eager to rise above their mercantile roots, were horrified that Norman Warne the publisher was 'in trade'." (Gristwood 2022: 76) This is the real-life illustration of what Jane Austen dealt with in some of her novels. The Bingley sisters despise the Bennets - among other things - for their relatives although "their brother's fortune and their own had been acquired by trade" (Austen 2010: 13). Austen was very well-aware of this prejudice and, in her work, she tried to hint at possibilities of overcoming them by making Mr Darcy realize that the Gardiners, Elizabeth's aunt and uncle, were respectable people despite their wealth being acquired through trade:

Mrs Gardiner was standing a little behind and on her pausing he asked her if she would do him the honour of introducing him to her friends. This was a stroke of civility for which she was quite unprepared; and she could hardly suppress a smile at his being now seeking the acquaintance of some of those people against whom his pride had revolted. (Austen 2010: 246)

This rebellion on Austen's part suggests the changing of times and norms, on the one hand, while, on the other, it may be perceived as Austen's great wish rather than new reality, as some hundred years later we are

⁶ To mention but some of her children's stories: *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*; *The Tailor of Gloucester*, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny*; *The Tale of Two Bad Mice*, etc.

confronted with the same kind of real-life situation that ensues another parallel between fiction (partly) inspired by reality, and post-Victorian reality. In *Pride and Prejudice*, when Elizabeth Bennet is confronted by haughty, proud, prejudiced and rude Lady Catherine de Burgh claiming that her marrying Mr Darcy “will be disgrace” (Austen 2010: 342), she is not intimidated by her. She boldly and openly defends her dignity though she is aware that Lady Catherine’s fears are unfounded and premature and that she cannot be sure that Mr Darcy’s proposal would ever be repeated. Her fearless opposition presents Elizabeth as a new woman who is not afraid to fight for what she feels is her right. “Elizabeth’s moral defeat of the older woman reveals the shallowness and ignorance of the social distinctions to which Lady Catherine is desperate to cling.” (Byrne 2017: 161).

In the circumstances encountered by Beatrix Potter, she realized that, in earning her own money, she could gain her independence from her “interfering parents” (Cohen 2021: 65) and she could find happiness with Norman. Perhaps for the very first time in her life, Beatrix tried openly to resist her parents though this feud made her unhappy. As they were unyielding in their opposition to her marriage to Norman, Beatrix did one thing that showed her rebellious nature – “she began to openly wear her engagement ring” (Cohen 2021: 66) despite there not being a public announcement. Sadly, Norman Warne died from leukaemia soon afterwards. In one of her subsequent letters to his sister Millie, Beatrix compared herself to Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot of her last completed novel, *Persuasion*, as she also “longed for a man she had been told was beneath her”, but, contrary to Anne, “Beatrix was to remain separated from her love for ever” (Cohen 2021: 69).

6. From a writing career to saving and protecting nature

Although Beatrix mourned the loss of Norman for a long time, this circumstance most probably contributed to her decision to try to liberate herself from the influence of her parents and do something more satisfying and useful than writing her books. During her summer holidays in Lake

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District, still with her parents, she bought Hill Top Farm⁷. It was a bold step for her as

[i]t was almost unheard of for unmarried women to buy property without the help of their fathers at that time, but Beatrix was emerging as something of a feminist many years ahead of the time. ... Hill Top Farm was the first thing Beatrix had ever bought for herself. ... When they realized that their unmarried daughter was making such a scandalous escape, ... Rupert and Helen were furious. Beatrix was ... rejecting ... their way of life and everything they stood for. (Cohen 2021: 72)

Beatrix started to fight more decisively for her right to live her own life the way she wanted it to go. Her second engagement to William Heelis met with the same opposition of her parents as all her previous attempts at independence, but, this time, she would not yield. Heelis was helping her with more purchases of land in Lake District which she wanted to save in the original state and prevent from being damaged by developers. It was a form of resistance to her family's oppression that helped not only her but also the area.

Conclusions

Jane Austen was among the first British writers who tried to rebel against what she saw as limitations to women's life. Her novels are full of reflections on what she observed and encountered. Sometimes, she is more open and direct in her resistance, other times one has to look for the rebellion hidden 'between the lines', but one thing is undeniable – her rebellious attitude though not that keenly demonstrated in her life (aside from her refusal to marry and have children), found its expression in her novels. This text dealt

⁷ Beatrix's first attempt at saving the farmland and nature of Lake District. The house is today used as her museum.

but with some of them – the restrained defence of Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey*, the portrayal of spirited, because safely independent, Emma Woodhouse in *Emma*, of the openly independent-minded and free-thinking Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* and of Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, who is introduced as the most liberated and liberal of them all and then tamed in the end.⁸

From Austen's literary legacy, it is evident that she was not satisfied with what was expected from women or with what women were allowed to expect from life. So, at least in her novels she attempted to make what was almost impossible in real life, possible and achievable. She reflected all the most important aspects of life – the injustice of the law, social and class prejudice, the inequality of women. They were all serious issues and yet, she made them sound less hopeless through her irony and sarcasm, and through gentle teasing even of the least sympathetic characters. On the other hand, I felt it really important to confront her fictional world with the real-life story of an exceptional woman who should not be overlooked but valued both for her literary legacy and for her achievements in nature protection. Austen's fiction and Potter's life overlap in many respects.

To conclude with, it is best to use the following words: "Her taste was for the rebels against literary conventions." (Byrne 2013: 88) But the rebellion did not concern literary conventions only - Austen, and after her Potter and other of their 'fellow writers', proved the feasibility of the ideas they brought forward – either encoded in fiction (Austen) or proved by life achievements (Potter).

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⁸ *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* were not included - Fanny Price did not fit that closely in the group of the early rebels and Anne Elliot was approached independently in Cultural Perspectives, Volume22/2017.

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