

## The complexity of the simple. The use of language in Jane Austen's novels

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**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, a large number of books and articles on Jane Austen have been published, in which various aspects of her works and the stories told in them are analyzed. Many of these studies focus on extraliterary aspects, or delve into only some elements of the plots of this author's novels, the issues that are treated, or their social impact. These studies can be of great interest and add a relevant perspective to understanding the novels of Austen. However, to have a global vision of the work of this author, it is necessary to analyze the most literary aspects of Austen's writings in detail. In this article, we will study how Jane Austen used language, some of the most frequent resources, and the strategies she employed to provoke different effects on readers through the choice of certain words and syntactic structures.

**KEY WORDS:** *Literary style, English Literature, literary analysis, Nineteenth Century Literature, Language and literature*

### I. INTRODUCTION

In a letter to her nephew James-Edward Leigh, Jane Austen compared her writing labour with the delicate work of polishing a piece of ivory with a small brush. A task that demands patience and skill, and in which results may seem imperceptible to those who do not know the process. This comparison, which was initially intended to serve as a compliment to the recipient of the letter, and that should have left the writer in an inferior position, enables us to appreciate more accurately the art of Jane Austen, and her attention to small detail.

Certainly, this perspective can be used to analyze any aspect of this author's literary style, however, in this article we will focus on some characteristics of her use of language and also on some of the most frequent resources that can be found in her works. Although we will pay special attention to the voice of the narrator, we will not limit ourselves to his interventions, but we will also study some characteristics of Austen's language within her works, either from the narrator's mouth or from the characters'.

### II. CHARACTERISTICS OF JANE AUSTEN'S USE OF LANGUAGE

#### a) *Conciseness*

One of the main characteristics of Austen's style is conciseness; not using more words than necessary, not giving more details than the story requires. These are the guidelines she gave to her niece Anna Lefroy and that she herself followed.

My Corrections have not been more important than before; — here & there, we have thought the sense might be expressed in fewer words. (Letters: 280)

I hope when you have written a great deal more you will be equal to scratching out some of the past. — The scene with Mrs Mellish, I should condemn; it is prosy & nothing to the purpose — & indeed, the more you can find in your heart to curtail between Dawlish & Newton Priors, the better I think it will be. (Letters: 288)

In her works, Austen is able to transmit a large amount of information with very few words. Frequently, that information is not only textual, but has many more implications which only the attentive reader will grasp. This is one of those features of Austen, which is both a feature of her language and a resource, and that will make the difference between those readers who can grasp a deeper meaning and the others. If we concentrate only on the literal sense of the words and phrases on display mean, we will be missing many nuances that the author wants to convey through these expressions.

Austen's conciseness is intentional. It is not just a characteristic of her writing. We know that she went over his texts repeatedly until she gave them the desired form. We also know, from her letters, that she liked to play with words, to reflect on the meaning and use of certain expressions, and to use the terms that best conveyed her thoughts. Later we will talk about Austen's desire to use the exact word, but before reaching that

point, we will focus on her ability to condense messages of a greater or lesser complexity into just a few characters. And, to understand it more clearly, we will offer some examples.

Sometimes, this conciseness is a reflection of the author's intentionality not to pause more than necessary to explore a matter that, although it may be relevant to the development of the plot, does not require a profuse description. For example, at the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, in order to inform readers of the economic situation of the Dashwood ladies, the narrator tells us the story of a wealthy relative who could have indirectly contributed to the well-being of the women, but who instead, left all his assets to their stepbrother. In the middle of this summary, we find the following sentence:

The old gentleman died: his will was read, and like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure. (S&S: 2)

Three brief sentences that determine, in part, the future of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters. The brevity of the text, the conciseness and the tone of those words mark a new paragraph, a change of tack. The story could have followed a different path, but this will had decided that Mr. John Dashwood would live with ease, while Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters would be forced to change their lifestyle.

The same conciseness can be found when revealing the thoughts - undoubtedly, much more elaborate - of a character. With four sentences, the narrator shows the past, present and future of the protagonist in the mind of Lady Russell.

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. (P: 48)

Once again, a new chapter is about to begin. The purpose of a character will alter the future of another. When passing from paragraphs with more extensive phrases to this telegraphic style, the narrator highlights the importance of what is said and marks a turning point in the plot.

But this is not always the purpose of conciseness. It can also be used to create a quick contrast between different characters.

Mrs. Dashwood smiled, and said nothing. Marianne lifted up her eyes in astonishment, and Elinor conjectured that she might as well have held her tongue. (S&S: 133)

The conclusion of a scene in an agile and successful way. Three reactions in two lines. A visual and incisive language.

On other occasions, this laconism will correspond to the mood of the character described. For example, after several pages in which the agitation of Anne Elliot for a possible reunion with Captain Wentworth has been related in detail, this feared and longed for moment takes place and, as a result, Anne's confusion and uneasiness not only does not disappear but increases. And, in that context, we are told:

Mary talked, but she could not attend. She had seen him. They had met. They had been once more in the same room. (P: 49)

This brevity reflects the inner tension of the protagonist, the speed of her thoughts, the images that cross her mind and stir her spirit. Austen manages to evoke feelings without needing to describe them, as explained by Virginia Woolf: "Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears on the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there . . . something that expands in the reader's mind" (1966)

With a different tone, although continuing with the same purpose, it is the scene that is shown in the following excerpt. Emma discovers in a brusque and unexpected way, her great mistake in promoting the affection of Harriet for Mr. Elton. Recovered from the surprise, the young protagonist suffers when thinking of the pain that this news will cause her friend. How is this pain described?

The hair was curled, and the maid sent away, and Emma sat down to think and be miserable. (E: 118)

A few words, but more than enough for us to see Emma alone in her room, sad and repentant, anticipating the tears that Harriet will later shed. Austen does not need a long paragraph full of gloomy remorse. She displays the scene, and wait for us to do the rest.

As we are seeing, there are occasions when conciseness is much more effective than a long speech. In fact, brevity has the advantage of achieving the surprise effect. In a single glance, the reader captures an unexpected message. Again in *Emma*, we find an example of this resource. After years of waiting, Frank Churchill's visit seems imminent. Her father announces it joyfully, the whole town is glad of the news, Emma lets her imagination run wild. And, then, we come to chapter eighteen, which begins with the following sentence: "Mr. Frank Churchill did not come." (E: 127). And, immediately, comes the relevant explanations that justify this fact, but the news is already given and in a way as clear as sparing in words.

There are other reasons for Jane Austen to show her conciseness in different passages of her works. One of them, present with some frequency in the final part of the novels, is her desire not to over elaborate, once the tension has been resolved. In this way, the impression achieved does not lose its effectiveness or dilute with the following paragraphs. It has reached a turning point, the characters have resolved the crisis, and the issue is settled to make way for other matters. Such would be the case with Mr. Knightley's statement so unexpected by Emma. The misunderstanding is clarified, the happiness of both is shown and the scene closes with elegance and brevity:

Her way was clear, though not quite smooth.--She spoke then, on being so entreated.-- What did she say?--Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does. (E: 386)

Both in these cases and in those explained above, conciseness is part of the way in which the author decides to construct her work. Austen manages the narrative rhythms to achieve the various effects that she wants to provoke in the reader. Within her planning, she knows in which moments the narrator should stop to delve a situation or a character, and in which moments the pace should be accelerated, so as not to lose the attention of the reader. This care of the narrative structure is a trait that sets Austen apart from many of the writers of her time. "Whereas many Eighteenth-Century Novels of the nonepistolary kind are rather rambling, as if they are first drafts, Austen's published novels are more tautly constructed." (Oatley 20)

In all the examples exposed here the conciseness has corresponded to the narrator, but we could also find it in the lips of some characters. In those cases, it will respond to the essence of that person and his or her circumstances. That is to say, it will not be so much a resource to achieve an effect on readers as a way of expressing the feelings, and the personality of that protagonist. We will only offer here the text of Mr. Darcy's second statement, which is much shorter than the first, and also much more successful.

"If your feelings are still what they were last April, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject for ever." (P&P: 320)

In these words we can appreciate not only the conciseness with which deep feelings are expressed, but also the evolution of the character, who has changed his way of expressing himself throughout history.

Just as Elizabeth soon memorizes Darcy's letter through sheer dint of rereading and contemplation, so too has Darcy remembered Elizabeth's angry words verbatim through the months of their separation, and has found in them a fund for meditation and self-excoriation. In this period of mutual education, Elizabeth relinquishes the language of prejudice, Darcy, the language of pride. (Bloom 70)

#### b) *The exact word*

Only a few paragraphs earlier, we mentioned the desire of Jane Austen to use the exact word, that which best defines the reality she wants to name or describe, and that picks up as many nuances as possible. This is an attitude that we not only find explicit in her letters, but also in her works through some of her characters.

What becomes clear in reading Austen's oeuvre is her preoccupation with the potential for language to be misused. Misapplications of linguistic conventions by Austen's characters generate much of her ironic humour: a key instance occurs in Henry Tilney's debate with Catherine Morland about appropriate uses of the term 'nice'. (Todd 24)

The excerpt from the passage referred to in this last quote is offered below. It takes place when Catherine Morland defines the book *The Mysteries of Udolpho* as "nice". The young and innocent lady will have to endure the satirical correction of Henry Tilney, who will explain her the different uses that are given to that word, nullifying its meaning.

"I am sure," cried Catherine, "I did not mean to say anything wrong; but it is a nice book, and why should not I call it so?"

"Very true," said Henry, "and this is a very nice day, and we are taking a very nice walk, and you are two very nice young ladies. Oh! It is a very nice word indeed! It does for everything. Originally perhaps it was applied only to express neatness, propriety, delicacy, or refinement – people were nice in their dress, in their sentiments, or their choice. But now every commendation on every subject is comprised in that one word." (NA: 67)

And we also find a reflection on the right word on Mary Crawford's lips, when she says goodbye to Fanny and asks her to transmit her "compliments" to Edmund.

But you must give my compliments to him. Yes; I think it must be compliments. Is not there a something wanted, Miss Price, in our language--a something between compliments and-- and love--to suit the sort of friendly acquaintance we have had together? (MP: 256)

It is not always possible to describe feelings or other realities with words, and so it will be necessary to resort to other means to show that discordance. For example, to use the term that comes closest to what we want to say and then deny or refine it:

Sir Thomas was satisfied; too glad to be satisfied, perhaps. (MP: 177)

She had never seen him so agreeable--so near being agreeable. (MP: 363)

Or, simply, to point out the error without proposing another word that can replace the employed.

Marianne's preserver, as Margaret, with more elegance than precision, styled Willoughby, called at the cottage early the next morning to make his personal enquiries. (S&S: 39)

Sometimes we find nuances to the meaning of some words depending on their use. As for example the terms "never" and "nothing", employed in a colloquial way.

"Do you think the church itself never chosen, then?"

“Never is a black word. But yes, in the never of conversation, which means not very often, I do think it. For what is to be done in the church? Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing.”

“The nothing of conversation has its gradations, I hope, as well as the never. A clergyman cannot be high in state or fashion.” (MP: 81)

Or the word "manners", which can be used in varied contexts with different meanings.

“And with regard to their influencing public manners, Miss Crawford must not misunderstand me, or suppose I mean to call them the arbiters of good-breeding, the regulators of refinement and courtesy, the masters of the ceremonies of life. The manners I speak of might rather be called conduct, perhaps, the result of good principles.” (MP: 82)

In all these cases, Jane Austen's interest in language and its use is detected. An attitude of reflection that will directly affect her style.

Scholars as different in approach as Edward Said, Stuart Tave, and Vladimir Nabokov have all shown that Austen is a most deliberate, even persnickety, author—a polisher and refiner minutely attentive to individual word-choice in her fictions. One word—be it *Antigua*, *sensibility*, or *Thursday*—can bear immense interpretive pressure in a reading of her novels. (Barchas 8)

Let's observe now some examples in which we can appreciate the author's care in choosing words to describe a character or a situation. In the first extract we are introduced to Mr. Lucas, a character with a peculiar way of behaving, who the narrator wishes to define in a concrete way, but at the same time with brevity.

By nature inoffensive, friendly, and obliging, his presentation at St. James's had made him **courteous**. (P&P: 14)

This is an example that would also have served us in the previous paragraphs, in which we talked about conciseness. The word "courteous" perfectly defines the attitude of this character throughout the story. Not only is he kind, polite, cordial ... But courteous, with the proper connotations of this word. That is, its relationship with the court, the nobility, the people of the highest society and rank. A recurring theme for Mr. Lucas, who longs to forget his past related to trade, and reach a much higher position.

In the same way that we said that Austen's concision may go unnoticed by some readers, and that this will make the difference between one and the other, we can add that something similar will happen with the precision of her vocabulary. The paragraphs of these novels have many examples in which the most predictable term is not used, but a different one, which is closer to reality.

But Mrs. Bennet, who had **calculated** on her daughters remaining at Netherfield till the following Tuesday, which would exactly finish Jane's week, **could not bring herself to receive them with pleasure before**. (P&P: 51)

First, we will establish the situation: a mother whose two eldest daughters are staying with a neighboring family, and who expects them to return on a certain date, but that, to her surprise, come back home earlier than expected. Now, we will analyze how this situation is described: the first surprise is found in the verb "calculated". The logical thing would have been to use "expected", or some synonym. But Mrs. Bennet had everything planned for her daughter Jane to stay as long as possible in Netherfield. So the reality is not that she expected them to return on a specific day, but that she had calculated that it would be like that. And for this reason, she is not able to receive them with pleasure, since they have upset their plans.

The use of the right words can add more drama to a situation, highlighting emotions, creating contrasts, enhancing an idea by repeating it in different ways, etc. The wide range of vocabulary, the accuracy in choosing the precise terms and the ability to put them in the right place allow this author to draw very detailed scenes without needing to abuse descriptions.

The **rapture** of Lydia on this occasion, her **adoration** of Mrs. Forster, the **delight** of Mrs. Bennet, and the **mortification** of Kitty, are scarcely to be described. Wholly **inattentive** to her sister's feelings, Lydia flew about the house in **restless ecstasy**, calling for everyone's congratulations, and **laughing and talking** with more **violence** than ever; whilst the **luckless** Kitty continued in the parlour **repined at her fate** in terms as **unreasonable** as her accent was **peevish**. (P&P: 201)

In just a few lines, Austen manages to show a situation that readers can recreate in their mind without effort. It is almost impossible not to imagine Lydia jumping and dancing around the house, filling it with her crazy laughs and her excessive exclamations, while Kitty laments and cries over her bad luck.

The narrator also manages to show the attitude of some characters by choosing the terms that he will use frequently when talking about them. In this way, an image of that protagonist is created without the need to describe him or her.

They were not the only objects of **Mr. Collins's admiration**. The hall, the dining-room, and all its furniture, were **examined and praised**; and his **commendation of everything** would have touched Mrs. Bennet's heart, but for the mortifying supposition of his viewing it all as his own future property. The dinner too in its turn was **highly admired**; and he **begged** to know to which of his fair cousins the **excellency** of its cooking was owing (...). He **begged pardon for having displeased her**. In a softened

tone she declared herself not at all offended; but **he continued to apologise for about a quarter of an hour.** (P&P: 57)

Mr. Collins's servile and overly humble attitude is conveyed through keywords, which show his tendency to praise or apologize in an exaggerated manner.

There are many occasions in which this author changes the meaning of a paragraph with a single word. Usually, these determining words refer to the attitude of a character.

Elizabeth could but just **affect** concern in missing him; she really rejoiced at it. Colonel Fitzwilliam was no longer an object; she could think only of her letter. (P&P: 184)

The rest of the evening passed with the **appearance**, on his side, of usual cheerfulness, but with no further attempt to distinguish Elizabeth. (P&P: 206)

He attended them to the last, and left them only at the door of their own house, when he knew them to be going to dinner, and therefore **pretended** to be waited for elsewhere. (MP: 367)

In this brief and simple way, Austen manages to mark the difference between appearances and reality, and establish a contrast between social behavior and the true feelings of people. This characteristic feature of her style acquires greater significance when we consider the habits of their socio-cultural context, in which manners were so relevant, although they did not always correspond with the feelings.

By correctly choosing the word that best defines a reality, the author is able to contrast different attitudes in just one line.

Bingley was ready, Georgiana was eager, and Darcy determined, to be pleased. (P&P: 227)

Three characters, three different stories and three ways of dealing with a situation summarized in three adjectives that form a scale of intensity.

A single word may be enough to create a comical effect in a sentence that would otherwise have been lacking it. For example, there are many moments within *Northanger Abbey* in which the narrator describes the ruses of Isabella Thorpe, who manages to deceive Catherine through lies and swearing. So, when he wants to show a situation where those resources are not enough to hide the truth, the narrator just needs to add a word to make this fact clear.

Such a strain of shallow artifice could not impose **even** upon Catherine. (NA: 135)

This comical effect can also be achieved when that determining word contrasts in an exaggerated way with the reality known by the reader. As happens when Mrs. John Dashwood tries hard to convince her husband that he should not use his money to help his sisters. This couple are very wealthy, but even so, she uses exaggerated terms that show her greed and selfishness.

To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy would be **impoverishing** him to the most dreadful degree. (S&S: 6)

### c) *Repetition of key words*

One of the basic rules of literary stylistic is that repetitions of words, or forms derived from the same term, should be avoided within the same sentence or paragraph. However, it is not uncommon for this or other rules to be transgressed to achieve a certain effect.

In Austen's works we find examples in which the author highlights a trait of a character's personality, and, simultaneously, reflects the contrast with the attitude of others. For example, in the following excerpt we can observe how the narrator insists on Elinor's ability to overcome her pain, and, without needing to make any reference, he makes evident Marianne's unwillingness to act in the same way.

Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she **could** struggle, she **could** exert herself. She **could** consult with her brother, **could** receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and **could** strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance. (S&S: 5)

The repetition of a word also serves to show the surprise of a character before an unexpected event.

As she had heard no carriage, she thought it not unlikely to be Lady Catherine, and under that apprehension was putting away her half-finished letter that she might escape all impertinent questions, when the door opened, and, to her very great surprise, **Mr. Darcy**, and **Mr. Darcy** only, entered the room. (P&P: 155)

By naming the gentleman who enters the room twice in a row, the narrator introduces us into Lizzy's head to show her reaction without needing to describe it.

Another of the most common effects due to the repeated use of a word is to accentuate its meaning and the feelings it provokes. Whether something disturbing, like the imminence of the outcome of Marianne and Willoughby's relationship.

A **short**, a very **short** time however must now decide what Willoughby's intentions were. (S&S: 135)

Or something much more inoffensive, such as the characteristics of Mrs. Jennings' house in London, where she will welcome Elinor and Marianne during her visit.

The house was **handsome**, and **handsomely** fitted up, and the young ladies were immediately put in possession of a very comfortable apartment. (S&S: 136)

*d) Avoiding common expressions*

In some paragraphs above we have included an extract from *Northanger Abbey* in which Henry Tilney complains about the excessive use of the adjective "nice". Along the same lines is Marianne's statement, offered below, in which she shows her rejection of certain expressions used by her interlocutors and which she considers vulgar and impoverishing..

"That is an expression, Sir John," said Marianne, warmly, "which I particularly dislike. I abhor every common-place phrase by which wit is intended; and 'setting one's cap at a man,' or 'making a conquest,' are the most odious of all. Their tendency is gross and illiberal; and if their construction could ever be deemed clever, time has long ago destroyed all its ingenuity." (S&S: 38)

Both in one case and in the other, we seem to hear the voice of the author who speaks to us through her characters to defend the correct use of language. We will return to this subject later. Let's see now an example related to Marianne's relief, featuring Mary Crawford and her sister.

"We must leave him to himself, I believe. Talking does no good. He will be **taken in** at last."

"But I would not have him **taken in**; I would not have him **duped**; I would have it all fair and honourable." (MP: 40)

"Taken in", "duped", common ways of referring to the path that leads a person to marriage. By putting them in the mouth of one of her characters, Austen points out the negative connotations of these frequent terms, which may go unnoticed by some of the people who use them.

In a letter dated on September 28, 1814, Austen comments to her niece Anne one of the errors she has found in the manuscript she had sent her. It is about the employment of an old and much used expression, which she recommends her to avoid.

Devereux Forester's being ruined by his Vanity is extremely good; but I wish you would not let him plunge into a "vortex of Dissipation". I do not object to the Thing, but I cannot bear the expression it is such thorough novel slang — and so old, that I dare say Adam met with it in the first novel he opened. (Letters: 289)

Metaphors, phrases, comparisons or other types of resources that could be original at some point, but that have aged and lost their value through use. To the point of causing the opposite effect that which is desired.

Jane Austen had this very present in her mind and it is clearly reflected in her works. Her characters will do their best not to commit this error, even if it implies that they recognize themselves as incapable of expressing properly.

"I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning." (S&S: 83)

Or, if they finally have to resort to one of those expressions, they will introduce them with an apology.

"When the first of hers reached me (as it immediately did, for I was in town the whole time,) what I felt is— in the common phrase, not to be expressed; in a more simple one—perhaps too simple to raise any emotion— my feelings were very, very painful.—Every line, every word was—in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid—a dagger to my heart." (S&S: 281)

Moreover, in the event that one of the protagonists commits this "crime", there will be another interlocutor who shows the inadequacy of such behavior. This is how Mrs. Gardiner reacts when Elizabeth describes Mr. Bingley's attitude towards Jane as "violently in love".

"But that expression of "violently in love" is so hackneyed, so doubtful, so indefinite, that it gives me very little idea. It is as often applied to feelings which arise from a half-hour's acquaintance, as to a real, strong attachment. Pray, how violent was Mr. Bingley's love?" (P&P: 124)

And Emma also acts in the same way, when Mrs. Elton describes the county of Surry (sic) as "the garden of England".

"Yes; but we must not rest our claims on that distinction. Many counties, I believe, are called the garden of England, as well as Surry." (E: 242)

There is also the possibility that, in some cases, it is considered appropriate to use one of these expressions. But, even so, it should be noted that it is repetitive; as Mary Bennet does when evaluating the first letter of Mr. Collins.

"The idea of the olive-branch perhaps is not wholly new, yet I think it is well expressed." (P&P: 56)

These worn-out phrases have lost part of their original meaning, and, because of that, they can be used as a resource to express a judgment without having to compromise one's opinion.

Emma would not allow herself entirely to form an opinion of the lady, and on no account to give one, beyond the nothing-meaning terms of being "elegantly dressed, and very pleasing." (E: 239)

Despite everything said so far, Jane Austen shows off her wit and her taste for playing with words and expressions, resorting to some of these phrases, but giving them a personal touch.

But Miss Frances married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a lieutenant of marines, without education, fortune, or connexions, did it very thoroughly. (MP: 2)

e) *Trios*

We are going to focus now on a resource widely used by this author in all her works, which has a certain relationship with what we have just commented on her eagerness to use the exact word. If the use of a successful term can confer a greater strength or meaning to a paragraph, a well constructed succession of words will have a greater effect. From what we have seen in our study of Austen's novels, this writer has a clear tendency to form trios, be it nouns, adjectives, adverbs or different types of syntagmas. The effects achieved through this resource will vary depending on the words used and their context, but in all cases the idea expressed is emphasized and the intensity of the tone is increased.

Sometimes, these trios serve to exemplify an idea expressed in a general way.

They attacked him in various ways--with barefaced questions, ingenious suppositions, and distant surmises. (P&P: 6)

The little visitor meanwhile was as unhappy as possible. Afraid of everybody, ashamed of herself, and longing for the home she had left. (MP: 10)

When adjectives are linked, it is not strange that they are preceded by an adverb that indicates the increasing intensity of that description.

He was quite young, wonderfully handsome, extremely agreeable. (P&P: 6)

And entered a room splendidly lit up, quite full of company, and insufferably hot. (S&S: 149)

Through a triple negation, it is possible to create a global effect that goes far beyond what is explicit in that phrase.

She had no conversation, no style, no beauty. (P&P: 29)

When reading these words, the sensation perceived by the readers is that this lady has nothing to recommend her. Not only does she lack topics of conversation, style or beauty, it is understood that she lacks any positive quality that could make her pleasant. The same occurs in the following example, in which the feelings of loneliness and lack of resources are intensified far beyond the literality of the expressions employed.

No aunt, no officers, no news could be sought after. (P&P: 78)

And, in a positive sense, by using three affirmative sentences with the same structure, an impression that transcends the text is also transmitted.

His present pursuit could not make him forget that Elizabeth had been the first to excite and to deserve his attention, the first to listen and to pity, the first to be admired. (P&P: 133)

By repeating "the first" three times, this quality is accentuated eclipsing the following words in each sentence. Thus, the reader will grasp the idea of Elizabeth being "the first". What this primacy corresponds to is secondary.

These trios are also a way of exercising the conciseness, since they allow the author to summarize a process in just three short steps.

Hastened away with eager steps and a beating heart to pay her visit, explain her conduct, and be forgiven. (NA: 56)

Such is Austen's taste for this resource and its effectiveness, that she does not hesitate to use it twice in the same paragraph, multiplying the effects of this strategy.

Elizabeth continued her walk alone, crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise. (P&P: 27)

There are many more examples that we are not going to set down so as not to explore unnecessarily a point which we think has been sufficiently clarified already. We are just going to answer the question that any reader could ask. Why three elements? Why not another number?

The answer is found in everyday experiences. Three is usually a recurring number to quantify something complete. "Third time lucky, all good things come in threes, counting till three." Without the need to enter into symbols or conjunctures, it is easy to understand that the number one implies novelty, something that has never been done before; what follows the absence. Two marks the first repetition, the second step, something that has begun to be learned but still needs to be practiced. Three is the first 'safe' number.

With the first term, the author offers an idea; with the second, she highlights it; with the third, she consolidates it and achieves an effect of forcefulness and truthfulness that "hits" the reader. Continuing the series may be counter-productive in some cases. A list that is too long could be tiring or seem exaggerated, lacking in objectivity.

The next example will serve to introduce the following resource that we will comment on.

To the rest of the family they paid little attention; avoiding Mrs. Bennet as much as possible, saying not much to Elizabeth, and nothing at all to the others. (P&P: 76)

This extract corresponds to those cases in which a situation is exposed in a general way and then it is specified with three attitudes. We can also see that in this example a gradation is established: "as much as", "not much", "nothing at all". This is the resource that we are going to analyze in the following paragraphs.

### f) Gradation of adjectives

We have already discussed the effects of creating contrasts between characters. We will analyse here how the author shows these contrasts between the attitudes of different people, or of the same person either at different times, or comparing the possible with the real. And to achieve this, it resorts to gradations of different types.

Elizabeth would not quit her at all, till late in the evening (...), when it seemed to her rather right than pleasant that she should go downstairs herself. (P&P: 31)

"Rather right than pleasant". Through this comparison, the feelings of the character are defined with greater accuracy, since a possible reason for her behavior is shown and it is denied, confronting it with the real motive. A similar effect is achieved with the following structure.

And though more astonished than gratified herself by this effect of her charms. (P&P: 78)

The interest with which she thus anticipated the party, was soon afterwards increased, more powerfully than pleasantly, by her hearing that the Miss Steeles were also to be at it. (S&S: 198)

The narrator puts in balance two feelings, one which would be expected in that situation and the other which the protagonist really harbours. The gradation established between them increases the intensity of the superior.

In other cases, one of the feelings is not denied -as is the case in the previous ones- but they are simply shown in their proper measure.

Colonel Brandon, who, always glad to be where the Miss Dashwoods were, received his eager civilities with some surprise, but much more pleasure. (S&S: 198)

When contrasting two attitudes, establishing a gradation between them, the author increases the effect and, more than a comparison, what is produced is an intensification of the critical tone of that phrase.

Miss Bingley was uncivil to her, and more teasing than usual to himself. (P&P: 52)

The same thing happens in the next examples, which, at first glance, might seem like comparisons, but which are just one resource to highlight the last term.

The evening conversation, when they were all assembled, had lost much of its animation, and almost all its sense by the absence of Jane and Elizabeth. (P&P: 52)

After some time spent in saying little or doing less, Lady Middleton sat down to Cassino. (S&S: 149)

This is not always the case and it may happen that, certainly, a gradation between the different elements of the phrase is created, although highlighting especially the conclusion.

This event, while it raised the spirits of Elinor, restored to those of her sister all, and more than all, their former agitation. (S&S: 143)

These comparisons do not always lead to the superiority or inferiority of one of the expressions, which will be emphasized by the narrator. An equal relation can be established, highlighting one of the elements by putting it at the level that readers will understand as logical and predictable..

The news was as disagreeable to Fanny as it had been unexpected. (MP: 20)

In this case, the news that Fanny will leave Mansfield Park to settle with Mrs. Norris is something that readers will capture as highly unexpected by the young woman. Therefore, by equating both "disagreeable" and "unexpected", the protagonist's rejection of this change is emphasized, without the need to include any adverb of quantity before the first adjective.

To finish, let's see two examples in which a contrast is established using the same word, but preceded by the adverb "more".

Elinor was pleased that he had called; and still more pleased that she had missed him. (S&S: 198)

She felt Edmund's kindness with all, and more than all, the sensibility which he, unsuspecting of her fond attachment, could be aware of. (MP: 70)

In the first example, the purpose of the comparison would again be to emphasize the second part of the sentence. While in the second, the purpose of the narrator is to show the intensity of a feeling by resorting to an impossible comparison, since there is no quantity corresponding to "more than all".

### g) Parallelisms

In this section we will study some examples of a different resource, although, on occasions, it achieves an effect similar to the gradations that we have just explained. It consists of creating parallels within the same sentence or paragraph, repeating some elements of the preceding one, with certain changes in the structure. The purpose of this resource may vary. The most frequent, at least in Austen's novels, is to create a contrast, for example, between the different attitudes of a person to the same event.

Anne **found it most natural to** take her almost daily walk to Lady Russell's, and keep out of the way till all was over; when she **found it most natural to** be sorry that she had missed the opportunity of seeing them. (P: 69)

Or to different facts, but establishing a relation that shows the consistency between those two opposing behaviours.

But **in sorrow** she must be equally carried away by her fancy, and **as far beyond consolation as in pleasure she was beyond alloy**. (S&S: 6)



The parallelism is an effective resource to compare two different aspects of the same person and, at the same time, to produce in the reader the feeling that both are linked or, at least, there is some continuity between them.

Mrs. Ferrars was a little, thin woman, upright, **even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness, in her aspect.** (S&S: 200)

A contrast can also be created by using the same subject and showing it while he or she performs two supposedly incompatible behaviors.

Her fingers were mechanically at work, proceeding for half an hour together, equally **without error, and without consciousness.** (P: 111)

The effect achieved with this repetition of the same structure is a slight surprise, since the first sentence does not foresee the second; At the same time, an attitude that readers will understand immediately is transmitted in a visual way.

On other occasions, a contrast that reflects the evolution of the protagonist's thoughts is created. When something good is depicted as impossible, a lesser evil is chosen.

And as she could not even **wish him** successful, she heartily **wished him** indifferent. (S&S: 42)

And, continuing with the impossible, through these parallels the sense of longing for something that can not be achieved is intensified, matching its strength to the feeling of satisfaction that would bring its achievement.

**Nothing could be more** impossible than to answer such a question, **though nothing could be more** agreeable than to have it asked. (MP: 259)

The author sometimes resorts to this repetition of structures or words to emphasize an idea and increase the effect that she wants to show through it. For example, as it can be seen in the following excerpt, the narrator of *Sense and Sensibility* stresses Marianne's state of excitement by offering two analogous images that show her nervousness.

Elinor began her letter directly, while Marianne, **too restless for employment, too anxious for conversation,** walked from one window to the other, or sat down by the fire in melancholy meditation. (S&S: 146)

But parallels are not only used to create contrasts or intensify a sensation. As we will see in the following text, the repetition of a structure corresponds to a process through which the narrator offers us the information in a gradual way. First with an abstract phrase and then with something more concrete.

**He had said enough** to shake the experience of eighteen. **He had said enough** to give Fanny some happier feelings than she had lately known. (MP: 240)

Although it can also be done the other way around; first two concrete ideas are shown and then some reference is made to the original reason.

**She spoke** from the instinctive wish of delaying shame; **she spoke** with a resolution which sprung from despair, for **she spoke** what she did not, could not believe herself. (MP: 393)

#### **h) Maxims**

To finish this chapter, we will now refer to another strategy that Austen frequently uses in all her works, the use of maxims.

This rhetorical figure, which consists on expressing a general thought or truth in a brief and concise manner, is very much in keeping with the author's literary style, the tone of her works and the interventions of the narrator and some characters. Therefore, it is not surprising the abundance of examples that we find in these novels.

Using this resource can cause several effects on the reader. On the one hand, these maxims serve to summarize the attitude or thinking of one of the characters or the narrator. Also, to conclude an issue that has been debated. With some frequency, these are phrases that are easy to remember because of their brevity and because of the force of the idea they convey. When these aphorisms are tinged with irony, a comical or surprising effect can be achieved in the reader. Thanks to their conciseness, they accelerate the narrative rhythm and make reading more enjoyable. They can be used to create contrasts between the words and attitudes of different characters. They allude to situations known to the reader, thus increasing the sense of reality.

A good maxim is self-explanatory, so we will limit ourselves to a simple classification, according to the theme of these sentences, and to transcribe some examples extracted from all the novels we are analyzing. As it can be seen in these texts, some of the sentences are expressed in the form of dialogue, but this does not alter their meaning or the effects they produce in the audience.

- Maxims related to love and marriage:

In nine cases out of ten a woman had better show more affection than she feels. (P&P: 17)

To be sure, you knew no actual good of me--but nobody thinks of that when they fall in love. (P&P: 333)

Husbands and wives generally understand when opposition will be vain. (P: 94)

- All the privilege I claim for my own sex (...), is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone. (P: 288)
- If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. (E: 385)
- Friendship is certainly the finest balm for the pangs of disappointed love. (NA: 18)
- Maxims regarding attitudes and the general behaviour of people:
- Better be without sense, than misapply it as you do. (E: 56)
- There are people, who the more you do for them, the less they will do for themselves. (E: 81)
- One half of the world cannot understand the pleasures of the other. (E: 72)
- I wish as well as every body else to be perfectly happy; but, like every body else it must be in my own way. Greatness will not make me so. (S&S: 77)
- Shyness is only the effect of a sense of inferiority in some way or other. (S&S: 81)
- Those who see quickly, will resolve quickly, and act quickly. (MP: 54)
- Selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, because there is no hope of a cure. (MP: 60)
- Nobody minds having what is too good for them. (MP: 421)
- Maxims regarding situations and circumstances.
- The distance is nothing when one has a motive. (P&P: 27)
- Handsome young men must have something to live on as well as the plain. (P&P: 132)
- There are some situations of the human mind in which good sense has very little power. (NA: 149)
- A young party is always provided with a shady lane. (MP: 62)
- In these great places the gardeners are the only people who can go where they like. (MP: 81)
- When people are waiting, they are bad judges of time, and every half minute seems like five. (MP: 91)

### III. CONCLUSION

As it has been explained, through the abundant examples offered, the use of language in Austen's works is marked by conciseness and precision, using as few words as possible and choosing the term that best expresses the situation that is described.

To achieve this goal, a demanding task of revision of the texts is necessary, which allows the author to eliminate the superfluous, replace the words that do not fit perfectly and make all the adjustments she deems appropriate. The testimonies that have reached us about Austen's work as a writer confirm that this author reviewed her writings repeatedly, until arriving at the definitive version. On occasion, this work lasted more than ten years and led to a gender change. Such is the case of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, which went from being epistolary novels to the format we know today.

However, this desire of Jane Austen to review her work and choose the words that she considered more appropriate, far from complicating her texts made them easier. The conciseness and precision that characterize these novels allow the reader agile and fluent reading, although they also require more attention from the readers in order to capture a greater number of nuances and connotations. The apparent simplicity of Austen's literary style hides a complexity that is only discovered when rereading her works, analyzing them paragraph by paragraph.

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