

## JANE AUSTEN'S IDEA OF A GENTLEMAN

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### **Abstract**

*The idea of “gentlemanliness” appears frequently in Jane Austen’s novels, being associated with notions such as “chivalry”, “knighthood” or “politeness”. Her books present the ideals of gentlemen that were publicly approved by the English society around the turn of the nineteenth century, but also the way in which these models interacted with each other. The article intends to reveal Austen’s conceptions regarding this topic by examining the manner in which she constructed the leading male characters in her work.*

**Keywords:** gentleman, gentlemanliness, politeness, knight, chivalric, Jane Austen

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### **1. Introduction**

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Ever since the Middle Ages, the idea of “gentlemanliness” has been connected to those of “knighthood” and “chivalry”. In fact, the origins of the term “gentleman” have been traced to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), where the knight was described as a man of high rank who “loved chivalrye, / trouth and honour, freedom and curteisye” (Chaucer, 1996: 5), and who “was a veray, parit gentil knight”. (Chaucer, 1996: 6) During Chaucer’s time, a man was considered “gentil” if he was high-born, perfectly bred, but also kind and considerate, and this ambivalence of meaning persisted in the usage of the term “gentleman” during feudal times. As Raffaella Antinucci explains,

*the terms gentleman, gentle, gentry, gentility, gentiluomo, gentilhomme and gentillesse, share the same etymological root, deriving from the Latin gens and the Greek eugenia, both expressions denoting a noble ancestry. Such seal of rank has been long impressed on the idea of gentleman as a noble specimen in its double meaning of titled and good-natured man. (Antinucci, 2012: 76)*

Until the eighteenth century, the notion of gentleman<sup>2</sup> traditionally referred to someone of “appropriately chivalrous and refined conduct” (Gouws, 2012: 97), who

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<sup>2</sup> In the traditional hierarchy, the gentleman ranked below the baronet, knight or squire, but above the yeoman. (Gilmour, 2016: 5).

could only be of noble descent or from the gentry<sup>3</sup>, who owned an estate, didn't need to work for a living and bore a coat of arms. According to Thomas Gisborne, whose conduct books were popular during the eighteenth century, gentlemen were "considered under the following characters: first, as land-owners; secondly, as invested with various offices and trusts of a public nature; and thirdly, as bound to the performance of numerous private and domestic duties." (Gisborne, 1800: 416) William Harrison's definition of 1577, also quoted by Gilmour (Gilmour, 2016: 6), describes in more detail the criteria according to which someone could be considered a gentleman:

*Whosoever studieth the laws of the realm, whoso abideth in the university, or professeth physic and the liberal sciences, or beside has service in the room of a captain in the wars, or good counsel given at home, whereby his commonwealth is benefited, can live without manual labour, and thereto is able and will bear the port, charge and countenance of a gentleman, he shall for money have a coat and arms bestowed upon him by the heralds, and thereunto, being made so good cheap, be called master, which is the title that men give to esquires and gentlemen, and reputed for a gentleman ever after. (Harrison, 1968: 177)*

Since the British system favoured those occupations that were based on the ownership of land, many gentlemen lived upon the annual incomes of their estates and, when administering them, they had the duty to consider not only their own interest, but also the welfare on the whole community that depended on them. Thus, a gentleman had to provide guidance for the tenants, employment for the inhabitants of the land and support for the poor in times of need. On a personal level, he also had to marry a woman who would be a good match for him in virtue and temperament. Regarding the issue of choosing a wife, Thomas Gisborne affirmed:

*Let not those be surprised at finding their comforts corroded by indifference and discontent, by contrariety of views and domestic broils, who have chosen a companion for life merely or principally for the sake of personal beauty and accomplishments, of a weighty purse, of eminent rank, of splendid and potent connections: nor they who, without being altogether blinded by passion, or impelled by interested motives, have yet neglected previously to ascertain whether their intended partner possesses that share of congruity to their own dispositions and habits, and, above all things, those intrinsic virtues steadfastly grounded on religion, without which, in so close an union, no permanent happiness can be expected. (Gisborne, 1800: 463-464)*

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<sup>3</sup> This condition implied that a man who was born in a noble family would have greater possibility to receive education and to acquire gentle manners.

The dignified position that the gentleman occupied in the social hierarchy allowed him to share in the prestige of the landed society, even if he was different from the aristocracy itself. (Gilmour, 2016: 5) In the same time, since the rank of gentleman belonged to the gentry, it constituted a point of entry for the members of the middle classes who, in the pursuit of social esteem, wanted to penetrate the gentry. Yet, access to this respectable society was conditioned by education and occupation, for not all professions were considered appropriate for the rank of gentleman. Gilmour even talks about “a system of subtle exclusions”, that “conferred gentility on the army officer; on the clergyman of the established church, but not the Dissenter; on the London physician, but not the surgeon or attorney; on the man of 'liberal education', but only if he had received that education at Oxford or Cambridge [...]”. (Gilmour, 2016: 7)

During the eighteenth century, however, this system of exclusions characteristic of the pre-industrial society became problematic, for more and more members of the middle class were getting wealthy enough to be able to acquire a higher status. In the same time, the old criteria for defining gentlemanliness were starting to lose importance: standards such as the noble descent and the coat of arms were becoming less relevant than behavioural considerations, while the separation of work and income<sup>4</sup>, which had been a necessary condition for the traditional gentleman, was contested by the social forces which were preparing the new industrial society. Consequently, the old standards of gentlemanliness were reconsidered and, by the end of the period, the rank of gentleman began to gradually integrate new kinds of people, such as self-made men and captains of industry, who valued “meritorious honor and integrity over heredity and appearances”. (Gouws, 2012: 98)

During the eighteenth century, the traditional model of gentleman was challenged by two other ideals: the polite man and the chivalric knight. Thus, according to Michèle Cohen, the eighteenth-century gentleman was “a man of conversation, distinguished by his civility, good breeding, manners, and his ability to please and make others feel easy”. (Cohen, 2005: 325) In other words, the masculine ideal was the polite, educated gentleman, who would control his emotions and strive to improve his manners<sup>5</sup> and his conversational skills in order to gain a reputation as agreeable.

But endeavourment to be pleasing didn't necessarily imply sincere behaviour, and the polite man was challenged by the chivalrous knight, an ideal that was considered more honest and manly. By the time when Burke was lamenting that the age of

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<sup>4</sup> It was considered that a gentleman should live without paying too much attention to business, for it was leisure that allowed him to cultivate an independent, socially esteemed life.

<sup>5</sup> Gentlemen who practiced French manners in the company of women and were excessively concerned with politeness and sensibility started to be seen as effeminate, idle and undisciplined.

chivalry was gone<sup>6</sup>, chivalry was, in fact, reviving in England. This model of masculinity disregarded the niceties of etiquette in favour of blunt sincerity and of the more substantial aspects of knighthood. This new type of chivalry, that integrated “national identity with enlightenment notions of progress and civilization” (Cohen, 2005: 325), called not only for courtesy, but also for courage, usefulness, discipline, trustworthiness and altruism.

Still, it is important to remember that all these ideals of gentlemanliness (the traditional gentleman, the polite gentleman and the chivalrous knight) were not necessarily opposites, and they coexisted during the time when Jane Austen wrote her novels. In fact, she used them in various ways in the construction of her characters.

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## ***2. Austen’s gentlemen***

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### ***2.1 Henry Tilney (“Northanger Abbey”)***

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Henry Tilney reunites the traditional and the polite ideals of gentlemanliness. Henry may be considered a traditional gentleman because he was born in a very wealthy land-owning family that is highly esteemed in society. As General Tilney’s younger son, he also has an appropriate occupation, working as a minister on his father’s estate. Henry’s profession as a clergyman provides him with financial independence and with a comfortable home. His small and functional parsonage house, which is surrounded by meadows and connected to a prosperous village, represents “a welcoming image of domestic simplicity and happiness.” (Ailwood, 2008: 102)

However, Henry also represents the embodiment of the polite ideal of gentlemanliness, with its “fluency and spirit” (Austen, 1803: 18), although he sometimes mocks the artificiality of ordinary conversation with its repeated clichés.

Catherine Morland meets him at a ball, where he is introduced as a “very gentlemanlike young man” who “seemed to be about four or five and twenty, was rather tall, had a pleasing countenance, a very intelligent and lively eye, and, if not quite handsome, was very near it. (Austen, 1803: 18) He playfully guides his dialogue with Catherine, and he succeeds in delighting her with his clever and amusing style. Dazzled by his charming eloquence, she leaves “with a strong inclination for continuing the acquaintance”. (Austen, 1803: 23)

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<sup>6</sup> During the eighteenth century, Burke militated for a return to the traditional values of chivalry, which implied a “generous loyalty to rank and sex”, a “proud submission” and “dignified obedience”, but also a “subordination of the heart that kept alive (even in servitude itself) the spirit of an exalted freedom.” (Burke, 1790: 42)

As Babb notices, the “wonderful suppleness” of the conversations between the two protagonists fills the book with a “spirit of joie de vivre.” (Babb, 1962: 86) Henry courts Catherine enthusiastically from the beginning to the end, helping her at the same time to cope with the difficulties caused by her own gullible imagination. Thus, after learning of her suspicions regarding General Tilney, Henry treats Catherine with a compassionate attention that reveals his nobleness and astonishing generosity:

*The formidable Henry soon followed her into the room, and the only difference in his behaviour to her was that he paid her rather more attention than usual. Catherine had never wanted comfort more, and he looked as if he was aware of it. The evening wore away with no abatement of this soothing politeness; and her spirits were gradually raised to a modest tranquility. (Austen, 1803: 223-224)*

Henry's conduct proves that his reassuring gentleness is the result of an honest concern for others, that his refined conversation and conduct are a reflection of his inner kindness and virtue. Austen seems to imply that genuine politeness is different from superficial gallantry, for it values women and even protects them in a society dominated by men.

Henry's respect and consideration for women, as well as his appreciation for an affectionate family life, can be seen in his responsible and loving attitude to his sister, but also in his reaction to Catherine's eviction from Northanger Abbey. Hearing about his father's behavior towards her, Henry feels bound “as much in honour as in affection to Miss Morland” (Austen, 1803: 282) and he steadily declares his intention of wedding her. His decision, which triggers his father's anger, shows not only the depth of his feelings for her, but also his courage and steady commitment to his own moral code.

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## 2.2 Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon (“Sense and Sensibility”)

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In “Sense and sensibility”, Edward and Brandon are somehow lacking in their gentlemanliness, and the novel is about their becoming complete gentlemen by improving their manliness. According to Perkins, Edward is “exceptional in his principled conduct, his modesty and his self-knowledge, and engaging in his disposition to truthfulness and gentle wit” (Perkins, 1998: 119), but he is also ordinary in his lack of ambition. Indeed, Edward has neither the abilities, nor the desire to fulfil the wishes of his mother and sister, who want to see him “distinguished” by becoming a politician or by driving a barouche. (Austen, 1811: 12) In fact, in the beginning of the novel, Edward appears not to conform with any standard of gentlemanliness or even eighteenth-century masculinity. As Landin notices,

*He is not married and is in no possession of any household for himself. He also does not participate in any sport, socializes little with his peers and seems to not be*

*making sexual conquests, i.e. he does nothing of what was important to assert one's masculinity as opposed to femininity and effeminacy.* (Landin, 2017: 8)

Edward is not a land-owning gentleman, but he is not an effeminate one either, for he does not possess the artful conversation and the social agreeableness of the polite gentleman ideal. In fact, he is quite incapable of hiding his melancholy and his sense of defeat, which is why, when he becomes acquainted with the Dashwoods, they all feel the need to cheer him up. Edward's low self-esteem and his depressed state of mind are due to the fact that he feels he hasn't been able to achieve anything in life. Austen presents him as a victim of the traditional criterion of gentlemanliness according to which "a gentleman makes it of his essence that he does not work for a living". (Perkins, 1998: 119)<sup>7</sup> As a young man, Edward was not allowed to settle on the profession he wanted and was encouraged by his family and friends to be idle:

*It has been, and is, and probably will always be a heavy misfortune to me, that I have had no necessary business to engage me, no profession to give me employment, or afford me any thing like independence. But unfortunately my own nicety, and the nicety of my friends, have made me what I am, an idle, helpless being. We never could agree in our choice of a profession. I always preferred the church, as I still do. But that was not smart enough for my family. They recommended the army. That was a great deal too smart for me. [...] and, at length, as there was no necessity for my having any profession at all, [...] idleness was pronounced on the whole to be most advantageous and honourable [...]. I was therefore entered at Oxford and have been properly idle ever since."* (Austen, 1811: 92)

Since Edward is not able to provide for himself, he is dependent upon his mother for his income. Consequently, he has no control over his own life. His hopelessness is amplified by his secret engagement with Lucy Steele, which he regrets, but also by his falling in love with Elinor, with whom he believes he has no future. Edward doesn't act in a gentlemanly manner when he makes Marianne's sister believe that his affection is "all her own" (Austen, 1811: 122), but he does reveal his chivalric nature when he loyally stands by his betrothal to a woman he has ceased to love, though disinherited for doing so: "I thought it my duty," said he, "independent of my feelings, to give her the option of continuing the engagement or not, when I was renounced by my mother, and stood to all appearance without a friend in the world to assist me." (Austen, 1811: 325) Luckily, his fiancée breaks off their engagement and Edward is free to pursue his happiness with Elinor, who will also help him improve in amiability. At the end of the novel, Edward fulfils his dream of becoming a diligent and happy gentleman by becoming a minister and by embracing the domestic comfort of a tranquil life.

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<sup>7</sup> In the absence of a profession, the heirs were idle, undisciplined and purposeless, while those who were not heirs had very limited freedom of action, being economically dependent upon their relatives.

As for Brandon, he already has an estate and a military occupation which grants him a manly experience and authority: "He has seen a great deal of the world; has been abroad, has read, and has a thinking mind." (Austen, 1811: 45) The colonel has a "particularly gentlemanlike" (Austen, 1811: 30) address, and his acquaintances acknowledge his good breeding and polite manners, but also his kind nature. As Elinor notices, Brandon is a "sensible man, well-bred, well-informed, of gentle address, and [...] possessing an amiable heart." (Austen, 1811: 46) However, even if he is "on the wrong side of five and thirty", the colonel is not married. We are told that in his youth, Brandon felt a passionate attachment to a "lovely, blooming, healthful girl" (Austen, 1811: 181) whom he couldn't marry and who died due to unfortunate circumstances, leaving her illegitimate daughter to the colonel's care. This tragic love story has left its mark on Brandon, who has become grave, silent and cheerless.

These unyouthful and unpleasing traits repel at first the impetuous Marianne, who attracts the attention of the colonel with her passion and vivacity. Although in love for the second time in his life, Brandon does not believe that Elinor's sister would reciprocate his feelings. Yet, his selflessness and benevolence make him stand by Marianne and by her family even in the most difficult circumstances of her illness without expecting anything in return. The unwavering support that he offers to the Dashwood sisters, as well as the compassion and delicacy with which he acts when he hears about Edward's misfortunes, envelop the Colonel in an aura of chivalry. Gradually, Marianne begins to understand the difference between Willoughby's false gentlemanliness, which is polite and charming, but selfish and honourless, and Brandon's true knighthood, which implies authenticity, generosity, loyalty and trustworthiness. Thus, the colonel wins Marianne's heart through good deeds and deepness of feeling, while she finally heals his broken heart, restoring his liveliness:

*Colonel Brandon was now as happy, as all those who best loved him, believed he deserved to be;—in Marianne he was consoled for every past affliction;—her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness; and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend. Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby. (Austen, 1811: 336)*

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### *2.3 Fitzwilliam Darcy ("Pride and Prejudice")*

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Fitzwilliam Darcy is, in many respects, the representative of the traditional English gentleman. He is of noble descent, for his mother was the daughter of an earl, and has received a good education. Being the only son of the late George Darcy, he has inherited the large estate of Pemberley, and his income of £10,000 a year makes him one of the wealthiest members of the gentry in the kingdom. Moreover, he is extremely good looking. When he first appears at the Meryton assembly, the

attention of the room is drawn by his “his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien”. (Austen, 1813: 8)

However, the “great admiration” he initially provokes is almost immediately replaced by the general “disgust” with his unpleasing manners: “for he was discovered to be proud; to be above his company, and above being pleased [...]”. (Austen, 1813: 8) Although he is a well-bred man, the taciturn Darcy refuses to “recommend himself to strangers” (Austen, 1813: 160) and to engage in dialogue with people who are not his intimates or equals. His prideful conduct may be a result of a flaw in his character, for, according to his own words, he was “spoilt” by his parents and allowed to be “selfish and overbearing”, to only care about his family circle and to “think meanly of all the rest of the world”. (Austen, 1813: 332-333) This behaviour is, in fact, in conflict with his good, healthy principles, but his sense of dignity, combined with the incessant praise surrounding him, keep him from realizing the discrepancy between his beliefs and his practice.

However, Darcy may also be seen as someone who refuses to adhere to the superficial and sometimes insincere ideal of the polite gentleman who would strive to be considered amiable and pleasing under any circumstances. He doesn’t want to “perform to strangers” (Austen, 1813: 160) because “disguise of every sort” is his “abhorrence” (Austen, 1813: 177), and politeness implies, in his view, a certain degree of deceitfulness. Yet, this refusal to play the social game costs him a lot, for the poor quality of his “performance”<sup>8</sup> disposes those who do not know him to disapprove of him and to even consider him capable of gross misconduct.

In reality, Darcy is tired of conversing with unfamiliar people who hide their intentions under the deceptive mask of polished conduct, and his reserve constitutes, in a way, a defence mechanism. This may be the reason why, when Bingley offers to introduce him to Elizabeth, Darcy replies coldly: “She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men” (Austen, 1813: 9). By placing himself well above her and by considering Elizabeth’s not dancing as an indicator of her unattractiveness to other gentlemen, Darcy hurts her deeply, even if he remains unaware of the offense he has given. Thus, Elizabeth becomes highly defensive and, during the novel, she repeatedly fortifies herself against him by assuming his ill will and by remaining fixed in her dislike.

On the other hand, Darcy revises his first impression of her during their following meetings, and, as he falls in love with Elizabeth, he reveals his most gentlemanlike

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<sup>8</sup> According to Babb, the meaning of this word ranges from “a show, an exhibition, to a total act, a deed integrated with one’s entire nature.” (Babb, 1962: 146-147)



character. Thus, during the dance at the Netherfield ball, when Elizabeth provokes him with her shows of wilfulness, he yields to her with impeccable politeness: "He smiled, and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said." (Austen, 1813: 84) While Elizabeth focusses only on trying to put Darcy in his place, ignoring his real emotions, he endeavours to cut through her "performance" in order to break down the barriers between them:

*'We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the eclat of a proverb'. 'This is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure', said he. 'How near it may be to mine, I cannot pretend to say. – You think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly'. 'I must not decide on my own performance'. (Austen, 1813: 85)*

Darcy's willingness to achieve mutual understanding with the woman he admires can also be seen throughout the scene at Rosings, where Elizabeth uses her performance on the piano metaphorically in order to accuse Darcy of not taking the trouble to improve his conversation skills: "My fingers [...] do not move over this instrument in the masterly manner which I see so many women's do. [...] But then I have always supposed it to be my own fault – because I will not take the trouble of practising". (Austen, 1813: 160)

Disregarding Elizabeth's attempts to polish him off, Darcy not only answers with outstanding courtesy and propriety, but he also expresses his deepest affection for her: "Darcy smiled and said, 'You are perfectly right. You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers'". (Austen, 1813: 160) Darcy's politeness contains no falsehood, for, by being kind to the woman he treasures, he is being true to himself. Implying that the witty conversations between them are more valuable to him than any piano playing, he pleads for emotional directness, for intimacy between kindred spirits. However, far from welcoming his warm and gallant words, Elizabeth dismisses any thought that he might have feelings for her, and remains committed to finding him undesirable.

Darcy is so in love with Elizabeth, that he decides to propose to her despite her indecorous family and unfortunate connections: "In vain I have struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you." (Austen, 1813: 174) Darcy's words reveal the intensity of his sentiments, but also his inner hesitations concerning the possible marriage between them. The defensive Elizabeth finds the blunt mode of the proposal insulting, and she accuses Darcy of "ungentlemanlike" behaviour. This accusation stings him to the core, for he has always considered himself an exemplary man, who behaves and lives up to his standards. Yet, Darcy's fault lies not necessarily in a lack of politeness or of appropriate conduct, but in a lack of modesty.

But Darcy's behaviour may also have another explanation: in his relation with the woman that he cherishes, he values plain speaking and honesty more than formality, tendency that proves, in fact, that he is an authentic English gentleman. Actually, Darcy's "uncivility" is precisely the factor that provokes Elizabeth to make her charges against him concerning Wickham and Jane, thus setting in motion the chain of events that will lead to the happy ending.

Darcy's subsequent letter makes Elizabeth realize that, despite what she initially thought of him, he is an honourable, principled gentleman, who acts in an ethical manner under any circumstance: "she had never, in the whole course of their acquaintance [...] seen anything that betrayed him to be unprincipled or unjust – anything that spoke him of irreligious or immoral habits [...]" (Austen, 1813: 189)

By the time she arrives at Pemberley, Elizabeth is ready to see Darcy in an even more favourable light. Consequently, she perceives the estate as a reflection of its owner. Thus, Elizabeth is pleased to admire the wild, natural beauty of the grounds that have hardly been altered by man. Since during Austen's times the "improvement" of estates was considered "wasteful, silly and reflective of a frivolous character" (Scheuermann, 2009: 101), Pemberley's lack of artificiality suggests the healthy moral convictions of a master that is level-headed and sensible. The magnificent house, with its "delightful library" (Austen, 1813: 33) and its "lofty and handsome" (Austen, 1813: 221) rooms, displays the highest standards of taste, elegance and order: "but Elizabeth saw, with admiration of his taste, that it was neither gaudy nor uselessly fine; with less of splendour, and more real elegance, than the furniture of Rosings." (Austen, 1813: 221)

However, Darcy's good taste and character is revealed not only through the medium of the environment, but also through the voices of the people around him. The housekeeper's admiration and affection for her good-natured, generous-hearted and excellent landlord radiates in everything she says, while the people in Lambton acknowledge that he does "much good among the poor". (Austen, 1813: 237)<sup>9</sup>

According to Scheuermann, it is precisely Darcy's goodness that appeals to Elizabeth, a goodness "objectified in the well-run estate and the explicit happiness of those in his care." (Scheuermann, 2009: 103) As Elizabeth looks at one of his portraits, she meditates upon the "the glamour of power" (Todd, 2006: 66) that envelops Darcy: "What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his guardianship! – how much of pleasure or pain was it in his

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<sup>9</sup> As Irvine affirms, Darcy represents "all the concern for family continuity, all the virtues of responsible and self-abnegating stewardship" which are central to English national life. (Irvine, 2005: 65)

power to bestow! – how much of good or evil must be done by him!” (Austen, 1813: 225)

When they meet at Pemberley, Darcy breaks out of his rank-inflected pride and tries to show Elizabeth through his exquisite politeness, unassuming manners and perfect hospitality that he has improved: “Never, even in the company of his dear friends at Netherfield, or his dignified relations at Rosings, had she seen him so desirous to please, so free from self-consequence or unbending reserve, as now [...]” (Austen, 1813: 235) This complaisant behavior makes Elizabeth’s esteem for him develop into love.

Lydia’s elopement with Wickham gives Darcy the chance to intervene on behalf of the Bennet family and to save it from disgrace. By using his significant power in the service of traditional values and by behaving gallantly in a difficult situation for the sake of the woman he loves, Darcy acts “like a knight of the old”, winning “fair Elizabeth’s favour through staunch faithfulness and beau gestes”. (Bander, 2012: 39). By the end of the novel, when he offers his hand again, Elizabeth wholeheartedly says: “yes”.

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#### *2.4 Edmund Bertram (“Mansfield Park”)*

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In “Mansfield Park”, Edmund Bertram needs to prove that he is morally fit to be called a minister and a gentleman. Edmund has chosen to become a clergyman not only because of a lack of fortune, but also because of his “strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness to himself and all his connexions”. (Austen, 1814: 15) Like a true gentleman living around the turn of the nineteenth century, Edmund wants to be useful to his community and to society. He treats his forthcoming clerical responsibilities seriously, for a minister “has the charge of all that is of the first importance to mankind”. (Austen, 1814: 79)

Edmund has a compassionate nature which differentiates him from the rest of his family. When his ten-year-old cousin, Fanny, came to live at Mansfield Park, it was he who penetrated her shyness and reserve, watching out for her health, standing up for her rights and developing her mind: “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, and heightened its attraction by judicious praise.” (Austen, 1814: 16)

Edmund represents the plain-speaking, honest and straightforward English gentleman who refuses to use in his conversation the flattery, the gallantry and the small talk associated with the eighteenth-century refined politeness. As Miss Crawford notices, “he was not pleasant by any common rule: he talked no nonsense; he paid no compliments; his opinions were unbending, his attentions tranquil and simple. There was a charm, perhaps, in his sincerity, his steadiness, his integrity [...]”. (Austen, 1814: 56)

Yet, even if Edmund is endowed with the sound moral convictions of a true gentleman, he lacks the moral strengths to adhere to them. Thus, when he falls in love with the “remarkably pretty” (Austen, 1814: 33) Mary Crawford, he allows his feelings to compromise not only his principles and his judgement, but also his solicitude for Fanny, to whom he shows less consideration and concern than before.

Despite his awareness of Mary’s flaws, Edmund convinces himself that her deficient behavior may be improved and he contemplates on proposing, although he knows that Mary is against his becoming a clergyman. It is only her improper reaction to her brother’s illicit affair that makes Edmund realize her true character and acknowledge his own weakness. Once Edmund has become aware of Miss Crawford’s faults, he is ready to admit that Fanny, with her generosity of mind and moral superiority, is more precious to him than anyone else. Thus, he is willing to let his brotherly love develop into something else.

The end of the book praises the benefits of an ideal domestic life in the country, where love is supported by family and friends and everything is authentic and wholesome:

*With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune and friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be. Equally formed for domestic life, and attached to country pleasures, their home was the home of affection and comfort [...].* (Austen, 1814: 409)

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### 2.5 George Knightly (“Emma”)

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Mr. George Knightly combines in his name two references: one to England’s patron saint, and the other to the old English tradition of the knight. He represents the early nineteenth-century chivalric gentleman who revives the national English character in the context of modernity. Mr. Knightly is the head of a family of “true gentility, untainted in blood and understanding”. (Austen, 1815: 319) His attractive physical appearance and his impressive bearing reveal a natural gentlemanliness that cannot go unremarked:

*His tall, firm, upright figure, among the bulky forms and stooping shoulders of the elderly men, was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes; and, excepting her own partner, there was not one among the whole row of young men who could be compared with him.— He moved a few steps nearer, and those few steps were enough to prove in how gentlemanlike a manner, with what natural grace, he must have danced, would he but take the trouble.* (Austen, 1815: 290)

Knightly’s residence, Donwell Abbey, represents the long-established model of English estate which does not follow the contemporary tendency towards artificial improvement. The house is rather practical and convenient, having only “one or two

handsome rooms” (Austen, 1815: 319) and “scarcely a sight” (Austen, 1815: 319), while its “ample gardens stretching down to meadows washed by a stream” (Austen, 1815: 319) reveal the owner’s preference for natural beauty.

But Mr. Knightly is not only a traditional man, he is also an industrious modern agriculturist who manages his estate diligently: “as a farmer, as keeping in hand the home-farm at Donwell, he had to tell what every field was to bear next year”. (Austen, 1815: 89) However, he prioritizes the interests of the community over his own interests when he intends to shift a path on his own meadow, being aware that land ownership implies social responsibility.

Knightly’s good relationship with his tenants and with people belonging to all classes of society shows that he encourages individual development and class mobility. In fact, his concern with the community often reveals his chivalric nature. At the ball, he saves Harriet Smith from mortification when Mr. Elton intentionally humiliates her. He also treats the poor Mrs. and Miss Bates with great consideration by offering them the very last apples from his farm and by allowing them to use his carriage for their own benefit. Remarking Mr. Knightly’s “unostentatious kindness” (Austen, 1815: 197), Emma says, “I know no man more likely than Mr. Knightley to do the sort of thing – to do any thing really good-natured, useful, considerate, or benevolent. He is not a gallant man, but he is a very humane one”. (Austen, 1815: 197)

Mr. Knightly’s refusal of gallantry and flattery reveals his rejection of the polite ideal of gentlemanliness. Although he pleases with his generous gestures, he doesn’t endeavour to please with his manners. His conversational style is plain spoken and honest, yet graceful and dignified. Sometimes, his frankness may even be unpleasant, for he doesn’t mince his words when he feels it is his duty to point something out.

Despite his bluntness, Emma thinks that one “might not see one in a hundred with gentleman so plainly written as in Mr. Knightley”. (Austen, 1815: 27) And her marriage to him, based on mutual love, embodies all “the wishes, the hopes, the confidence” and “the predictions” (Austen, 1815: 431) of both their family and friends.

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## *2.6 Captain Wentworth (“Persuasion”)*

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Captain Wentworth embodies the new nineteenth-century ideal of gentlemanliness which implies not only a solid work ethic, but also diligent national service. Through him, Austen honours the military heroism and the courage of the English navy men, but also “their friendliness, their brotherliness, their openness” and “their uprightness”. (Austen, 1818: 84)

The fearless Captain Wentworth is a skilled naval officer who performs his social and national responsibilities impeccably. He is a self-made man, which means that he is a man of low birth, who has determined his own faith by earning rather than

inheriting his fortune. He doesn't own any land, and, even if he lacks a home of his own, he doesn't seem to wish to acquire one. As Malone notices, he "belongs to a new, modern class of men who work for a living, who achieve their set goals, and who ultimately garner rewards through the use of their minds and bodies." (Malone, 2012: 15) For this new class, work becomes a path for obtaining gentlemanliness.

At the time when he courted Anne, Captain Wentworth was "without alliance or fortune" (Austen, 1818: 20), having "nothing but himself to recommend him" (Austen, 1818: 20), and she was advised to reject him. Yet, he returned eight years later with increased wealth and social status, his fortune and success resulting entirely from his hard work.

Now, as a gentleman of rank, the handsome Captain Wentworth is eligible for marriage, and he knows how to make himself agreeable. His graceful way of talking and his charming manners attract everybody's attention, and he is ready to propose to "any pleasing young woman" who comes "in his way, excepting Anne Elliot." (Austen, 1818: 50) Clearly, he has not forgiven her, but he has not forgotten her either. He treats her with "cold politeness" and "ceremonious grace" (Austen, 1818: 60), but, in spite of his resentment, his chivalric actions show that his affection for her is still there: "She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest". (Austen, 1818: 77)

Mr. Elliot's attention to Anne makes Captain Wentworth realize that she is still the desirable woman he once cherished and that he still loves her. However, he proposes again only when he is sure of her feelings for him: "You pierce my soul. I am half agony, half hope. Tell me not that I am too late, that such precious feelings are gone for ever. [...] I have loved none but you." (Austen, 1818: 204) His words reveal the depth of his passion, but also his constancy and truthfulness.

Sir Walter's approval of the marriage confirms once more Captain Wentworth's social acknowledgement as a worthy self-made man who, by acquiring wealth and by being promoted, was able not only to evolve from being a "nobody" (Austen, 1818: 18) to being a nineteenth-century respected gentleman, but also to marry the woman of his dreams.

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### ***3. Conclusions***

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Austen's heroes represent combinations of the ideals of gentlemanliness that functioned around the turn of the nineteenth century. The ideal of the polite gentleman appears most prominently in Henry Tilney's character. Henry cheerfully mocks the conversational conventions of his time, endeavors to please with his ebullient eloquence, but he also perceives politeness as a reflection of one's inner generosity and nobility of character.

The traditional ideal of gentlemanliness is best represented by the handsome Fitzwilliam Darcy, with his aristocratic descent, his fabulous wealth and his chivalric character. Darcy enjoys the benefits of politeness and courtesy only when he feels he is being true to himself, but he does learn how to be more modest.

In the case of Edward Ferrars and Edmund Bertram, their gentlemanliness is defined by their choice of an occupation that makes them useful to society. They have acquired the esteemed profession of a clergyman and they perform their role in the community while enjoying the domestic comforts of the country life.

Mr Knightly represents a mixture of tradition and modernity, being in the same time a traditional land-owner and a diligent modern administrator, a chivalric “knight” and a blunt, plain spoken man who doesn't concern himself with pleasing others.

Captain Wentworth embodies a new class of powerful, disciplined men who, without being titled or landed, distinguish themselves and acquire the rank of gentleman through their work ethic and through their national service.

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