ABSTRACT

AGEISM IN THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

This project seeks to examine displays of ageism within Jane Austen’s six core novels. Ageism is defined as prejudice and discrimination against an individual based upon age. First, I studied a specific character who demonstrates ageism, Emma Woodhouse. The possession of wealth blinds her to her obligations towards the elderly Mrs. Bates and singlewoman Miss Bates, while also enabling her father’s hypochondria via benign ageism. Secondly, I examine Jane Austen’s commentary (through her narration) on older men and older women. During these assessments, I found that ageist attitudes come in two varieties in the novels of Jane Austen: characters who are overtly ageist are to be seen as erring in judgment (no matter how benign the behavior), while Austen’s use of ageist stereotypes serves to promote the independence of her heroines by weakening their figures of authority.

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AGEISM IN THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

by

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To my parents for their love and support.
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Uncovering the issue of ageism within the works of fiction can be a difficult task, as demonstrations of negative bias against individuals based upon age receive less critique than instances of sexism and racism. At first, one can view the characters as one would participants in a study, taking clues from interpersonal encounters within the text. Looking beyond the presented characterization questions arise focusing upon the author. How does the author present characters of differing age? Does their characterization reflect that society’s beliefs concerning aging? Might these opinions arise from their personal background, or are they simply a plot-sensitive attribute? One must take into consideration these factors in determining the presence and source of ageist prejudice.

For this study, I shall be examining the six novels of Jane Austen. A resident of several southern counties in England, she produced her writing during the 1810s. These works center upon the lives of young ladies in the gentry, maturing and entering society. It is the thoughts and opinions of these characters that the reader is privy to, which shall be investigated for traces of ageism. They consist of:

- Catherine Morland, of *Northanger Abbey*
- Elizabeth Bennet, of *Pride and Prejudice*
- Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, of *Sense and Sensibility*
- Fanny Price, of *Mansfield Park*
- Emma Woodhouse, of *Emma*
- Anne Elliot, of *Persuasion*
As a group, I refer to them as “the heroines.” Over the course of the novels, they encounter not only possible love interests, but also mature adults (male and female) who are already ensconced in polite society. It is the association that unfolds between the heroines and these characters older than themselves that offers a glimpse into intergenerational relationships in the British Regency period. Collecting these data is a two-fold process: there will be instances of character-to-character interaction analyzed, while others shall be examples of Austen’s narration concerning the ladies and gentlemen. With this information, I hope to show that while certain of her characters are overtly ageist, her depiction of flawed older characters is tied to the necessity of weakening power structures to facilitate the agency of her heroines.

The definition of ageism, from Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, is “prejudice and discrimination against a particular age group and especially the elderly.” When meeting and interacting with others, individuals are prone to make judgments based upon observable variables. The most common are a person’s sex, race and age. At their most biased, observations become prejudice, which may lead to discrimination. Erdman B. Palmore further defines these distinct facets as follows:

“Prejudice against an age group” is a negative stereotype about that group (such as the belief that most old people are senile), or a negative attitude based upon a stereotype (such as the feeling that old age is usually the worst part of life). “Discrimination against an age group” is the inappropriate negative treatment of members of that age group (such as compulsory retirement). (4)

The term “ageism” was formally adopted in the 1960s due to studies concerning the elderly conducted by Robert Neil Butler, gerontologist and founder of the
National Institute on Aging. Butler was strongly influenced by the movements addressing racism and sexism, using their classification of prejudice and discrimination as a model for his analysis. For all the negative aspects of ageism, however, there are instances of positive ageism, when a group is given precedence due to their age. These are not as common, and proceed from a respect for the aged individual, or the age group as a whole. For this study, I concur with this definition and its three aspects: prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Holding prejudice and discriminating against an individual based solely upon age is a negative trait, as it eliminates opportunity for a multigenerational community to learn from and care for each member in a respectful manner.

One can expect to be challenged from different angles as one progresses through the life cycle. From youth to adulthood to old age, there may be friction between age groups as each strives to gain or maintain prestige. In contrast, one’s inclusion into a racial group is based on genetic inheritance, and one’s gender is established early in development, making these variables (and the potential prejudice leveled against an individual) set permanently.

What can occur, unfortunately, is a layering of prejudices. Should an individual belong to more than one unfavorable division of society, he or she may face increased difficulties. A sample scenario centers on the circumstances of older women: victims of both sexism and ageism, they can be judged further by their ethnicity or economic conditions. John Macnicol acknowledges this practice in his book, *Age Discrimination: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis*:

“[A]ge acts as an accelerator of class, gender and ethnic disadvantage… Prevailing images of beauty and desirability tend to be those of young women; society is more tolerant of aging in men, who are ‘allowed’ to age, where women are not” (25). The complexity of this layering can be witnessed in Austen’s works, as the
heroines encounter the disadvantaged and those in power and strives to earn their own place in society.

As mentioned before, Jane Austen’s novels were published during the beginning of England’s Regency period, with Sense and Sensibility released in 1811. Three works followed: Pride and Prejudice in 1813, Mansfield Park in 1814, and Emma in 1815. Following her death in 1817, her final work, Persuasion, and her first creation, the previously unreleased Northanger Abbey, were both given to the publishers. The subjects of her novels were drawn from her observations of a civilized world—gentlemen and their families, living in the countryside. Daniel Pool suggests that Austen focused upon members of a financially advantaged social class because the possession of wealth allowed them to pursue and strengthen interpersonal relationships as a primary pastime: “It is from the gentry from whom Jane Austen draws most of her characters… they do not work themselves but oversee the work of others and spend their time plotting how to marry off their children, paying calls or seeking to elevate their social standing” (164). How these members of the gentry respond to individuals, whether at, above or below their own station, forms the crux of Austen’s works; the obligation to be of service, to one’s family and community, held the utmost importance. For the heroines in their mid-teens or early twenties, at the age to be presented as adults into formal society, learning social niceties and demonstrating them appropriately was indicative of their good breeding, of their family’s background. David Monaghan notes the significance of manners in his book Jane Austen in a Social Context:

Being a very formal society, eighteenth-century England placed tremendous emphasis on the moral implications of the individual’s polite performance…Therefore, Jane Austen’s decision to deal with
the minutiae of her characters’ social lives…would not have seemed to her contemporaries to reflect any intention of escaping social reality. On the contrary, they would have recognized that she was directly encountering the kind of moral questions that had to be answered if a society based on a code of duty and obligation to others was to flourish. (2-3)

In a culture that placed such weight on proper decorum, an individual’s inappropriate social performance was likely to draw censure. For example, once a child reached adulthood, he or she would be expected to act sensibly and uphold their responsibilities. So when the adults in Austen’s novels display foolish or selfish behavior, the heroines are often embarrassed for them, aware of what others in their community might say. Austen’s younger characters have their share of flaws also, but there may be another reason for giving such a wide variety to the older characters.

The politics of age in the Regency period are complicated by the established power structures that often times pulled financial issues out of the hands of those without power. Character flaws exhibited by the family patriarchs could be construed as critiques towards the practice of strict primogeniture, in which property and wealth passed to the closest male relation, with any more suitable female candidates disregarded. Matriarchs also promoted the system by encouraging girls to pursue the wealthiest bachelor regardless of personal feelings, or by warding them away and protecting their own wealth. Therefore, interactions between Austen’s older characters and her heroines will be analyzed for traces of criticism against the social system, as the failings of those with authority lead to greater autonomy for those beneath them.
Ageism in Austen’s novels will be approached based on a couple of factors. As I suspect that the attribution of negative traits to older characters is intended to weaken the in-story power structure, I plan to examine those characters for flaws and analyze their weaknesses and strengths. Due to the importance placed on civil interactions during this time period, covert observations from the heroines or gleaned from Austen’s characterization will be critical evidence. Secondly, characters that display the three aspects of ageism will be analyzed in terms of behavior, possible motivations and the consequences their choices earned them. A vital component of their characterization is whether they are able to revise their opinions over the course of the novel, or if they remain static throughout.

Given the breadth of characterization covered in six distinct novels, I have divided this study into three chapters: the first will follow a single character, Emma Woodhouse, from the novel bearing her name. Tracing her activity around Highbury, one can distinguish ageist beliefs throughout her social interactions. The largest marker is her negative perception of the unmarried Miss Bates, who serves as an agent of communication (to a grand degree) for the village. Emma’s disdain deepens due to Miss Bates’s ties to Jane Fairfax, an agemate of Emma’s who is viewed as an accomplished rival. Emma’s behavior also marks positive ageism towards her father; her devotion to him and indulgence of his weak constitution overshadows her own hopes for the future. With these flaws in mind, Austen is careful to show Emma’s personal growth over the course of the novel. From her fair treatment of Mr. Knightley, someone seventeen years her senior, to her change of heart after being shown the harm her immature behavior has had on her community, she becomes conscious of social inequality and seeks to make amends. The character of Emma Woodhouse shows that both positive and
negative ageism can distort perception and damage interpersonal relationships, and demonstrates the effort needed to revise these opinions.

The second chapter examines Austen’s older gentlemen, and the advantages and disadvantages being at the top of the social hierarchy brings to them. In most cases, these men are owners of large estates; each of the various heroines draws her status from them or at least makes use of their resources. Austen seeks to dispel the invincible air that might surround the gentlemen through creating their character flaws. Some are well-meaning but inept socially; others are more aware of their power but are still inhibited by one issue or other. The heroines must face the repercussions from the patriarch’s actions, whether they arise from irresponsibility, foolishness, or other personal failings. In rare cases, there are exceedingly capable gentlemen presented, either as suitors or parties interested in the heroines’ welfare. They serve as premier examples of what their counterparts should be like. Austen strengthens her heroines by distributing these flaws to the gentlemen, granting them the autonomy needed to make decisions and carry the novel’s plot.

Chapter 3 examines the role of older women in Austen’s works. The mothers and mentors of the heroines occupy more tenuous social positions than their male counterparts; indeed, their social arrangements are influenced by the men in their lives. While some characters are wealthy in their own right, insuring their comfort regardless of parent or spouse, others must face drastic changes when their status shifts. Affluent or impoverished, women possessing negative traits such as haughtiness, incivility and ignorance are universally frowned upon. The heroines look to older women acquainted with the world for guidance, only to find them inadequate. Indeed, the strongest criticism towards the heroines comes from women in power, who prove themselves unused to being challenged. The
multitude of foolish and antagonistic women in Austen’s novels makes finding a serious, competent role model significant for the heroines. The older women, with their excesses and deficiencies, serve as prompts for moderation and control, both for the reader and for the heroines.

The resources used for this project centered upon the areas of Jane Austen herself, the British Regency and ageism. Throughout the quotations drawn from Austen’s novels, I have taken the liberty of reducing the book titles to their initials. The exceptions will be quotes from the novel *Emma*, due to the brevity of the title. Current research on ageism centers upon the elderly. Examiners raise questions concerning health care, compulsory retirement, elder abuse and neglect and poverty. The “double jeopardy” of sexism and ageism is a popular topic, as researchers study the lives and troubles of older women. Evelyn R. Rosenthal’s collection of essays, *Women, Ageing and Ageism*, studies victims of multiple prejudices in such a manner. Ageist beliefs arise because the offending party does not associate themselves with older individuals—they are young and healthy, and lack sympathy for those who have gone through life changes they have yet to experience. This cloistered view can be seen in characters like Emma Woodhouse and Marianne Dashwood. Other characters rebel against their elders in pursuit of their own pleasure, disregarding propriety. Ageist research into Austen’s novels is not common. Given that the books’ plots are carried by women, theorists focus upon the heroines and female characters. Audrey Hawkridge’s *Jane and her Gentlemen: Jane Austen and the Men in Her Life and Novels* is a rare source in examining the male interactions in the novels. Critical texts examining the works and their historical context are also popular. David Monaghan’s analyses of social structure were vital in distinguishing why Austen would weaken the older cast to elevate her heroines. Resources that explain facets of everyday life in the regency
Era provided insight on matters such as what effect the entailment of an estate could have upon its occupants,

Ascertainment of an author’s intentions is difficult, especially one who lived and produced works roughly two centuries ago. I hold that Jane Austen gave her characters, young and old, memorable flaws—ones the reader can discuss and theorize about. Ageist characters are not commended or rewarded for their beliefs—they are seen as lacking proper respect for their elders and face correction over the course of the work. Austen’s depiction of older characters was a situational necessity for a story led by the actions of a young woman in the British Regency. The lack of a strong female role model forces the heroine to discern her own course of action, while the lack of a strong patriarchal figure gives her the freedom to act upon it. While there are instances of overt ageism performed by characters towards others, Austen’s motive for giving flaws to her older characters was to subvert traditional power structures in order to grant her heroines agency.
CHAPTER 2: MISS WOODHOUSE’S STRONG OPINIONS

Out of Jane Austen’s central heroines, the character of Emma Woodhouse is the most prosperous and the most overtly ageist. Her frail father owns the estate of Hartfield, giving her a fortune of 30,000 pounds; with her mother deceased and her sole sibling married and living in London, Emma has had the run of the household for years. This early sovereignty leads the heroine to develop a firm conviction in the rightness of her beliefs and actions, as well as to impose distance between herself and the humble community. Inside her family, she is a direct enabler of her father’s hypochondria, her subservience demonstrating how positive ageism can be as damaging as negative ageism. Outside the home, she is tempted to abuse the social power she possesses. She takes a particular aversion to Jane Fairfax; while they are the same age, Jane’s seeming perfection and her reserved manner inspire not admiration but envy for her talents. Emma shows the most ageism towards Miss Bates, a poor unmarried woman well known for her gossip. She is publicly humiliated by the young lady in an event that awakens Emma’s social awareness and conscience and marks a change in her character. Proof that this change is possible lies in her friendship with Mr. Knightley—though he is sixteen years her elder—she greatly respects his moral excellence and considers him one of the best individuals in Highbury. Austen’s portrayal of Emma Woodhouse is a study in character development—an ageist young woman, secure in her superiority, comes to realize that her prejudices are harming the community she seeks to serve. By having Emma assert herself against her father and express compassion, not disdain, for the less fortunate, Austen presents her growing past as her ageist views to mature into a more sensitive and generous gentlewoman.
The core of Emma Woodhouse’s ageist convictions arises from her position of power and wealth in the village of Highbury. The sheltering environment of the estate of Hartfield has allowed the young woman to assert herself without challenge from an early age. Emma’s view of her family is that they are superior to most of the inhabitants of Highbury; as she reflects on the difference between a family involved in trade and her own, she considers them nobodies compared to the generations-old line that seats itself in Hartfield. As her mother died when she was a child and her older sister has married, she has been the mistress of the Woodhouse estate for years. Her neighbor, Mr. Knightley, pins the issue of Emma’s prideful sense of self-importance on the death of Mrs. Woodhouse: “She was always quick and assured: Isabella slow and diffident…In her mother she lost the only person able to cope with her. She inherits her mother’s talents, and must have been under subjugation to her” (Emma 48). Mrs. Woodhouse’s positive influence on her daughter as she matured would have created a less powerful and less biased version of Emma, as she could look to her sensible mother for guidance. Therefore, when Mrs. Woodhouse died, Emma lost her female figure of authority. Though Mr. Knightley is a morally excellent constant in the lives of the Woodhouses, a woman fulfilling a strong feminine role was absent from the community until Emma (then twelve years old) claimed the position for herself. Austen writes that while Emma has filled her mother’s place successfully, she has also become vain and overindulged: “The real evils…were the power of having rather too much of her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well for herself…The danger, however, was at present so unperceived, that they did not by any means rank as misfortunes with her” (Emma 24). Miss Woodhouse’s opinions and behavior are challenged by very few individuals in the novel, leading her to believe she treats her community better than she actually does.
Emma’s ageist view is strengthened by the Highbury community due to her elevated status. As Hartfield’s mistress, Emma possesses the highest rank of all the females in Highbury. In placing herself in the role of feminine leadership, she is empowered to interact as she sees fit with the rest of her community. Her ageist behavior is only lightly chastised by her former governess, Mrs. Weston, and her neighbor, Mr. Knightley; though she cares for them both, this neither impresses upon Emma the injustice of her actions nor prompts her to reform. However, it is also due to her wealth that she is far removed from the trials and insecurities of the novel’s other women. She will never be impoverished, nor forced into servitude; she is free to remain a daughter of the Woodhouse family for as long as she wishes. Emma does not perceive any common situation between herself and the other females, so she classifies herself above them. It is this detachment that inhibits Emma’s ability to sympathize wholly with her community and leads her to create prejudice.

With Emma’s high opinion of her family background and standing comes an unquestioning reverence for her father that shows evidence of positive ageism. As with negative ageism, positive ageism consists of stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination- in this case, it is for the aged, rather than against. Palmore notes that positive stereotypes for the elderly include their kindness and happiness, dependability, as well as wisdom and affluence (34). Emma does not appear to apply these to Mr. Woodhouse. Rather, she treats him fondly, avoiding or deflecting topics that might trouble him. Though aware of her father’s flaws, her deference towards Mr. Woodhouse shows signs of prejudice and discrimination in his favor to the point of indulgence, when it becomes a flaw.

With the departure of her former governess Mrs. Weston from Hartfield to her new home at Randalls, Emma is left to tend to the ailing Mr. Woodhouse. Or
rather, he continually convinces himself that he is ailing; from Austen’s description, Mr. Woodhouse suffers severe hypochondria. Barrow and Smith classify the term as follows:

A hypochondriac is defined as someone who is overly concerned about his or her health...The person generally has bodily complaints for which there is no physical cause; this individual may be depressed, fear physical deterioration, need attention, want to punish others, or seek escape from real problems by retreating into the “sick” role. (235)

It is made clear in the text that Emma has grown up conscious of Mr. Woodhouse’s nervous disposition. There are servants within the estate, but it is Emma who keeps her father’s spirits elevated. She discriminates in his favor and holds him in such high esteem that his needs always come before her own. Having grown up around Mr. Woodhouse’s hypochondria and weak mind, her coping patterns are to yield to his wishes or work subtly around his quirks. As Austen muses about their relationship, “She dearly loved her father, but he was no companion for her. He could not meet her in conversation, rational or playful” (Emma 24). Mr. Woodhouse’s lacks his daughter’s quick wit; he expects others to share in his opinions, becomes fixated easily on ideas and personal points-of-view, and dislikes change around him. When discussing the older gentleman, Wallace emphasizes his appreciation for his daughter’s talents, and his lack of insight into her own needs: “Mr. Woodhouse, another innocent reader, sees Emma as clever, talented, popular, and entirely devoted to his comfort. No inkling of her loneliness or self-doubt or desire ever reaches him; nor does he have any access to the playful side of his daughter” (80). Fortunately for him, Emma is willing to communicate at his level, giving as much clarification as he desires. For instance,
upon Mr. Woodhouse’s entrance during the charade scene in the ninth chapter of Volume One, Emma must follow a strategy or risk confusing her father: reading the riddle slowly several times, and explaining each part. This painstaking approach works and Mr. Woodhouse is able to enjoy the riddle, but Emma’s efforts demonstrate the gap between the father’s and the daughter’s intellect.

While respecting one’s elders is proper, the amount of positive ageism Emma engages in threatens to warp her future. Because of Mr. Woodhouse’s crushing dependence upon her, Emma cannot contemplate marriage, or even leaving Hartfield, without being mindful of its effects on him. To him, travel is fraught with peril, while marriage would be the ultimate change-bringer and home-wrecker. The extreme sense of duty Emma feels towards providing for her father’s comfort eventually conflicts with her own personal desires. Caroline Dunn relates the pressure a hypochondriac like Mr. Woodhouse may place upon his caregiver: “Those involved with the sick have a responsibility not to upset them or do anything that might be perceived as exacerbating their situation. This opens the door to a variety of tactics on the part of the sick person which can be considered emotional blackmail” (11). At first, Emma is determined to avoid marriage in favor of established ties. With her independent fortune and high status, she has no need to marry to promote herself, and the control she believes she has over her emotions insures she will not fall head over heels in love with just anyone. However, after Harriet Smith confesses her own love for Mr. Knightley, Emma is able to see that the life her father favors will not satisfy her in the long run. She realizes that she herself loves Mr. Knightley. But this epiphany does not shake off her father’s grip on her sympathies. Mr. Woodhouse is agitated by Emma’s decision to marry, even though the groom is Mr. Knightley, who is willing to live at Hartfield to avoid separating father from daughter. It is only
through the combined effort of friends that Mr. Woodhouse and Emma are both put at ease enough to go through the ceremony. Emma’s own will is compromised by her father’s insensitive and unyielding outlook on life, and part of her journey towards maturity requires her to reduce the level of positive ageism towards him and separate her own needs from his.

As attentive as Emma is to the needs of her father, the same compassion does not extend unconditionally towards those outside her family circle. The greatest fault Emma displays is her discourtesy towards the Bates household, in particular the unmarried Miss Bates. The elderly Mrs. Bates, her father’s frequent guest, does not irritate Emma strongly due to her quiet, passive nature, whereas Miss Bates is talkative and excitable. She is well aware of their dependence on her family’s charity, and provides for them generously. However, she imposes a strict social division between herself and the Bateses, concerned that becoming familiar with them will lower her standing in the community. Emma considers every visit a chore that must be endured if it cannot be avoided entirely. Her discrimination against two harmless women sets a hazardous example for others in the community to follow. Therefore, Emma must be made aware of her prejudiced actions and their consequences if she is to set an example of integrity for the citizens of Highbury.

The widow Mrs. Bates and her daughter are prime targets for multiple prejudices. In addition to ageism, they face the challenges of sexism as well as a steep drop in the social hierarchy. Once inhabiting the vicarage of Highbury, they were evicted from their home by the arrival of Mr. Bates’s successor, Mr. Elton. Mr. Bates provided the family’s sole source of income; with his death, they live in poverty and rely upon the goodwill of their community to survive. Barrow and Smith write in their book, *Aging, the Individual and Society*, that there are many
issues of self-sustenance faced by individuals like the Bates women: “The elderly poor, taken as a whole, have problems maintaining independence, meeting physical needs of shelter, food, clothing, and living life with dignity, pride, happiness, and meaning. Some manage to do this whether they are in urban or rural areas. Others find it impossible” (181). With no outside income, the Bates’ way of life is tied to the generosity of others, in particular to the families belonging to the gentry.

As a member of the landowning class, it is Emma’s duty to give charity to the less fortunate members of society. However, her interactions with the Bates family display not only ageist but classist prejudice as well. The first indication of this is the emotional negligence she subjects them to. Despite the family’s previous standing, and the camaraderie Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Bates share, Emma herself seldom visits the household outside of charitable visits. Her rationalization is that she finds Miss Bates’ gossip unbearably dull, while Mrs. Bates provides better company for her father. A glimpse of her true feelings can be seen as she imagines “all the horror of being in danger of falling in with the second rate and the third rate of Highbury, who were calling on them for ever….” (134), should she look in on them. Emma believes that associating with the Bates family threatens her own prestige, that she will devolve into a common gossip. She does not find value in the local and remote news Miss Bates has to share because the workings of her own world interest her more. While Emma does her best to ease the material burdens the Bateses might encounter, she otherwise avoids interacting with them if she can. This negligence escalates into abuse when Emma begins discriminating against Miss Bates openly.

Emma’s disdain for the Bates family becomes painfully obvious to the reader and to those closest to her with each encounter. In the first presented
encounter with Miss Bates, Emma immediately regrets visiting when Miss Bates pulls out a letter from her niece, which the doting aunt means to discuss at length. While the kindly woman rambles on about its contents, Emma’s patience slips away as she plots her escape. Using her father Mr. Woodhouse as an excuse to cut the visit short, she flees the Bates household without repentance: “She regained the street—happy in this, that though much had been forced on her against her will, though she had in fact heard the whole substance of Jane Fairfax’s letter, she had been able to escape the letter itself” (*Emma*, 139). Emma’s insensitivity towards Miss Bates reaches the point where the middle-aged woman becomes the butt of her jokes, Emma openly mocking the kindness offered her. On rebutting Mrs. Weston’s conjecture that Mr. Knightley would court Jane Fairfax, Emma remarks on how tiresome it would be to live with Miss Bates’ chatter. While she might not have been an authoritative governess, Mrs. Weston immediately rebukes her former charge for her disrespect: “For shame, Emma! Do not mimic her. You divert me against my conscience. And upon my word, I do not think Mr. Knightley would be much disturbed by Miss Bates. Little things do not irritate him” (*Emma* 186-7). But even her companion’s warning does not dissuade Emma from further condescending comments. The young woman’s ageism culminates into the scene at Box Hill, when Miss Bates seeks to join a game centered on gossip. Thoughtlessly, Emma makes fun of her infamous tendency to chatter:

> “Three things very dull indeed. That will do for me, you know. I shall be sure to say three very dull things as soon as ever I open my mouth; shan’t I?…”

> “Ah! ma’am, but there may be a difficulty. Pardon me—but you will be limited as to number—only three at once.”
Miss Bates, deceived by the mock ceremony of her manner, did not immediately catch her meaning; but, when it burst upon her, it could not anger, though a slight blush showed that it could pain her.

*(Emma 296)*

Though she does not realize it at the moment, Emma has deeply hurt and embarrassed Miss Bates by her remark. The Westons, Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill do not stand up to Emma on her behalf, letting the issue slide. The exception to this is of course Emma’s moral compass, Mr. Knightley, who is outraged by her insensitivity. It is he who steps in to lead Miss Bates away from the main party and distract her, and then beelines to Emma as soon as the group departs to scold her.

“How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible.”

“Nay, how could I help saying what I did?—Nobody could have helped it. It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me.” *(Emma 299)*

With this last quote, one can see her attempt to defend her point of view, even as it is noted that she feels some remorse. Everyone in Highbury knows Miss Bates’ eccentricities; even the reader can see in the thick blocks that make up Miss Bates’ monologues that she uses more words than she needs to. But her ties to the community give her access to personal information and the town’s history. John A. Dussinger asserts that for all her talk, Miss Bates plays a role in maintaining the history and bonds of Highbury, with her variety of social contacts giving perspective into events. However, she is also apart from society, a separation which brings its own lesson: “[A]mong Miss Bates’s various functions, perhaps the most intriguing is the expression of an existential loneliness that no other
character can voice in their polite conversation” (113). This loneliness is something that Emma, the golden child, does not understand, and so she mocks the selfless woman. However, it is one thing to believe such things privately, and another to announce them to the community at large. In insulting Miss Bates, Emma has breached codes of civility that operate to protect those lower on the social ladder. Mr. Knightley scolds Emma for being insensitive to the older woman’s difficulties, reminding her that “[s]he is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more. Her situation should secure your compassion” (Emma 300). Emma’s arrogance, then, has caused her to forget her previous ties to the Bates family; all she knows of them now is that the widow is going deaf and has glasses that break, that the spinster talks too much about nothing at all, and that they are poor. This final reproof from her one true advisor forces Emma to re-evaluate her actions and resolve to overcome her prejudices.

An important observation to make is that ageism can be directed towards any age group. The elderly can bear prejudice against the young, and the middle-aged can discriminate against either side. However, I will next examine a unique situation in which ageism arises due to equality of age: Emma’s aversion to Jane Fairfax, an orphaned young lady on the verge of seeking employment as a governess. Both Emma and Jane are the same age, though their temperaments and abilities differ. By the accounts of her relatives and the people of Highbury, Jane is a well-mannered and talented person, if a little reserved. She grew up outside of Highbury, returning only for occasional visits and corresponding faithfully with her relatives, Mrs. and Miss Bates. Because of this distance and the seeming perfection of Miss Fairfax, Emma feels herself threatened whenever Jane comes to Highbury. Austen sets up the source of this one-sided rivalry as Emma listens to
Miss Bates speak of her niece: “Mr. Knightley had once told her it was because she saw in her the really accomplished young woman, which she wanted to be thought of herself; and though the accusation had been eagerly refuted at the time, there were moments of self-examination in which her conscience could not acquit her” (Emma 142). In this section, Emma knows that for all her high standing in Highbury, Jane surpasses her in the feminine accomplishments; in this case, Jane is the superior woman. Their similarity in age encourages comparison between the two and Emma fears that once she is found to be the inferior, her own reputation will suffer in consequence.

This sense of rivalry and jealousy that Emma feels towards Jane is a case of ageism, since it is Emma’s perception that their equivalent age invites comparison that sparks her ill will. She fears that others will look at Jane’s abilities and find Emma’s lacking; even worse, they might comment and spread the opinion, sinking her in people’s estimates below the unfortunate orphan. Emma’s awareness of their similar ages therefore produces apprehension, which she channels into antipathy in an attempt to lessen her distress. To start with, she makes excuses for herself, as to why she puts no effort into building an alliance with Jane:

But “she could never get acquainted with her… but there was such coldness and reserve…and it had been always imagined that they were to be so intimate—because their ages were the same, everybody had supposed they must be so fond of each other.” These were her reasons—she had no better (Emma 142-3).

Emma’s prejudiced opinion can be viewed here, as her perception of Jane’s composure grows into an insensitivity that thwarts sociability. Alongside the dislike of Jane’s reserved nature, Emma notes how their similar ages led to the
erroneous presumption that the two young ladies are friends. In fact, Emma’s fear and mistrust of this familiar outsider centers on the doubts that arise when faced with an intellectual equal. In her own mind, Emma believes she is the talented and beloved daughter of Highbury, without equivalent. When Jane visits, she unwittingly upsets the social order, causing Emma to become defensive. Age is shown to be the foremost factor that triggers Emma’s animosity towards Jane; therefore, another factor must be found to lessen Emma’s anxiety and promote a positive connection.

Surprisingly enough, it is Jane’s decision to seek employment as a governess that prompts Emma to disregard her ageist opinions and renew attempts at amity. This drop from gentility to servitude is seen as necessary from Jane’s perspective, as she does not wish to burden her foster family nor her own relations beyond a certain point. Daniel Pool observes that governesship was one of the employment options available for impoverished gentlewomen as it was a profession that made use of the education given to young ladies: “Being a governess was one of the few occupations considered suitable for middle-class girls who needed to earn their own living, but although the governess was expected to have the education and mien of a ‘lady,’ she was treated as a servant” (224-5). With this change in fortune, however, Emma’s ego would be satisfied; there could be few reasons to compare the heiress of Hartfield to a mere governess. Therefore, she tries to be agreeable, but again she falls into her critical habits once Jane’s first visit to Hartfield proves that the lady’s demeanor has not changed: “Former provocations reappeared. The aunt was as tiresome as ever…and Jane’s offences rose again… Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved” (Emma 144). At this point, Emma is eager for Jane to enjoy her
relatives’ company and leave to pursue employment, but the opinions of a new arrival to Highbury shake up Emma’s perceptions. Mrs. Elton, the pastor’s new bride, takes much the same interest in Jane Fairfax as Emma takes in young Harriet Smith, offering her patronage and recommending families in need of a governess. Seeing Miss Fairfax yielding to the “kindnesses” offered by the presumptuous woman triggers Emma’s pity. Most importantly, Mrs. Elton brings Emma’s attention to the fact that it was not long ago that Mrs. Weston, Emma’s former governess-turned-companion, once occupied the same low status that Jane prepares to enter into:

“And she appears so truly good—there is something so motherly and kind-hearted about her, that it wins upon one directly. She was your governess, I think?”

Emma was almost too astonished to answer; but Mrs. Elton hardly waited for the affirmative before she went on.

“Having understood as much, I was rather astonished to find her so very lady-like! But she is really quite the gentlewoman.” (*Emma*, 225)

This unpolished insult of her friend does little to endear Mrs. Elton to Emma, but having her rival compared to one of her closest acquaintances does bring new sympathy for Jane’s plight. Emma is brought to realize she does no justice to Jane by discriminating against her, when Jane faces the threat of servitude stoically, and so Emma resolves to aid her as best she can. By novel’s end, she sets aside her antagonism and recognizes Jane’s worth as a gentlewoman and friend.

From Emma’s various encounters with Jane Fairfax, one can discover that not only must Emma learn how to oblige the older members of society only she must also learn how to peacefully engage with agemates, without succumbing to
jealousy. At first, Emma’s views make their closeness in age a threat to her own prestige, as she fears being regarded as inferior to Jane. Once Emma begins to associate Jane’s impending change in class with Mrs. Weston’s experience as Emma’s governess, the connection forces her to consider Jane in a more responsive light. Building acquaintances with worthy contemporaries, instead of dismissing them, provides for a lasting and healthy social network based upon admiration and respect as well as personal growth.

Despite Emma’s marked intolerance for some members of the Highbury community, Austen presents evidence early in the novel that she is capable of reformation. The most direct sign is her respect for Mr. Knightley, a gentleman seventeen years her senior. He is the one person willing to censure Emma at her most extreme, and though she may react stubbornly, she takes his advice to heart. Likewise, she values his rare commendations. In a place where strangers are viewed in a suspicious, almost hostile light, Emma’s lifelong relationship with Mr. Knightley insures her trust in him. In fact, the large gap in their ages does not even dissuade her from viewing Mr. Knightley as an appropriate candidate for her hand in marriage. For all of her youthful mistakes, her recognition of Mr. Knightley’s worth makes Emma’s improvement possible. This relationship demonstrates that she does not apply ageist prejudice against every older figure, and her affection for him provides her with motivation to amend her discriminatory behavior.

The factor that prevents Emma from viewing Mr. Knightley through an ageist standpoint is his long-standing familiarity with her and her family. Due to the close proximity of his own estate to Hartfield, he is shown to be a constant in the lives of the Woodhouse family, as Austen writes: “Mr. Knightley…was not only a very old and intimate friend of the family, but particularly connected with it
as the elder brother of Isabella’s husband. He lived about a mile from Highbury, was a frequent visitor and always welcome” (Emma 26-7). His relationship with the Woodhouses, due to his immediacy and blood ties, has developed into one of the strongest that either Mr. Woodhouse or Emma knows. In turn, his frequent visits grant him insight into the workings of the family.

Austen makes it plain that while everyone else in the village views Emma as perfect, Mr. Knightley takes it upon himself to confront her with her errors in word and action. He is the only one who consistently rebukes her for her biased behavior and strives to make her understand that her prejudices are unjust. Having to face Mr. Knightley’s ire is a familiar, uncomfortable situation that Emma encounters quite often. He is most concerned with Emma’s social interactions outside of the family. As a landed gentleman, Mr. Knightley’s responsibilities to the community resemble Emma’s—to be a leader among the people, to be generous and morally upright. He takes care of his tenants and listens to them when they come to him for advice. For example, when Emma interferes in the courtship of Harriet Smith by Robert Martin, Mr. Knightley defends the farmer’s choice of wife. While Emma believes her friend’s unknown parentage to be a hidden source of gentility, Mr. Knightley’s assertions are based upon his belief that the secrecy surrounding her parentage lowers her potential of finding as good a man as Martin: “Her friends evidently thought this good enough for her; and it was good enough. She desired nothing better herself…She was as happy as possible with the Martins in the summer. She had no sense of superiority then. If she has it now, you have given it” (Emma 67). This rebuke stings Emma’s conscience for reasons she does not understand. Although she acts contrary, she also acknowledges his wisdom, which leaves her unsettled. Emma’s firm belief in
her decisions causes many such arguments with Mr. Knightley, but as will be shown, she does not hesitate to promote his best qualities also.

Although Emma rankles at having her deeds reproached by Mr. Knightley, she does apply ageist criticism towards him. In fact, the text demonstrates her willingness to commend him. Her appreciation is more than a polite compliment; he does exemplify the courteous country gentleman, in Emma’s mind. From his charitable acts towards the Bateses to his patience with Mr. Woodhouse’s peculiarities, he serves the community as best he can. At the Coles’ party, upon hearing that Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax arrived in Mr. Knightley’s carriage, Emma believes that his consideration for Jane’s health is a sign of his general interest in her welfare, rather than a mark of favor as Mrs. Weston suspects: “I know no man more likely than Mr. Knightley...to do any thing really good-natured, useful, considerate or benevolent. He is not a gallant man, but he is a very humane one; and this, considering Jane Fairfax’s ill health, would appear a case of humanity to him” (Emma 185). It is her knowledge of his character that makes his criticism so effective against Emma. As Mr. Knightley discusses Mrs. Elton’s patronage of Jane with Mrs. Weston and Emma, he brings their attention to Emma’s disservice to her agemate. This reminder does touch Emma’s conscience, and she makes renewed effort to acquaint herself closer with Jane. During her walk to the village, she reflects without rancor on the conversation, showing she takes his words to heart: “This is very true,” said she, “at least as far as relates to me, which was all that was meant—and it is very shameful.—Of the same age—and always knowing her—I ought to have been more her friend” (Emma 235). Her concession towards Mr. Knightley’s point of view is but one facet of her esteem for her neighbor. Later in the text, her appreciation extends farther.
Perhaps most telling in Emma’s perceptions of Mr. Knightley is the distinction she makes between him and the other gentlemen of Highbury. Much as Emma ranks herself above the village’s females, she grants Mr. Knightley the highest position amongst the males. During the ball, she observes the incongruity of his standing with the elders of town while she prepares to join the other young people dancing: “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” (Emma 261-2). Clearly, despite being sixteen years her senior, Emma does not class Mr. Knightley in the same age category as the older gentlemen—she feels he should be dancing with the younger set! And while she does not realize it yet, it also means she views Mr. Knightley as an age-appropriate partner, a feat which makes the events of the final volume a discovery of her true feelings for him.

The reader can discern how facing Mr. Knightley’s disappointment and striving to regain his approval after Box Hill serve as motivations for Emma to change. While most of the events follow Emma’s point-of-view, Austen provides considerable insight into Mr. Knightley’s personality, to prove his consideration towards Emma and her father. This understanding of his nature serves to intensify his remarks to Emma at Box Hill, after her humiliation of Miss Bates. One can see that she loses her chance to apologize immediately after the mistake, which makes her fear that he would hold her actions against her. Being faced with the destructive nature of her prejudice, Emma is humbled. She recognizes that her discriminatory behavior damages the social ties of the community and makes her a lesser person. It is a hard lesson to learn, but she is eager to make amends for her ignorant mistakes. Emma hopes to prove herself worthy of her leadership position
and of Mr. Knightley’s affections by her change of heart. By the next time that
they meet, she has already begun to follow through on her newfound resolutions
by visiting the Bateses and Jane for a social call. She has begun to change her
ways in a noticeable fashion. As if to reward her character for her newfound
maturity, Austen reveals that not only does Emma realize that she’s in love with
Mr. Knightley, but that he has always loved her as well:

She had not deserved it; she had often been…slighting his advice, or
even willfully opposing him…but still, from family attachment and
habit, and thorough excellence of mind, he had loved her, and
watched over her from a girl, with an endeavor to improve her and
an anxiety for her doing right, which no creature had at all shared.

(Emma 329)

Despite her faults, Emma received the regard of Mr. Knightley years before either
of them realized their shared attraction for each other. Emma’s positive
recognition of Mr. Knightley presents evidence that her worldview is not
completely ageist, and likewise his pride in her encourages Emma to push aside
her prejudices and interact graciously with the members of her community.

With the character of Emma Woodhouse, Jane Austen speculates on how
an ageist mindset can develop, the effects of ageist behavior on a small community
and the potential of an individual to amend their views. Being the heiress of a
large fortune, Emma’s pride in her prominent standing contributes to a sense of
superiority over individuals in the Highbury community, expressed in some cases
by ageist behavior. She bears prejudiced opinions and discriminates negatively
against the Bates family, while demonstrating positive ageism to an unhealthy
degree towards her father. Emma is not meant to be an antagonist, for she does
show admirable qualities: her love for her family and friends, and the
acknowledgement of her duties towards the less fortunate. However, it does take her some time, through observation and through error, to become conscious of both the troubles faced by Jane Fairfax and the Bateses and of the damage being done by her absolute obedience towards her father. She has occupied an adult’s role in society from a young age, but it is not until the events of this novel take place that she is called to mature past her vain prejudices. To do this, she must set emotional boundaries to separate her needs from Mr. Woodhouse’s demands, while showing more empathy towards those in need. Erdman B. Palmore notes in his book *Ageism: Negative and Positive*, that heroes and heroines throughout literature confront ageist stereotypes, and are challenged to resolve quarrels created by the generational divide:

Classical literature also presents ambivalent views of aging…One image is the aged as helpless victims of neglect and indifference; the other is victimizers of youth who selfishly cling to a disproportionate share of wealth, power, and resources. The “heroes” who promote generational continuity are the younger characters who find a place for both young and old persons to dwell harmoniously. (94-5)

Emma proves her potential as one of these heroines through her actions after the epiphany at Box Hill. It is only that she needed direction, and to be reminded that her wealth and influence should be used to give aid to others. Austen does not support Emma’s ageism, but she also maintains that this erroneous belief can be corrected. Throughout the novel, she forces the young lady to face the consequences for her behavior until the lesson of tolerance and respect has been comprehended. In the end, she is still proud of her rank and position in society, but she is also more conscientious; her duty is to tend to her people, young and old, not offer them scorn in return for their fondness of her.
CHAPTER 3: MASTERS OF THEIR DOMAIN

For the heroines of Jane Austen’s novels, operating within the patriarchal social system of Regency England is a difficulty. There are issues of money and inheritance to be contended over, and the older men governing these affairs for the ladies are presented as hindrances rather than help. In order to insure enough autonomy for her heroines to maneuver within the plot of the novels, Austen weakens male authority over the ladies. The patriarchs are therefore targeted due to their age because their seniority qualifies them for positions of influence that must be mitigated. Austen exposes the flaws of several older gentlemen over six novels. The most severe cases are the “strong” gentlemen, in control of large estates and possessing powerful influence over their families. General Tilney of Northanger Abbey and Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park both seek to control the lives of those living under their roof. In these cases, it is the heroine’s objective to navigate the social minefield without endangering her standing with the gentlemen. The flaws of Austen’s “weaker” gentlemen serve as more specific trials to the heroines: Sir John Middleton’s tactless bluster, Mr. Bennet’s emotional detachment, Mr. Woodhouse’s hypochondria, and Sir Walter Elliot’s narcissism limit their ability to give aid when it is needed. Their weaknesses compel the various heroines to adopt a less dependent attitude towards the gentlemen and take action for themselves when faced with adversity. In contrast, Austen creates few competent older men. Kindly Admiral Croft of Persuasion is a minor character with a small number of scenes, while Colonel Brandon from Sense and Sensibility, at first a victim of ageist prejudice, exemplifies the ideals of the Regency gentry. The male figures of authority in Jane Austen’s works, while holding power in the communities they are a part of, are given flaws that impair
their ability to control or aid the heroine. In subverting the patriarchal system, Austen characterizes these gentlemen in an ageist manner in order to give her younger heroines more power.

The first category of gentlemen has its foundations in an idealized stereotype of the country gentry; they are powerful yet flawed. The model gentleman was the owner of an estate, who tended to the needs of his family and the neighboring community. Holding the power and the wealth of the household, he was above all expected to wield his authority competently and justly. Two of Austen’s gentlemen appear to be cast directly from this mold, only to have other dire failings exposed. General Tilney from *Northanger Abbey* is introduced as a boisterous man intent on ushering Catherine Morland to the altar beside his son. He utterly dominates his family in pursuit of greater social and financial advantage and reveals his gullibility by taking the words of a known braggart to heart.

Likewise, Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park* imposes order on his estate. However, the distance he creates between himself and his family leads his more nonconformist children to rebel in stronger and stronger ways in his absence. These gentlemen are the most overtly dangerous to the heroines because, despite their flaws, they are forceful and well aware of the influence they possess. Therefore, while Austen gives them antagonistic scenes that threaten the heroines, their flaws insure that their threats are not insurmountable.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen is able to veil General Tilney’s initial faults behind an optimistic perspective by having the novel follow an inexperienced young woman, Catherine Morland. The reader can perceive in the actions and reactions of her friends Henry and Eleanor Tilney that their father is a man they respect and try to avoid crossing. However, Catherine is not yet experienced enough in reading personalities to look beyond the pleasantries he offers to the
calculating mind beneath. She does not understand why she and the siblings should be so uneasy around the general:

> It could not be General Tilney’s fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry’s father. He could not be accountable for his children’s want of spirits, or for her want of enjoyment in his company. (NA 105)

It is clear that General Tilney wants his family to be on good terms with Catherine, even inviting her back to their home, Northanger Abbey, for an extended visit. A glimpse of his true personality is seen, however, when he takes severe umbrage to his eldest son’s late arrival to the inn and berates him in front of the party. The general presumes that Catherine will be angry at the delay, but she is only confused by the incongruity between the older man’s genial behavior earlier and this outburst. Although his tirade is in the heroine’s defense, Austen writes that the heroine was “quite pained by the severity of [General Tilney’s] reproof, which seemed disproportionate to the offence; and much was her concern increased, when she found herself the principal cause of the lecture; and that (his son’s) tardiness was chiefly resented from being disrespectful to her” (NA 128). General Tilney’s behavior towards Catherine should provoke questions from the reader. His mood swings indicate that his reasons for encouraging her friendship with his family are not as straightforward as they seem; it is not long before Catherine grows suspicious and begins giving thought to what kind of man he really is.

Austen gradually reveals over the course of the text that behind his amiable facade, General Tilney uses his power and authority as a landowner to dominate his family. Barrow and Smith note that the filial respect children had for their fathers was equal parts duty and necessity:
The tradition of respect for the elderly was rooted not only in religious and political ideology but in legal and financial reality. The elders owned and controlled their own land, which did not pass to their sons until they died…Times were conservative because the young had little choice than to honor, obey, and follow the ways of the old. (3)

In this case, Henry and Eleanor Tilney must follow their father’s orders, even though General Tilney’s actions offend them. The most striking use of his authority would be his dismissal of Catherine from Northanger Abbey without due cause. He does not even deliver his decision in person but leaves the transmission of bad news to Eleanor, who recognizes the impropriety. The heroine dwells upon the seeming metamorphosis of the General from a courteous gentleman into someone blatantly uncivil as she packs her luggage for the long trip home: “The manner in which it was done so grossly uncivil; hurrying her away without any reference to her own convenience; or allowing her even the appearance of choice as to the time or mode of her travelling…What could all this mean but an intentional affront?” (NA 189). Eleanor is embarrassed by her father’s behavior, and Catherine’s parents are distressed to hear that their daughter traveled home alone by post-chaise for eleven hours. As for Catherine, she realizes General Tilney is not an evil man but comes to the conclusion that his temper makes him less than an ideal gentleman. Her experience, though mortifying, has made her more aware of the duplicity that a smile can hide.

Due to General Tilney’s overwhelming command of his household, Austen had to give him a character flaw that would take a measure of control away from him. Her choice was to make the general susceptible to gossip, especially in financial matters. Catherine becomes involved as the unwitting subject of gossip
due to the remarks of one John Thorpe, who had an interest in the heroine during her time in Bath. When Thorpe brags about Catherine’s nonexistent wealth in an effort to boost his own standing, General Tilney plots to steal the girl and her fortune from the braggart by allying her with his son. Likewise, when Catherine rejects his proposal, Thorpe retaliates by claiming she is destitute and looking to swindle her way into high society. Upon hearing that, General Tilney banishes her from the abbey, assuming Miss Morland lied to both him and Thorpe. The older man’s lack of caution may rise from his position at the top of the social hierarchy, assuming his authority would intimidate others into telling the truth. If so, this erroneous belief in his superiority in fact reverses the power dynamic, as he becomes the weaker party by his gullible acceptance of slander.

The author’s choice of flaw in this instance is discriminatory against General Tilney, as his credulity is accepted as a permanent failing while the naïve Catherine is shown becoming more discerning over the course of *Northanger Abbey*. Giving an older character with authority the trait of gullibility, commonly associated with the young and inexperienced, seems unbefitting. As Tara Ghoshal Wallace notes, the incongruity forces the reader to analyze General Tilney more critically than the heroine does: “This picture of a mercenary and credulous old man is hardly consistent with the vigorous, arrogant patriarch we have encountered, whose idiosyncrasies have so dominated the imaginations of both heroine and reader” (27). Wallace goes on to compare General Tilney with John Thorpe, with the former’s boasts veiled with authority, and much harder to distinguish as prideful displays of wealth. While he still possesses the financial and social power in his family, the revelation of this trait removes the illusion of complete control from the imposing General. The novel ends happily as Catherine’s parents refute Thorpe’s lies by explaining they are prosperous enough
to provide a modest dowry for their daughter. As quickly as General Tilney’s anger was roused by Thorpe’s exaggerations, so quickly does it subside with the facts laid before him; he allows the marriage between Henry and Catherine to take place. General Tilney’s subjugation of his family is an example of landowning authority taken too far. His credulity could rise from a feeling of invincibility from his position and a keen interest in acquiring assets and protecting his fortune.

Austen introduces the general as a formidable man, yet grants him a failing that spoils his indomitable façade. By making him vulnerable to gossip, she underlines the lesson learned by Catherine not to depend completely on the advice of others. Austen discriminates here, in that the flaw in the young lady is meant to be endearing and correctable, but its presence in the older man only weakens confidence in his ability to act justly.

Within Austen’s novels, the flaws given to the patriarchs serve to balance the power disparity between them and the heroines—the dominant landowners most threaten the self-determination of the heroines, so they must be given traits to make them vulnerable. While General Tilney’s susceptibility to gossip dispels the illusion of complete competence, Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park* is given the illusion of control over his insubordinate family. His moral influence is embraced or rebelled against strongly by his offspring, providing a strong example of generational conflict. Within the first few pages, he is shown to be a man placing high value on social propriety, a trait most of his children resist. The pride with which he presides over the estate of Mansfield Park is emblematic of the importance placed on the ancestry of the family as well as the property in those times, as Venetia Murray writes:

> London may have been the epicenter of the fashionable world…but the priorities of the great families of the Regency were still firmly
centered on their country estates…. [T]heir primary obligations were
to their tenants and dependents, and their principal homes were the
castles and mansions built by the founding members of their
dynasties. (113)

However, feelings of affection towards Sir Thomas are harder to come by,
especially from his children. The attitude they hold towards him is one of awe, if
not fear. The girls in particular are forced to suppress their high spirits around Sir
Thomas because the boys are able to leave the park for schooling. With the
introduction of Fanny Price, Lady Bertram’s niece, to the household, the paternal
figure shows some signs of conflict. While he wants the little girl to be happy, he
also wants to maintain the separation between his family’s high status and the
relative poverty of the Prices. His decision, as delivered to sister-in-law Mrs.
Norris, is as follows: “I should wish to see them very good friends, and would, on
no account, authorize the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but
still they cannot be equals. Their rank, fortune, rights, and expectations, will
always be different” (MP 10). With this resolution in place, the Bertram
household matures; while Fanny Price gratefully accepts Sir Thomas’ authority,
the Bertram children grow resentful of the control their father holds over them.

The pivotal moment when Sir Thomas’s authority starts to decline is when
he discovers his elder son’s gambling debts. As in many other stories, Tom is
spoiled due to the guarantee of primogeniture; that is, he stands to inherit his
father’s estate and fortune upon the baronet’s death. Yet his debts are so great that
Sir Thomas must sell the living belonging to Mansfield Park. The sale causes a
disruption of the landowner’s plans, as it forces his younger son to take orders
away from home. The uncertainty of when the living could be reclaimed by
Edmund bothers Sir Thomas the most, as granting the position to a stranger takes
control out of his hands. As Pool notes, the accurate transmission of livings to
relations required careful timing, especially if they were still in training: “The
problem here was always that of ensuring that the living would somehow become
vacant at precisely the time that the son fulfilled the requirements for ordination
and was actually eligible to become the incumbent” (117). Tom’s carelessness,
therefore, sets back years of planning for Edmund to remain close to home and
garner a larger tithe than he would receive at a distant parish. Sir Thomas
criticizes Tom over how he has deprived his only brother of a guaranteed source of
income, but the young man does not take the lecture to heart. Rather, he leaves as
soon as he can to continue his reckless lifestyle before Sir Thomas drags him to
Antigua. The heavy antipathy Tom shows is an open example of the resentment
felt by his other siblings towards Sir Thomas. It only becomes more distinct when
the gentleman’s travels send him away from home for months, and the younger
generation experiences complete freedom from his rule.

In Sir Thomas’s absence, the Bertram children no longer feel the
constraints of his influence. The superficiality of their former obedience is
revealed as they now claim autonomy for themselves, in increasing amoral ways.
The arrival of Dr. and Mrs. Grant to Mansfield Park, along with her niece and
nephew, adds a new dimension to the social atmosphere. Henry and Mary
Crawford are worldly individuals, intriguing outsiders that the Bertram siblings
take to easily. Fanny, more concerned with proper behavior than her cousins, is
impressed by the pair but not pleased with their distinct lack of modesty. The
most severe of their moral breaches is the suggestion to perform the play “Lovers’
Vows.” The risqué selection is controversial, but as the Bertram brothers discuss,
what once was taboo under their father’s supervision can be explored in his
absence. Edmund argues for preserving the propriety of Sir Thomas’ house, while
the recently returned Tom argues against the restrictive attitude Edmund seeks to reintroduce:

“It is a very different thing. — You must see the difference. My father wished us, as school-boys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown-up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict.”

“I know all that,” said Tom, displeased. “I know my father as well as you do, and I’ll take care that his daughters do nothing to distress him. Manage your own concerns, Edmund, and I’ll take care of the rest of the family” (MP 90).

Despite Edmund’s efforts, the wishes of the elder brother are carried out. Their conflict over the play exemplifies the uneven power dynamic between the brothers, the careless elder and the responsible younger man, and their awareness of each other’s standing in the family: “Like Mrs. Norris, he must make indirect inroads, but Tom, unlike Lady Bertram, is jealous of his prerogatives, and his curt dismissal of Edmund’s arguments against acting reveals an irritable consciousness of competition” (Wallace 64). Though his objections are strong, not even Edmund is immune from the liberality of the Crawfords, as Mary persuades him to take a role opposite her. Only Fanny stands aloof from the morally questionable performance until the very end. Sir Thomas’s abrupt return from Antigua disrupts the proceedings; however, it is not enough to eliminate the defiant feelings recently aroused. Though Sir Thomas’s hold on his estate remains firm, his children have slipped out of his control, and soon demonstrate an unwillingness to submit that soon escalates into conflict.

The return of Sir Thomas to Mansfield Park reintroduces patriarchal control over its inhabitants. Through the second generation’s reactions, Austen suggests...
that the generational divide in values between the gentleman’s traditional morality and the younger set’s worldly aspirations has grown further apart, as well as taken an antagonistic turn. Sir Thomas’s disapproval of the play results in the dismissal of the outsiders involved. Henry and Mary Crawford retreat to their sister’s home, leaving their acquaintances to the mercy of newfound monotony. The social environment grows quiet with the patriarch’s return, and Austen emphasizes the negative feelings this change induces in the younger set: “Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place. Some members of their society sent away and the spirits of many others saddened, it was all sameness and gloom, compared with the past; a somber family-party rarely enlivened” (MP 135). The re-imposition of control causes Julia and Maria great discomfort, Tom bristles at the restrictions and even Edmund wonders what has gone wrong. At this point, Sir Thomas’s moral code is strong enough to rouse outward obedience, but the young people’s desire for independence makes them eager to gain control again.

This vying for power between two generations of the Bertram family exemplifies the concepts surrounding age conflicts. Erdman B. Palmore writes in his book, *Ageism: Negative and Positive* that situations like Sir Thomas’s re-establishment of control could give rise to age conflict: “Like other forms of social conflict, age conflicts involve struggles over scarce resources or over values… Struggles occur when the disadvantaged age group makes claims for more power or other goods, and the more advantaged seek to protect their privileges” (16).

The area of conflict in the case of *Mansfield Park* is morality: Sir Thomas, a member of the older generation, advocates rigid adherence to the social mores of the time, while his offspring adopt adventurous yet morally questionable codes. Even as they grow more rebellious, the younger generation must give the appearance of submission towards the figure in authority. Palmore examines what
motives could dissuade the disadvantaged from open demonstration, motives that play into the Bertrams’ reluctant attempts to appease their father: “There are many factors that serve to check sharp age conflicts, such as the legitimization of age inequalities by various stereotypes, the fear of painful consequences from those in power, ties of affection or obligation, and social separation of age groups” (16).

As in the case of General Tilney, having possession of Mansfield Park means that Sir Thomas controls the finances and the Bertram family, and there is nothing that can be done to shift that power until he ages further. Unless the children follow his model of good conduct, they do not receive the support and resources he offers.

Whereas Sir Thomas’s children feel discontent, Fanny is unsurprised by the reintroduction of restrictions, recognizing that rather than disrupting their lives, his return is bringing it back to normal.

There was never much laughing in his presence; or, if there is any difference, it is not more I think than such an absence has a tendency to produce at first… But I cannot recollect that our evenings formerly were ever merry, except when my uncle was in town. No young people’s are, I suppose, when those they look up to are at home. (MP 135)

Because she believes in a moral code similar to her uncle’s, Fanny readily accepts that the time of revelry has ended. In fact, she was never truly comfortable with the liberal atmosphere introduced by the Crawfords in the first place. The heroine adheres to society’s rules even when figures of authority are absent, welcoming the return of order. However, it is her strict moral code that will soon bring her into the age conflict.
Sir Thomas attempts to reassert his power in the household through his authorization of marriage. Maria Bertram became engaged to the wealthy, but foolish, Mr. Rushworth during Sir Thomas’s absence, and Henry Crawford makes his attentions towards Fanny known. As the head of the family, it is Sir Thomas who has the final say in approving engagements. In the case of Maria and Mr. Rushworth, he senses the lack of chemistry between the two. Not wanting to risk his daughter’s happiness on this lackluster though profitable alliance, he thoughtfully meets with Maria to confirm her decision. Austen includes this scene to demonstrate the concern Sir Thomas has for the well-being of his family, and perhaps his awareness that an unhappy marriage could invite trouble: “Advantageous as would be the alliance, and long standing and public as was the engagement, her happiness must not be sacrificed to it. Mr. Rushworth had perhaps been accepted on too short an acquaintance, and on knowing him better she was repenting” (MP, 137-8). However, Maria feels she has been scorned by Henry Crawford, to whom she is actually attracted. To spite him, she accepts a marriage where the love is one-sided. Not only that, she seeks to surpass her father’s station by gaining a greater fortune. Marrying the foolish owner of Sotherton will provide that; as Wallace notes, this competitive edge is rarely seen in Austen’s works: “Maria’s desire to have more money than her father shows an impulse not towards independence but towards winning, an interest not in escaping a system of constricting values but in acquiring weapons of power within that system” (66). As it stands, the only one made miserable by this alliance is herself. Her father does not show consideration beyond his initial meeting with her and believes the matter is settled.
Likewise, Sir Thomas gives little thought to the proceedings of Henry Crawford and Fanny Price, causing even that mild young woman to speak out against her benefactor. Henry, who has fallen in love with Fanny’s retiring ways, approaches Sir Thomas with his intentions. The gentleman then assumes that with such an eligible bachelor calling for her, Fanny reciprocates his feelings. However, Fanny is sensitive to the drama surrounding Henry and his disregard for propriety. She is unwilling to marry a man with loose morals, and she goes so far as to contradict her uncle. Two characters with strong moral codes come into conflict over this proposal, both asserting that their position is the correct one. The reader is encouraged to support the heroine’s declaration, as she has witnessed firsthand the questionable behavior of her suitor with her female cousins: “Oh! No, Sir, I cannot, indeed I cannot go down to him. Mr. Crawford ought to know—...he spoke to me on this subject yesterday—and I told him without disguise that it was very disagreeable to me, and quite out of my power to return his good opinion” (MP 213). Unlike Maria, who thinks only of her husband’s fortune and scorns him personally, Fanny cannot ignore Henry’s faults and is certain that should she marry him, she will be made unhappy. Jan Banfield mentions in her essay that Fanny’s strong beliefs place her in an unexpected position of rebellion for one so meek: “But no other Austen heroine defies the combined opposition of her benefactors and superiors—not even Elizabeth Bennet against Lady Catherine” (41). Sir Thomas, for one, is not expecting a rebellion from this most docile of women and so hears her declaration crossly. He accuses her of ingratitude and reminds her that offers like Crawford’s are few and far between:

I had thought you peculiarly free from willfulness of temper, self-conceit, and...that independence of spirit which prevails so much in modern days...which in young women is offensive and disgusting
beyond all common offence. But you have now shewn me that you can be willful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you. (MP 216)

His lecture is meant to remind Fanny that she owes her allegiance to him for elevating her above the station she was born to, using his power as landowner as a tool to intimidate the young lady into obedience. At this point, Fanny is torn. Being told that she is doing her foster-father and caretaker a disservice is enough to raise her doubts, and she regrets having to oppose Sir Thomas after the kindness he has recently shown her. However, as the heroine is protecting herself from an emotionally and morally damaging marriage, she feels that her protest is justified and her decision stands. These efforts to marry off the daughters of Mansfield Park are doomed from the start because no one in Sir Thomas’s family is willing to divulge information about Henry Crawford’s true character and his flirtatious exploits that occurred during Sir Thomas’s absence. Furthermore, Sir Thomas shows a superficial regard for the feelings of Maria and Fanny but does not take signs of Maria’s disinterest in Mr. Rushworth and Fanny’s aversion to Henry Crawford to heart, leading to disaster.

Austen’s characterization of the two male dominant landowners in her works draws upon the same stereotypes, which leads to similar reactions to events. For example, when an individual of lower status upsets the landowner, he views himself within his rights to dismiss the offending party from his property. Much like General Tilney’s expulsion of Catherine Morland from Northanger Abbey, Sir Thomas’s response to Fanny’s dissention is to send her away from his estate. He sends Fanny back to her birth family in Portsmouth, hoping that the atmosphere of poverty surrounding the Price family will force the girl to realize her mistake.
Fanny believes the gesture to be a positive one, enabling her to escape the attentions of Henry, but Sir Thomas has a more vengeful plan in mind:

He certainly wished for her to go willingly, but he as certainly wished her to be heartily sick of home before her visit ended; and that a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park, would…incline her to a juster estimate of the value of that home of greater permanence, and equal comfort, of which she had the offer. (MP 250)

This tactic of removing the heroines from the resources of their patrons is an overt display of the power these landowners possess, contrasted with the dependence of the heroines on their goodwill. Both instances are meant by the patriarchs to rebuke the ladies for slighting them, but Austen presents them as unjust shows of temper. General Tilney’s indelicate eviction of Catherine Morland and Sir Thomas’s resentful motivation for sending Fanny away both negate feelings of sympathy for the older men, encouraging the reader to align with the exiled heroines. However, while Fanny accepts her banishment and languishes obediently in Liverpool, the state of affairs in the Bertram family deteriorates as both daughters pull off a rebellion of their own.

Sir Thomas’s greatest flaw is his failure to properly impart his system of morals to his offspring, causing him to be deceived by their superficial obedience. His efforts to maintain a harmonious estate are ruined by the sexual transgressions of his daughters Maria and Julia once the former has married. Freed from their father’s control, both women pursue their craving for worldly experience in immoral ways. Tired of the façade of a happy marriage, Maria runs away with Henry Crawford, scandalizing both the Bertram and the Rushworth families. To add to her father’s distress, Julia elopes with one of the young men who visited the
estate during Sir Thomas’s absence. For all his perceived success in raising virtuous children, this scandal reveals how shallow Sir Thomas’s authority over them really was. The disappointment causes him to regret the inattention he paid to the real characters of his children, disguised beneath an obedient mien. While Maria’s transgression is unforgivable, there is hope for the remainder of the children: Tom reforms his ways after a life-threatening accident, and Julia returns with her husband seeking forgiveness. Sir Thomas learns that while one may preach to children, they must be watched to make sure they practice what they have been taught. Fanny’s dutiful comportment becomes valuable to the Bertrams after these scandals, and her opposition of Sir Thomas is forgiven. With her return to the park, Sir Thomas comes to recognize the humble virtue of the young lady and welcomes her back, even approving of Edmund’s decision to marry her though once that was his fear. This older male character is given the illusion of mastery over his family, while the young heroine witnesses the subversive actions of her cousins; in the end, he is forced to admit his failings and rely upon her to reestablish peace in the household.

Jane Austen uses the stereotype of competent patriarch most strongly for General Tilney and Sir Thomas Bertram, but ultimately distributes traits that undermine their authority. In the first case, she argues against blindly trusting figures in power. While he is one of the most dominant landowners in Austen’s works, General Tilney’s temper, gullibility and greedy motivations give a sense of the flawed person beneath the rank and title—one who is capable of being swayed by the words of strangers yet willing to make decisions that can drastically affect those closest to him without taking their feelings into consideration. In the second example, Austen dissects a generational conflict centered on moral values. Sir Thomas Bertram is unable and unwilling to supervise his children’s development
as he should, and his late attempts at control are met with rebellion, even from quiet Fanny. After being crossed by the heroines, their immediate response is to deny the girls access to their estates’ resources. The heroines are at a severe disadvantage against them, for they are firmly below them in rank: Catherine being a clergyman’s daughter and visitor to Northanger Abbey, Fanny being the daughter of a poor naval family. They cannot take direct action against the patriarchs, but must wait for circumstances to improve. Austen shows an awareness of cultural tropes, setting General Tilney firmly in the role of “tyrannical landowner,” although the distant Sir Thomas only ventures into this territory when Fanny rebels. By characterizing General Tilney and Sir Thomas Bertram as close to common stereotypes of dominant male landowners, Austen is able to subvert their power by applying strong character flaws. Their absolute authority becomes compromised, thus proving the righteousness of the heroines when they nonetheless heed the elder men. Therefore, these cases demonstrate the elevation of the younger party achieved by causing the older party to lose prestige.

The second category of gentlemen also inhabits the role of landowner but lacks the absolute control over their families that General Tilney and Sir Thomas exert. In these cases, it is their flaws that become their defining characteristic; they are the shrewd, the foolish, the vain and the weak. Sir John Middleton of *Sense and Sensibility* provides shelter for the family of Mrs. Dashwood but has little but good humour to recommend him. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet’s intelligence goes so far as to become foolishness; his disdain for his silly wife and impulsive daughters causes him to emotionally neglect his family and not attend to details a more dutiful man would notice. *Emma’s* Mr. Woodhouse is a hypochondriac at the mercy of his infirmity, who longs to maintain a hold over his family to the exclusion of all else. Preoccupied with his physical and social
appearance, Sir Walter from *Persuasion* drives his family so far in debt that they must lease their estate, Kellynch Hall. In their relationships with these gentlemen, the heroines possess a greater amount of free will to manage their problems personally. It is with this group that Austen’s narrative tactic is made explicit: to compel the young ladies to carry the story by weakening the older men and removing the checks of power they might have imposed over the young.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen characterizes Sir John Middleton as a generous yet foolish landowner whose attempts at humor dissuades the Dashwood heroines from becoming friendlier with the older man. From the first, he is portrayed as a man whose goal in life is to pursue his own pleasure and seeks to deliver a share of it to others. Though he is a good-hearted man, Austen makes clear through her heroines’ criticism that his excessive joviality is not entirely proper. He is introduced to the reader via correspondence to the widowed Mrs. Dashwood, inviting this distant cousin to stay in a vacant cottage situated on his land. His personal life seems lacking, as his cheery enthusiasm for pleasure matches that of his exuberant mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, rather than his frosty, prim wife. The addition of Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters to Barton enlivens the environment, and Sir John’s overriding concern is that the women are comfortable and happy in their new home. Of interest to him and his mother-in-law are the two older Dashwood girls, Elinor and Marianne; they are nearing marrying age with no dowry to speak of. Sir John fancies himself a comedian, and the Miss Dashwoods’ love lives are one of his favorite subjects. He starts with Marianne, who has clearly fallen for the dashing Willoughby. By praising the young man, he hopes to stir a declaration of affection from the spirited girl:
“As good a kind of fellow as ever lived, I assure you. A very decent shot, and there is not a bolder rider in England.”

“And is that all you can say for him?” cried Marianne, indignantly. “But what are his manners on more intimate acquaintance? What his pursuits, his talents and genius?”

Sir John was rather puzzled.

“Upon my soul,” said he, “I do not know much about him as to all that.” (S&S 34)

As shown, Sir John’s attention does not stray to such points as intelligence or adherence to etiquette; what draws his notice are the ways Willoughby engages in his own favorite pastimes. Marianne objects strongly to Sir John’s attempt at humor, believing the strength of her emotions should be beyond censure or amusement. Elinor, being a great deal more calm and secretive about her feelings than her sister, is more of a mystery to Sir John. He makes vague guesses towards her possible attractions, but it is not until youngest sister Margaret reveals details about Edward Ferrars that he makes out a connection between the two. The unrelenting manner in which Sir John treats this speculation causes Elinor much discomfort. There is a distinct lack of propriety in his speech that infuriates Marianne and embarrasses Elinor, both of whom would rather display their feelings on their own terms than be subject to ridicule. Sir John’s characterization does not correlate with stereotypes depicting older gentlemen as staid and level-headed; the sisters thus discriminate against him for not embodying the role of “proper” landowner. However well-meaning he is, his efforts in lightening the atmosphere cause his targets to withdraw rather than come forward, leading him to encourage them further. Austen insures that the younger characters are dissuaded
from identifying too closely with the older gentleman by bestowing a blunt nature upon him.

While Sir John is ordinarily a cheerful man, he does hold the well-being of his cousins in the highest regard. The situation that arises between Marianne and John Willoughby demonstrates how seriously he holds the position of guardianship. Upon Willoughby’s jilting of Marianne and subsequent marriage to the wealthy Miss Grey, the residents of Barton Park take offense on the girl’s behalf. Even more distressing is Marianne’s suddenly declining health, brought about by the intensity of her distress. The simple solution for Sir John is to simply ignore Willoughby. When finally encountering the foolish young man, the gentleman instead expresses his outrage: with very blunt speech, he announces that Marianne is dying at Cleveland. Willoughby is so shocked by the news and the change in Sir John’s behavior that he races to Cleveland Park. However, Sir John’s change of heart does not last long; he seems incapable of holding a grudge against someone as miserable as Willoughby. Sir John’s aim was to scold the young man for his careless behavior, but in the end, he comforts him. His jovial nature does not allow for sustained ill will; with his displeasure vented, his easy-going personality reasserts itself, seeking to restore harmony and alleviate the distress he himself brought about. While he has the best interests of the Dashwood girls at heart, the light-hearted method he employs to express his opinions does not generate their respect beyond what his generosity demands.

In contrast to the concerned guardian of Sense and Sensibility, Mr. Bennet from Pride and Prejudice takes an overall dismissive view on his responsibilities as a husband and father to five daughters. Mr. Bennet is characterized as exceedingly clever, but for all his wit, Austen emphasizes his negligence towards his family in his character. He is a resigned intellectual; he looks down upon the
majority of his household because they lack his acuity. The sole person he has consideration for is Elizabeth, his cleverest daughter. The remainder of his daughters vary in their follies; Jane is too naïve, Mary is too pedantic, Catherine (called Kitty) is weak-willed and Lydia takes most after her silly mother. Mrs. Bennet, sadly, receives the most contempt, as she grew from a pretty debutante to the foolish woman clucking after potential suitors for her brood. She in turn is perplexed by the man she married, unable to keep up with the quick turns of his mind and his lack of concern for the future state of herself and her girls. Austen includes the matriarch’s observation to emphasize the broken relationship that their differing levels of intellect have produced: “Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character” (*P&P* 7-8). The resulting incomprehension on the side of both parties leads to their emotional estrangement; Mrs. Bennet busies herself with the social minutiae of Longbourn, while her husband hides away in his study. In *Jane and her Gentlemen: Jane Austen and the Men in Her Life and Novels*, Audrey Hawkridge comments on how quickly the gentleman’s expectations were overthrown by one lapse of judgment: “[S]adly he has condemned himself to spending the rest of his life smiling quietly at his own ironic philosophizing, with only one of his five daughters completely able to appreciate what he is talking about” (132). After this failure, Mr. Bennet retreats and focuses upon his studies. Austen takes intelligence, normally a positive attribute, and makes it a negative trait of this older man, to emphasize his estrangement from family life.

The children produced from the Bennets’ unhappy union do not entirely alleviate the gentleman’s ennui; instead, their number and sex only adds more problems. The chief disappointment is that there are five daughters and no sons.
As the owner of an entailed estate, Mr. Bennet has abandoned hope of passing the property within the immediate family after Lydia’s birth. Daniel Pool gives a definition of entailment and a glimpse of the difficulty that would face Mr. Bennet: “The restrictions of entail….were a way of tying up the land—he couldn’t sell or mortgage it. In fact, the settlement was usually a deed giving the land to the eldest son, but only for use during his lifetime, his rights to the property being thus restricted or ‘entailed’” (91). Indeed, unless there were firm provisions in place, the property could only be passed to male relations of the landowner. The tradition was so firmly engrained in the social consciousness of the gentry that any form of inheritance other than primogeniture was viewed as a challenge. In the case of the Bennet family, the closest male relation is a distant cousin, Mr. Collins, one with little interest in aiding the family after being rejected by Elizabeth.

While, as will be shown, Mrs. Bennet takes the situation as a trial to be overcome aggressively, Mr. Bennet responds in a more laconic fashion. Even with five daughters and a wife anxious to hunt husbands for them, his resignation dulls his motivation to provide for more than immediate needs. The lack of care towards the Bennet women and society’s view of them is of little concern to him; despite his support of Elizabeth, this negligence forces her to take an authoritative stance against her younger sisters, and prevents her from sympathizing completely with her father.

Because he holds his daughters in disdain due to their silly natures, Mr. Bennet’s pride causes him to underestimate the impact one mistake can have on his family. A key passage is his debate with Elizabeth, concerning Lydia’s desire to leave home to visit Brighton. Elizabeth knows that given Lydia’s excessive passion, she will find a way to embarrass herself and her family if she travels far. She therefore goes to her father, hoping he will see the impropriety of allowing
Lydia her way. But the gentleman has had enough of the clamor of thoughtless girls, and sees nothing wrong with sending one away and earning a little peace and quiet in return:

“Lydia will never be easy till she has exposed herself in some public place or other, and we can never expect her to do it with so little expense or inconvenience to her family as under the present circumstances.”

“If you were aware,” said Elizabeth, “of the very great disadvantage to us all, which must arise from the public notice of Lydia’s unguarded and imprudent manner; nay, which has already arisen from it, I am sure you would judge differently in the affair.”

(P&P 199)

Their argument is lengthy; though Mr. Bennet does not agree with Elizabeth, he allows her to voice her opinion. Elizabeth exhorts her father on her sisters’ behalf not to send Lydia away. But Mr. Bennet reasons that being in a larger environment will make her unnoticed in the grand scheme of things and no harm will fall upon the other siblings. In the end, Mr. Bennet has his way, and Lydia is sent off into the world. Elizabeth’s predictions unfold as she fears, with Lydia running away with the charming yet immoral Mr. Wickham. The Bennets are devastated, and even Mr. Bennet feels the repercussions, racing to find his daughter before news of her disgrace spreads. As he tells Elizabeth later, “You may well warn me against such an evil. Human nature is so prone to fall into it! No, Lizzy, let me once in my life feel how much I have been to blame. I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough” (P&P 254). Mr. Bennet understands that his daughter was right all along but still returns to his usual, cynical self within days. Much like Sir Thomas
Bertram from the novel *Mansfield Park*, Mr. Bennet lets ignorance concerning his daughters lead to scandal; his refusal to heed Elizabeth’s advice compounds his foolishness.

The disappointment an unsuitable marriage brings is a major theme of the book, and Mr. Bennet’s saving grace is the effort he puts into insuring Elizabeth’s happiness in this area. The reader sees that Lydia’s marriage to Wickham is a disaster because their personalities are too selfish to care about others. Likewise, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s marriage suffers because their personalities vary too much. Elizabeth sees the results of this incompatibility on a daily basis, coming as close to criticism of her favorite parent as she ever comes:

> Elizabeth, however, had never been blind to the impropriety of her father’s behavior as a husband. She had always seen it with pain; but respecting his abilities, and grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself, she endeavored to forget what she could not overlook, and to banish from her thoughts that continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum which, in exposing his wife to the contempt of her own children, was so highly reprehensible. (*P&P* 203-4)

Though she is closer to him than to Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth knows that Mr. Bennet’s disdain for those below his intellect is a negative trait. However, though she does not always agree with his assessments, she feels she must play along or lose her father’s respect. This resolve is tested when Mr. Bennet’s target becomes Mr. Darcy, the man Elizabeth has fallen for. When Mr. Bennet receives a hint that Mr. Darcy is interested, he immediately scoffs, thinking it a lie, while his daughter can only nod and smile. While Elizabeth must put up with her father’s mockery of Mr. Darcy, he in turn must face the reality of her affection for the man she once hated. Mr. Bennet urges his daughter to reconsider her seemingly materialistic
choice, and reminds her of the sorrows created with hasty marriages. Fortunately, Elizabeth manages to convince her father that her opinion of Mr. Darcy has changed, and the gentleman is able to rest assured that this child will be happy with her husband. This moment withstanding, Mr. Bennet uses his higher intelligence as a barrier between himself and other members of his family. His disappointment in marriage leads him to draw further away from the products of a hasty union. Austen utilizes Mr. Bennet’s superior intelligence as a negative trait, to shape his character around the stereotype of the academic reluctant to engage in mundane matters. Because he views heroine Elizabeth’s wit as equivalent to his, he shows favoritism towards her. His imprudent decisions and neglectful conduct cause her distress, and she is unable to give him her full support. The younger character is ultimately presented as more responsive to the family’s needs, whereas the older character is inadequate despite possessing the highest authority.

The novel Emma contains the weakest of the landowning gentlemen, the one who most embodies stereotypes of the aged as a burden to their families. Mr. Woodhouse is presented as a fretful man, deeply afraid of change and development. As she describes his limiting attitude and fearful temperament, Austen informs the reader of the severity of Mr. Woodhouse’s debilitation and makes clear that this man is not as strong as the other landowners: “[F]or having been a valetudinarian all his life, without activity of mind or body, he was a much older man in ways than in years; and though everywhere beloved for the friendliness of his heart and his amiable temper, his talents could not have recommended him at any time” (Emma 24-5). As kindhearted and patient as Mr. Woodhouse is, he strongly resists any sort of change. It is something that he feels takes away his close companions, regardless of how willing they are for different surroundings. David Monaghan allows that the culture of Highbury mirrors Mr.
Woodhouse’s static nature, in that few events of note occur before the story begins:

Nothing happens there, and nothing changes. Balls have long been defunct and formal social intercourse is so limited that it is two years since the Woodhouses have been to Donwell. Mr. Woodhouse, the arch-enemy of change, for whom visits even to his closest neighbors are severe trials and marriages disasters, is a suitable patriarch for the community. (*Social Context* 115)

From the outset of the novel, Mr. Woodhouse is shown clinging to the familiarity of Hartfield and its residents, hoping to keep everything orderly. As unnatural a behavior as this seems, the rest of the community yields to it, due to Mr. Woodhouse’s prestige.

Due to his hypochondria limiting his willingness to travel, as well as isolationist tendencies, Mr. Woodhouse is extremely selective in his choice of companions. Those who do relate with him hold to his habits, accommodating his moods and supporting his eccentricities. His favorite and most constant visitors are Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Goddard, two older women who most likely are his age cohorts; that is, they were born in the same generation. Barrow and Smith note that age cohorts can be studied together due to shared history:

Because cohort analysis permits the sociologist to study the effects that events may have on a broad group of individuals, all of whom experienced the same events at a similar state of biological and physical development, the development of various age groups can be studied as they move through their specific life cycles. (64)

The elders of the community, having grown old together, enjoy the quiet evening activities that Mr. Woodhouse prefers, while the younger set amuse themselves
with more lively pursuits. So long as the visitors follow his requirements, he welcomes them. By that measure, Mr. Woodhouse is only sociable when it suits him, and very rarely towards strangers.

While the community is eager to support him, Mr. Woodhouse does encounter censure for his habits. His son-in-law, Mr. John Knightley, does not tolerate Mr. Woodhouse’s attempts to control his behavior. While Isabella Knightley (Emma’s sister) shares the same anxieties as her father, she yields to her husband’s judgment. Towards Mr. Woodhouse, however, John Knightley expresses disdain for the coddling being offered, which greatly upsets the older gentleman, and also Emma. Although his short tempered retorts bruise the feelings of his in-laws, his protests against the older man’s efforts to regulate his family life are a healthy reaction, compared to the overly compliant attitudes expressed by the remainder of the characters. As Austen writes, “Mr. Woodhouse’s peculiarities were sometimes provoking him to a rational remonstrance or sharp retort equally ill bestowed. It did not happen often; for Mr. John Knightley had really a great regard for his father-in-law…but it was too often for Emma’s charity” (Emma 91). This conflict between observing the proper respect for one’s elders and defending one’s family from unasked-for intrusion is explored with the Knightleys’ visit to Hartfield. The dejection surrounding Mr. Woodhouse is not displaced by the arrival of his elder daughter, son-in-law and grandchildren from London. Despite his daughter’s efforts, Mr. Woodhouse persists in lamenting the loss of Mrs. Weston to Randalls, before passing judgment on the doings of the Knightley household. Mr. John Knightley finally becomes defensive and loses his temper. Faced with this opposition, Mr. Woodhouse becomes distressed, and his daughters and Mr. Knightley strive to distract the two gentlemen before they disagree further.
Austen’s characterization of Mr. Woodhouse leaves the reader no doubt of the burden he is to those around him. His behavior is almost childish, in his desire to be tended to and his self-centered viewpoint. His inability to tend to Emma leaves her to her own devices, as was explored earlier. He is capable of generous actions, but they come as reflections on how he would like to be treated.

Furthermore, his selfishness leads him to disregard everyone’s opinion except his own; he is not prone to speculation because the thought that there may be other points of view seldom crosses his mind. When it comes to entertaining the man, it is difficult to keep him in a good temper. Only a few people are capable of keeping Mr. Woodhouse occupied. Mrs. Weston is one, and Mr. Knightley also has experience. When he holds a strawberry-picking party at Donwell Abbey, he prepares extensively around the older man’s habits. Knowing that Mr. Woodhouse’s interests lie in ancestry, Mr. Knightley pulls items from his reasonably sized collection and places them in a comfortable room. In this way, Mr. Woodhouse can amuse himself without disruption, and can share with Emma his simple findings. With his consideration for the older man, Mr. Knightley shows his suitability for courting Emma; indeed, a man with less patience would be hard-pressed to endure his complaints for the sake of the daughter’s hand in marriage. The infirmity of the older man may have a humorous effect, but it also speaks to primal fears regarding age and the onset of senility. Emma’s competence far surpasses her father’s; while the older gentleman symbolizes inaction, and even entropy of the community, the heroine comes to embody future progress and growth within the village.

Perhaps as troubling as Mr. Woodhouse’s reclusive tendencies is the mirrored effect these have on Highbury. His point of view opposes change, which is necessary for a community to grow and remain versatile. Austen suggests that
Emma, with her plans throughout the novel to bring excitement and novelty to the residents, serves to keep the community moving forward; at last, she rejects a stagnant future by seeking marriage to Mr. Knightley. Not even being asked by a close friend of the family for her hand sweetens Mr. Woodhouse to the idea of his youngest daughter marrying. The author affirms the heroine’s growing self-determination through her lovingly firm efforts to convince her father that this is for the best: “Poor man!—it was at first a considerable shock to him, and he tried earnestly to dissuade her from it....But it would not do. Emma hung about him affectionately, and smiled, and said it must be so” (Emma 367-8). The static nature of Mr. Woodhouse’s world does not allow for change, and multiple concessions must be made for him to consent to the match. Most significantly, Mr. Knightley must reside at Hartfield with Emma and Mr. Woodhouse, giving up the sovereignty he enjoys at Donwell Abbey. Mr. Woodhouse’s reluctance to give his daughters away would be seen as menacing in a more impressive character; here, one only feels glad that Mr. Knightley and Emma manage to escape to their seaside honeymoon, for a little peace before returning home to him. In short, Mr. Woodhouse does exert considerable control over the community, through their indulgence of his weaknesses. The older character’s desire for a quiet, unchanging world is unhealthy, and threatens to socially sterilize Highbury. Yet Austen counters this threat with a young heroine who matures into a forward-thinking, mature leader who seems capable of renewing the social vigor of her community.

The fourth gentleman in this group is one whose characterization is based most strongly on a specific stereotype of the time: Sir Walter Elliot from Persuasion fits the description of a dandy, a fashion-minded gentleman who were trendy in the Georgian era. By Austen’s time, however, public approval about them had fallen. Venetia Murray notes how the newspapers of the time portrayed
them as foolish: “The dandy was caricatured as a ridiculous figure in contemporary cartoons, and any aspirant to dandyism was liable to be mocked as a ‘veritable tulip’ or a ‘pink of the ton’: Regency prints show any number of these outrageously dressed characters” (33). Austen’s portrayal of the Regency dandy presents a self-centered man whose station in life enables him to look down on those less fortunate. Sir Walter Elliot’s narcissism is explicitly focused upon on the very first page, as he reads his own entry in a book of ancestry. From this book’s prominence in his study to the self-inserted additions he so carefully inscribes, there are indications that the gentleman is engrossed by little more than himself: “Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter’s character; vanity of person and situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did” (Pers. 4). For example, whereas most of the populace would hold some respect for the naval powers that protected England, Sir Walter objects to their presence on several levels:

First, as being the means of bringing persons of obscure birth into undue distinction, and raising men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of; and secondly, as it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly; a sailor grows old sooner than any other man; I have observed it all my life. (Pers. 14)

This disdain of promoting the common-born into social importance, and of the ruinous physical effects of their service, demonstrates his vanity. In a further display of ignorance, of the two children remaining in his care, he bestows his attention on the one most like himself, his eldest daughter Elizabeth. This similarity is more than in physical appearance, as she shares her father’s inflated egotism and disdain for the lower orders. One reason she remains single is her
refusal to marry beneath her station; with the scarcity of wealthy heirs in the vicinity, Elizabeth must stay satisfied with being the lady of her father’s house. In contrast, the most sensible daughter of the family, Anne, is looked down upon by Sir Walter; her experiences with loss and heartbreak have caused her good looks to fade, leaving her a shadow of the beauty that was. Sir Walter once viewed her with promise, but as of the start of the novel, she is useful only when she is sent away to her fretful sister Mary. Anne endures this treatment out of respect for her father, though it is not approved of outside of Kel lynch-Hall. But perhaps most damaging to Sir Walter’s character is the neglect of his ancestral home, and his eventual banishment from it.

Of all the landowning characters Austen created, Sir Walter possesses a shameful distinction: of being so remiss in his caretaking duties as to lose his family home. Unwilling to heed warnings about his wasteful expenditure, Sir Walter spends his wealth extravagantly. The need to keep in style drives the man to the point where his expenses threaten his way of life in ways he can no longer ignore. The author, in promoting young heroines that are able to adapt to circumstances, implies that older characters are unable to deviate from set behaviors, even when confronted with negative consequences: “It had not been possible for him to spend less;…blameless as he was, he was not only growing dreadfully in debt, but was hearing it so often, that it became vain to attempt concealing it any longer, even partially, from his daughter” (Pers. 7). So heavy are the gentleman’s debts that as a last resort, he must give up Kel lynch-Hall and move to the city. Sir Walter fails to live up to the expectations of the time, which dictate that the gentry practice noblesse oblige: to see their lands tended to and local families cared for. Monaghan notes in the introduction to his anthology Jane Austen in a Social Context that this responsibility arises from the gentleman’s
freedom from manual labor; as we see from other characters, performing charitable acts was the worthiest method to fill the hours:

And, indeed, the right of the landed gentleman to rule resided finally in the belief that he was better situated than members of other groups to live up to such obligations. The banker and merchant might have had incomes as large as the landowner’s, but they had to work for theirs. The landowner’s wealth, on the other hand, was unearned, and this meant that he had leisure. (2)

The decision to rent out the estate, though necessary, is difficult for Sir Walter to accept; it is only through the efforts of his lawyer and his friend that he acquiesces to the agreement. Even then, he has specific demands for the renter once he discovers the individual is from the Navy. While he may be abandoning Kellynch-Hall, the possessiveness shown in regard to Admiral Croft’s use of the grounds indicates the self-importance he carries has not diminished. Sir Walter is not humbled by this, but believes his remove to Bath will be a temporary retreat. With the movement of the plot following Anne’s journeys, the reader must allow the passage of months before judging how the gentleman fares in his new surroundings.

Sir Walter proves his unworthiness of regaining Kellynch-Hall with his wholehearted embrace of city life and the brazen flattery of social superiors. When Anne is summoned to Bath, she finds that her father and sister have adjusted exceedingly well to their change in situation. Their domicile is comfortable, they have found acquaintances to visit and have visit, and there are plenty of amusements in the city that were lacking in the country. The fact that they have so adapted to city life is a disappointment to Anne; rather than endeavor to cut their costs and return sooner to Kellynch-Hall, Sir Walter continues to believe himself
superior to the majority of the populace. The heroine’s dissatisfaction with her father’s immersion in city-life further alienates her from her family and points to her detachment from the tainted values of the gentry: “She might not wonder, but she must sigh that her father should feel no degradation in his change; should see nothing to regret in the duties and dignity of the resident land-holder; should find so much to be vain of in the littleness of a town…” (Pers. 90-1). Of all of the new developments in the life of the Elliots, the introduction of social superiors reveals an eagerness to impress that seems out of place in the proud gentleman. Sir Walter flatters his relation, Lady Dalrymple, into acknowledging the Elliots. He views the relationship as a further enhancement to his ego; Austen’s decision to pair this obsequiousness with his arrogance against the lower classes casts the older character in a negatively opportunistic light. To emphasize this, she has her steadfast heroine view this sycophantic maneuvering with dismay: “Anne had never seen her father and sister before in contact with nobility, and she must acknowledge herself disappointed. She had hoped better things from their high ideas of their own situation in life and was reduced to form a wish which she had never foreseen—a wish that they had more pride…” (Pers. 98). Were the advances of friendship on Sir Walter’s side based upon an honest desire to re-establish acquaintance with family members, the enthusiasm could be excused.

However, the obvious motive being social promotion, this is only a sign of the dignity the gentleman is willing to throw away in order to satisfy himself.

Likewise, Lady Dalrymple and Miss Carteret place only the barest importance on being approached; the meetings between the Elliots and their cousins fulfill the social requirements of good breeding and delve no deeper. By the time of Austen’s writing, the strict code of decorum followed by the upper class was losing its importance, and becoming a superficial marker of gentility; the older
man’s lack of empathy insures that he follows the form of genteel communication, but does not provide substantive content: “[M]anners were ceasing to function as a source of moral communication. For the decadent old order,…they were becoming little more than vehicles for empty display and the emerging naval classes were as yet too unsophisticated to understand the intricacies of polite codes” (Structure 119). For Sir Walter and Elizabeth, performing these empty courtesies for advancement is a natural procedure. Within the social set of Bath, Sir Walter is able and willing to abandon the responsibilities he was born to in order to indulge his narcissism.

With this set of older male characters, Austen sought to create figures that were less daunting and less able to control her heroines. Their flaws reduce the overall power behind their words and actions, leading younger characters to assert themselves and take over neglected aspects of estate life for themselves. Austen insures that the heroines preserve a moral balance: they obey their patriarchal guardians but maintain a firm belief in their own principles and decisions. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood accept the aid of Sir John Middleton, but do not approve of his earthy sense of humor. Elizabeth Bennet respects her father while being aware that his reclusive tendencies hurt his family. Emma Woodhouse’s view of her father, as the first chapter shows, shifts from indulgence to a realization of the sterility he and his unchanging worldview embody. Anne Elliot is all too conscious of her father’s narcissism; her grief at abandoning her home due to his negligence exceeds his own. Again, the ageist distribution of traits is contingent upon the need to weaken the support network so that the heroines assert themselves. The patriarchs here give the heroines their financial support, but their flaws serve to socially hinder them, or give them cause to search elsewhere for assistance.
There are noticeably fewer gentlemen that can be considered ideal examples of landowning authority or exemplary men. Not every character is needed to antagonize the heroines; the men who serve as love interests certainly should not. There are also minor characters who render aid on one or two occasions before slipping into the background. Colonel Brandon from *Sense and Sensibility* is an example of the former; twice the age of the Dashwood sisters, he becomes attracted to spirited Marianne. However, her views are heavily ageist and she scorns the idea of marrying someone so much older than she. Over the course of the novel, he gains the friendship of sensible Elinor, and proves himself worthy of Marianne with his decisive and compassionate actions when she is gravely ill, causing her to reconsider her ageist point of view. A happily married man, Admiral Croft of *Persuasion* is a character of few appearances within the work. His forthright nature and egalitarian relationship with his wife impress Anne Elliot and give her a favorable impression of the naval life. By creating some characters that uphold the systems of authority well, Austen not only offers praise, but underscores the disparity between the proper gentlemen and the characters lacking the same capability.

The fact that during the Regency Era, men sought to establish their fortunes before marriage meant that husbands were often years older than their wives. Out of Austen’s male characters, Colonel Brandon from *Sense and Sensibility* is the only love interest initially rejected due to his age. He is introduced to the Dashwood family as Sir John Middleton’s close friend, and upon first impression seems serious and withdrawn. Austen writes concerning the sisters’ first impression of the gentleman, “His appearance was not unpleasing, in spite of his being in the opinion of Marianne and Margaret an absolute old bachelor…; but though his face was not handsome his countenance was sensible, and his address
was particularly gentlemanlike” (S&S 27-8). Marianne strongly categorizes him according to the age difference between them. Though their shared love of music is a point in his favor that she is willing to concede, on the subject of courtship and marriage, Marianne’s beliefs are inflexible. Her sense of romance will not allow for a man as old as thirty-five to be a proper suitor. Her sister and mother both attempt to reason with her, but with all the certainty of youth she replies.

“Colonel Brandon is certainly younger than Mrs. Jennings, but he is old enough to be my father; and if he were ever animated enough to be in love, must have long outlived every sensation of the kind…When is a man to be safe from such wit, if age and infirmity will not protect him?”…

“My dearest child,” said her mother laughing, “at this rate you must be in continual terror of my decay; and it must seem to you a miracle that my life has been extended to the advanced age of forty.”

“I know very well that Colonel Brandon is not old enough to make his friends yet apprehensive of losing him in the course of nature. He may live twenty years longer. But thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony.” (S&S 29-30)

This severe reaction encompasses older women as well, with Marianne affirming the belief at the time that at twenty-eight, the only status a woman could hope for was spinsterhood or a loveless marriage of convenience. Unlike Emma Woodhouse, Marianne Dashwood unashamedly and frequently voices her ageist opinions—in fact she refuses to reconcile the social fables concerning age she has learned with the actual state of her companions. Barrow and Smith write in Aging, the Individual and Society that these lessons introduce a negative perception of aging to the young mind: “Old age is approached with apprehension, if not always
fear, for it has been typically regarded as a time of physical ugliness, sadness, and sorrow, a time of uselessness, loneliness, boredom and poverty” (10). If there are three aspects of ageism, Marianne has already demonstrated two; a prejudice against those older than her, and an active use of stereotypes against them. The third point readily becomes apparent when John Willoughby enters the story, as she discriminates against Colonel Brandon’s attentions in favor of his.

Willoughby serves as Colonel Brandon’s foil in the work, and he expresses ageist opinions as well as encouraging Marianne’s own. His characterization mirrors Marianne Dashwood’s in their excessive sensibility. Elinor notes their similarity and censures the potential impropriety to herself: “…in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged… he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve, in spite of all that he and Marianne could say in its support” (S&S 38). With the coming of a younger gentleman to the area, Marianne’s attentions are undividedly Willoughby’s. Their tastes coincide exactly, as do their prejudices. Willoughby’s dislike of Colonel Brandon finds voice during a conversation, with Marianne supporting him and Elinor arguing against. Their remarks offend Elinor, and as she asks for clarification, the pair relates the shallow reasoning for their disdain. Willoughby envies Colonel Brandon’s status and wealth, and Marianne views his solemnity as dullness. Another reason for their lack of compassion is explored by Erdman B. Palmore, who writes that in a study by Butler, young people disassociate with older age groups to avoid thinking about what awaits them: “Ageism allows the younger generation to see older people as different from themselves; thus, they suddenly cease to identify with their elders as human beings and thereby reduce their own sense of fear and dread of aging, illness and death” (101). The superiority Marianne and Willoughby feel is not dampened by Elinor’s
attempts to present a rational appraisal of the colonel’s worth; they refuse to acknowledge this older gentleman for ageist reasons. The ageist views shared by Marianne Dashwood and John Willoughby do little justice to Colonel Brandon and underline her immaturity and his rakish ways. They exist in their own world, happily until circumstances separate them and force them to mature past their prejudice.

The eldest Dashwood sister, Elinor, does not resemble her family members in temperament, nor does she hold to their prejudiced beliefs. The sensible sister, (in the modern use of the word), she follows the mores and customs of the day, displaying more reserve than her mother and sisters. She takes into consideration more than Colonel Brandon’s age; she appreciates his calm and steady comportment, and regrets that it does not catch her sister’s attention. Elinor may keep her opinions to herself, but Austen presents them to the reader in a way that underlines her care for the gentleman.

She liked him—in spite of his gravity and reserve, she beheld in him an object of interest. His manners, though serious, were mild; and his reserve appeared rather the result of some oppression of spirits, than of any natural gloominess of temper. Sir John had dropped hints of past injuries and disappointments, which justified her belief of his being an unfortunate man, and she regarded him with respect and compassion. (S&S 38)

Colonel Brandon’s esteem for her is mutual; he readily confides in her and trusts her discretion. When the Dashwood sisters leave Barton Cottage to visit London with Mrs. Jennings, he looks in on the pair; though Marianne wishes to see Willoughby and no other, Elinor welcomes him and re-establishes a cordial atmosphere in the home. Though she appreciates their friendship and sees Colonel
Brandon’s worth as a gentleman, Elinor still supports Marianne’s attachment to Willoughby. Therefore, when inquired as to the progress of the young people’s relationship, she is torn by her loyalties. As time passes in London, and Willoughby’s dissolute character is revealed, the concern the Colonel shows for Marianne is evident to Elinor. He willingly relates the story of the two Eliza Williams, and gives the Dashwoods and the reader a glimpse of his personal past. In turn, his disclosure further strengthens his friendship with the elder sister, and begins to soften the views of the younger. As close as the two become, it is little wonder that Mrs. Jennings begins to entertain matchmaking ideas towards the Colonel and Elinor instead of Marianne. However, their relationship remains platonic. Through his position as Delaford’s owner, he offers Edward Ferrars a vacant living, based upon Elinor’s good feelings towards the younger man and knowledge of his familial difficulties. Furthermore, when Marianne takes ill, Elinor requests Colonel Brandon bring her mother to her side, a request competently and swiftly enacted:

Her fears, he had no courage, no confidence to attempt the removal of…but her difficulties were instantly obviated, for with a readiness that seemed to speak to the occasion, and the service prearranged in his mind, he offered himself as the messenger who should fetch Mrs. Dashwood. She thanked him with brief, though fervent gratitude…

(S&S 220)

While at this point the Colonel’s feelings are known to the reader, his offer is a clear demonstration of their depth. David Monaghan asserts that this decisive action seeks to both bring comfort to Marianne and alleviate Elinor’s distress: “Colonel Brandon, however, although probably even more concerned about Marianne, never loses sight of Elinor’s needs… (H)e offers his services in a way
that combines calmness and urgency of purpose in just the right proportions to set
Elinor’s mind at rest….” (Structure 62). Colonel Brandon’s concern for all of the
Dashwood ladies, not just Marianne, indicates recognition of social responsibility
that a younger man such as Willoughby does not and may never grasp. As such,
he proves himself more worthy of Marianne than Willoughby and is granted a
happy ending with her in Delaford.

In *Persuasion*, Austen again engages in positive ageism, characterizing
Admiral Croft as worldly wise and capable due to his seasoning and experiences
as a leader. He is shown as the epitome of the naval elite, demonstrating the vigor
of the rising class as opposed to the ennui of the gentry. On leave from his
maritime duties, he acquires news of Kellynch-Hall being let through Sir Walter’s
lawyer. Soon enough, he and his wife, being previous residents of the county,
make their way to Somersetshire. Upon Austen’s introduction of the couple, they
meet with Sir Walter, who despite his earlier declaration of disdain for the naval
class, admits Admiral Croft to be a better specimen than most. The admiral takes
up residence in Kellynch-Hall and becomes closely acquainted and befriended by
the Musgrove family. Austen points out the exemplary relationship Admiral Croft
has with his wife, contrasting the slew of incompatible matches throughout her
earlier novels, through the observations of her heroine. Anne Elliot recalls her
former happiness with Captain Wentworth and takes positive notice of the long-
lasting camaraderie between the Crofts: “With the exception of Admiral and Mrs.
Croft, who seemed particularly attached and happy, (Anne could allow no other
exception …) there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no
feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved” (*Pers.* 42). In addition to his
strong attachment to his spouse, Admiral Croft’s personality combines a good
nature with decisive judgment making, an advantage from serving in the Navy in
wartime. Notably, his forthright nature extends to more than military matters, as the admiral honestly admits to Anne the speed to which he courted and married the then Miss Wentworth:

Ay, this comes of the peace. If it were war, now, he would have settled it long ago. –We sailors, Miss Elliot, cannot afford to make long courtships in time of war. How many days was it, my dear, between the first time of my seeing you, and our sitting down together in our lodgings at North Yarmouth? (Pers. 61)

Mrs. Croft is quick to add that they knew of each other before meeting, to assure Anne that it was not precisely a hasty marriage. Even so, the Crofts are a well-matched pair; the Admiral shows a willingness to work with his capable wife that is seldom seen in Austen’s works. This partnership in turn promises the best for the estate they rent, insuring it will not lose its prestige.

Austen emphasizes the disparity between the capability of Admiral Croft and the careless extravagance of Sir Walter Eliot as Anne returns to Kellynch-Hall and witnesses the admiral’s rehabilitation of the estate. She is able to judge the improvements they have made, and the care they are taking of the needy in the village. From this, Anne realizes how deficient her own father was in these matters, and what superior custodians of the property the Crofts are compared to the Elliots: “… she could not but in conscience feel that they were gone who deserved not to stay, and that Kellynch-Hall had passed into better hands than its owners’. These convictions must unquestionably have their own pain, and severe was its kind…” (Pers. 82). Marilyn Butler acknowledges that Anne’s peripheral standing in the family, enforced by her father and sister, allows her to judge between the past and present landholders without filial bias:
Sir Walter’s abandonment of Kellynch for self-indulgence at Bath is not seen primarily in terms of its effect on Anne, but as a point of general principle. Anne is not so much his victim, but the dispassionate observer who notices that Admiral Croft is a more manly and practical occupant of Kellynch than her father had been.

(63)

Such is Anne’s opinion, that she cannot share the pain of her friend and godmother Lady Russell, who regrets the removal of the rightful owner from the grounds. Though she has not yet seen Sir Walter and Elizabeth in their new domicile, she does not feel their absence so strongly nor object to the Crofts’ necessary claims. The only person Anne misses from her former life at Kellynch is her mother, who passed away years before the novel’s start. With her visit to the house finished, Anne passes its care to Admiral Croft with an easy mind. In turn, she welcomes his presence in Bath as the story’s resolution draws the major characters together once more.

The last function Admiral Croft serves in the novel is to bear and deliver tidings. With his travels and contact with the Musgroves and Captain Wentworth, he possesses information Anne is eager to acquire. One chance encounter gives her the opportunity to speak with him, and rather than take offense, he welcomes her company. Admiral Croft’s eagerness to talk to Miss Anne does result in a great many words spoken before coming to the subject of most interest to Anne: the switch of Louisa Musgrove’s affection from Wentworth to another naval captain, Benwick. As could be expected, while the admiral does not disapprove of the engagement, he finds Benwick lacking in liveliness and enthusiasm his brother-in-law possesses. While Anne cannot voice her opinion publicly, she is in agreement with the admiral. This discussion highlights another difference
between him and Sir Walter, in that his interest in the lives of those in his acquaintance demonstrates a concern for their well-being that the narcissism of the gentleman can never match. Conversing with Admiral Croft helps keep Anne informed and strengthens her own opinions on events, an activity sadly lacking in her family circle. Though his scenes are brief, Admiral Croft does affect the novel by reclaiming Kellynch-Hall and demonstrating the aptitude to improve it and the welcoming nature to impress upon Anne Elliot the benefits of the naval life.

The idealized characters here and throughout the novels serve as foils to the flawed individuals. They embody the virtues age bestows on a person; wisdom and experience are both emphasized strongly, along with an understanding of interpersonal relationships that the younger characters have yet to grasp themselves. The other men, in contrast, seem more foolish, and are mostly invested in their own well-being. Just as Austen afflicts some characters with authority with negative traits, she also promotes positive stereotypes with her affirmative characterization of male protagonists.

Examining the characterization of males for traces of ageism reveals that the distribution of negative traits among the older gentlemen is a coincidental effect of Austen targeting the patriarchal system of supremacy in order to empower her heroines. The majority of older men looked into here are members of the gentry, owners of large estates. One might expect such figures to be idealized and worthy gentlemen; however Austen manages to subvert their absolute power, in ways that allow her heroines to operate with some freedom in this society. Their faults vary from individual to individual, and yet appear to stem from the complaisance of being near the top of the social ladder. Ignorance, neglect, foolishness and self-indulgence are allowed to flourish in their country environment. To a man, they believe themselves secure in their sphere of
influence, and often it is a presence or issue from the outside world that serves to shake them from their sheltered lives. These faults are a double-edged sword to the heroines in their care, for while knowledge of them permits the girls to work around their quirks, oftentimes they hinder the heroines’ own pursuit of happiness. In contrast, the more worldly gentlemen seem to be the most stable, and the most likely to assist the heroines in their endeavors. Unencumbered by the narrow world of the gentry, they possess a realistic view of events and individuals. The country gentlemen of Austen’s works, due to the isolated remove of their estates, place excessive credence on their social standing; they are the men of consequence in their circles, which allows flaws to flourish without challenge.
CHAPTER 4: MOTHERS AND MENTORS

While the patriarchs of Jane Austen’s works are uniform in their status as landowners, her matriarchs inhabit a broader variety of social circumstances. They range from the destitute living off of charity to female members of the gentry owning estates in their own right. Older female characters face the stereotypes of age as well as negative cultural perceptions against women and issues particular to each social class. Associations the Austen heroines have with these women are of a more personal nature than with the older gentlemen, regardless of status. They are, after all, the mothers and the mother-substitutes of the young women, examples of mature Regency femininity that the heroines should aspire to emulate as they age. But as with the older men, there exist flaws that limit their ability to aid the heroines. Women in positions of power, such as *Pride and Prejudice*’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh and *Sense and Sensibility*’s Mrs. Ferrars are portrayed as unfeeling and vain; they fiercely oppose the heroines under the pretense of protecting their wealth. Austen also depicts very foolish women, caught up in one aspect of the world and foregoing all others. They attempt to assist the heroines but faults such as Mrs. Allen’s obsession with clothes, Mrs. Bennet’s husband-hunting on her daughters’ behalf, Mrs. Dashwood’s excessive sensibility and Miss Bates’s gossiping all discourage the girls from seeking their advice. Even within one family, Austen presents three adult sisters in *Mansfield Park* whose marriages are shown to have shaped their futures and their children negatively, forcing her heroine to rely upon herself. However, female characters tend to have more interest in the success of the heroines than their male counterparts and a better understanding of the social environment for having experienced it themselves. With this combination of knowledge and inspiration, matrons such as Mrs.
Jennings and Lady Russell use their skills to aid the heroines. For the most part, Austen dispersed negative traits to the majority of her older female characters in order to compromise the heroines’ social network; as they are unable (or unwilling) to seek the advice of women who have life experience, they had to formulate their own opinions and solutions to problems. The prejudices society held against older females led to that demographic being portrayed in Austen’s novels as opposition or hindrance to the younger generation; their unreliability forces the heroines to disassociate from even the well-meaning matrons and develop principles based upon their own experiences.

The reluctance of the Regency patriarchy to give jurisdiction to women gave rise to negative stereotypes concerning ladies in control of land or fortune. For example, having such control made the females exceedingly domineering and in some cases less feminine. While it may be understandable that any sensible person with capital should have say in its use, the stereotypes push that attitude beyond rational limits. It must be noted that, many times, the reason these women possessed the fortune was due to a death in the family: for example, older women who lost their husbands are scrutinized because they were no longer under a man’s control. Austen uses negative stereotypes in this vein to characterize two women in her works. Widowed Mrs. Ferrars from Sense and Sensibility is a cold woman, who seeks to elevate her son Edward socially when he has no interest, going so far as to snub his future wife Elinor for lacking the proper dowry. The emotional welfare of her children is of decidedly less importance than improving her family’s influence. In Pride and Prejudice, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is a stern mistress in command of the Rosings estate. She believes her word to be irrefutable and proves to be meddlesome in the affairs of those closest to her. Austen created these characters appealing to the stereotypical perception that
wealth affects women negatively. Possessing wealth has made them overly proud, and their advanced age implies that their hauteur is deeply engrained, a viewpoint challenged but not altered by encountering the heroines of the work.

Drawing upon the stereotype of the wealthy yet arrogant widow, Austen makes the matriarch of the Ferrars family as overbearing and controlling as she can. Mrs. Ferrars is a character intent on promoting her family through whatever means. Her highest hopes rest on Edward, her eldest son—she intends for him to enter politics and be a financial success, instead of allowing him pursuing more peaceful dreams. The pressure she places him under causes Edward to withdraw from his new acquaintance, Elinor Dashwood. The heroine is clever enough to pinpoint the source of his distress, as Austen writes: “The shortness of his visit, the steadiness of his purpose in leaving them, originated in the same fettered inclination, the same inevitable necessity of temporizing with his mother. The old, well-established grievance of duty against will, parent, was the cause of all” (S&S 74-5). The lack of familiarity Elinor has with Mrs. Ferrars does not stop her from making several accurate predictions about her nature. The most severe is that Edward’s lack of profession makes him dependent on maintaining good relations with his mother for complete financial support. Otherwise, he risks being cast out of the family without any means to make a living. Upon her brother’s arrival in London, Elinor is given the chance to confirm her suspicions by visiting the Ferrars household. The author emphasizes the matriarch’s antagonistic role by describing her as unattractive, but with an air of command that makes her formidable:

Mrs. Ferrars was a little, thin woman, upright, even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness, in her aspect. Her complexion was sallow; and her features small, without beauty, and
naturally without expression; but a lucky contraction of the brow had
rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving it
the strong characters of pride and ill nature. (S&S 165)

Mrs. Ferrars does little to improve Elinor’s opinion of her during the visit,
snubbing her in favor of Lucy Steele, Elinor’s rival for Edward. The heroine’s
efforts at painting are dismissed as mediocre, while little attempt at civil
conversation is made. Of the social gatherings depicted in *Sense and Sensibility*,
this event stands as the least welcoming and most unforgiving of the set. The
interpersonal warfare distinguishes it from the inclusive atmosphere engendered
by Sir John Middleton and Mrs. Jennings, as Monaghan rationalizes the hostile
ambiance: “In other respects… it is much more unpleasant than even the most
badly conducted of the Middletons’ parties because, far from being ignored,
manners become offensive weapons in a battle for power and prestige” (*Structure*
58). Elinor in turn expected no less from Mrs. Ferrars. She had foreknowledge of
the family’s mercenary mentality through her encounters with Fanny Dashwood, a
member of the Ferrars family before her marriage to Elinor’s stepbrother. With
her characterization of Mrs. Ferrars, Austen uses the stereotype of the overbearing
maternal figure to create an unpleasant woman whose ambitions are echoed by her
offspring, while denying the commendable but less-fortunate heroine any positive
acknowledgment.

Because Mrs. Ferrars governs her family harshly and shows clear bias
against a praiseworthy guest such as Elinor Dashwood, Austen administers a
punishment designed to overthrow her machinations. When the secret
engagement between Edward and Lucy is revealed, Fanny Dashwood relays the
message to her mother, who reacts with extreme shock. The disclosure brings the
wrath of Mrs. Ferrars down upon the heads of the offending parties. She
effectively disowns Edward, making second son Robert the heir of the family. Elinor feels this is a heartless move of the mother’s part, but her half-brother believes his mother-in-law to have the best of intentions and that she will take him back once her temper settles. In the end, Mrs. Ferrars does recognize Edward, after his marriage to Elinor. However, his claims under primogeniture remain under his younger brother’s control, since he still enters the church against his mother’s wishes. The hasty temper she displays turns back into generosity, as Lucy flatters her mother-in-law through her marriage to Robert into accepting her. A scheming mother so gains a scheming daughter-in-law, and pronounces her the favorite over Elinor. Austen does not inflict further punishment on Mrs. Ferrars for her incivility after her plans are overthrown; having her children continually rebel against her wishes is statement enough that her unfeeling behavior is not conducive to family unity. With Mrs. Ferrars, Austen sets an imposing woman as an obstacle to her heroine’s happiness; the use of negative stereotypes in her characterization is meant to underline the offensiveness of her misbehavior while offering a contrast to Elinor’s polite conduct throughout the novel. Witnessing the mercenary outlook of the older woman, the reader’s sympathy is therefore turned to the younger lady and set against the conceited widow.

Although Mrs. Ferrars is depicted as a lady of large fortune, Lady Catherine from *Pride and Prejudice* surpasses her in rank as a female character who owns an estate in her own right. As such, Austen ensures that her vanity is also greater. Her control over the Rosings estate and the surrounding village is absolute, and no matter is beneath her interest. The first suggestion of this authority comes as the rector in her estate, Mr. Collins, describes her for his cousins, the Bennets. An extreme flatterer, he describes Lady Catherine as a noble personage; the word
“condescending” is used frequently to mark her believed superiority over the common folk.

Lady Catherine was reckoned proud by many people he knew, but *he* had never seen anything but affability in her. She had always spoken to him as she would to any other gentleman; she made not the slightest objection to his joining in the society of the neighborhood, nor to his leaving his parish occasionally for a week or two, to visit his relations. (*P&P* 65)

This biased description of the domineering lady serves to impress the weak-willed, but for Elizabeth Bennet it only confirms her preconceptions against the noble class. When circumstances oblige her to visit the older woman, Elizabeth faces the challenge indifferent to her reputation. The lady in person is quite formidable—much like Mrs. Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, her key feature is her demeanor. In particular, her voice is described as commanding, and gives the impression that she is not to be trifled with. Forewarned by Mr. Collins what sort of woman Lady Catherine is, Elizabeth faces her with respectful perseverance. When queried about her family, she refuses to give straight answers to delicate subjects, surprising the dowager with her resistance against a social superior:

> “Upon my word,” said her ladyship, “you give your opinion very decidedly for so young a person.—Pray, what is your age?”

> “With three younger sisters grown up,” replied Elizabeth smiling, “your Ladyship can hardly expect me to own it.”

Lady Catherine seemed quite astonished at not receiving a direct answer; and Elizabeth suspected herself to be the first creature who had ever dared to trifle with so much dignified impertinence. (*P&P* 147)
The conflict between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine is Austen’s marker that an excessive show of superiority goes beyond responsible authority. For example, Lady Catherine visits the common folk informally for various reasons. However humane these good works appear, the manner in which she performs them indicates the pleasure she takes in making pronouncements on people’s lives. Elizabeth challenges the landowner’s controlling tendencies and proves her wit and courage in the face of them. Her cause is aided by the knowledge that Lady Catherine is treating her guests shamefully with her patronizing demeanor. David Monaghan affirms the lady’s lapse in protocol runs counter to acceptable conduct:

As hostess it is (Lady Catherine’s) duty to set her guests at their ease. However, far from acknowledging this obligation, she treats them in a manner designed to make them fully aware of their inferior rank, and obviously expects the kind of sycophantic response she receives from Mr. Collins and Sir William Lucas at dinner.…

(Structure 68)

With Lady Catherine, being the sole administrator of Rosings gives her the belief that everything falls under her jurisdiction. The scrutinizing use of her authority is not condoned by the heroine, and meant to evoke a negative response from the reader as well.

Due to the use of similar stereotypes, Lady Catherine is given motivation to preserve her wealth in a way that matches that upheld by Mrs. Ferrars. Austen presents as Lady Catherine’s goal the desire to marry her daughter, the heiress of Rosings, to Mr. Darcy, who owns the estate of Pemberly. The consolidation of wealth would only improve her own standing; in the name of safeguarding her family’s fortune, she does not exempt her own relations from the intense scrutiny she levels against the people in her village. Her aggressive maneuvers to see this
goal are not praiseworthy, and the reader is meant to approve of Elizabeth’s subtle resistance against her. This is shown most pointedly in Lady Catherine’s interruption of Elizabeth and Colonel Fitzwilliam’s discussion of music. She interrupts her own conversation with Mr. Darcy in order to barge in. She twists the conversation to suit her purpose—to both praise and admonish Georgiana Darcy through her brother, as well as emphasize Elizabeth’s deficiencies. Lady Catherine’s opinion of the young lady remains low, even after her long visit. Likewise, Elizabeth dislikes the lady, enough to take joy from imagining the appalled reaction she’d inspire from the older woman if the heroine had accepted Mr. Darcy’s proposal. Overt antagonism would reflect poorly on the offending party; Elizabeth therefore keeps this information to herself, but allows herself to be entertained by her thoughts in order to endure her final visit to Rosings. At this point in Pride and Prejudice, it seems that the two women are at an impasse, neither able to best the other. Austen created this rivalry to challenge Lady Catherine’s self-important worldview; the character is presented as grasping for too much control, and the resistance expressed by Elizabeth builds up to a final confrontation to decide whose reasoning will best the other.

With the confrontation at Longbourn, Austen is able to criticize Lady Catherine’s behavior through Elizabeth’s well-articulated wit. Although Elizabeth returns home, the disdain each bears for the other remains. In Lady Catherine’s case, it is so great that upon learning through gossip that Lydia Bennet has eloped, and that her nephew Darcy shows high interest in Elizabeth, she hastens to Longbourn to forestall the same events from happening to her own kin. As previously discussed, both parties are headstrong individuals who resist being dominated by others. The verbal duel between them culminates in this altercation. The first move is made by Lady Catherine, naturally as she is the one to approach
the house. Her discourteous entrance re-establishes the animosity between the dowager and the heroine, as the older woman snubs her hostesses’ greetings: “She entered the room with an air more than unusually ungracious, made no other reply to Elizabeth’s salutation, than a slight inclination of the head, and sat down without saying a word” (P&P 298). This disregard for social niceties was demonstrated before as she served as hostess; in this setting, she proves equally infuriating as a guest. With this air of condescension, the older woman makes clear the fact that this will not be a social visit. Elizabeth responds in kind, as she escorts Lady Catherine along a walkway. Instead of providing polite conversation, she remains quiet. Lady Catherine then makes clear the object of her visit: to warn Elizabeth of the censure she faces if she encourages Mr. Darcy’s attentions. So set is she on warding the young lady away, that she threatens Elizabeth with complete ostracism should she marry her nephew. Elizabeth, in turn, counters that the honor of being chosen to share Mr. Darcy’s life would outweigh any other concern:

“Because honor, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bennet, interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you willfully set against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted and despised, by every one connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never be mentioned by any of us.”

“These are heavy misfortunes,” replied Elizabeth. “But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation, that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.” (P&P 301)
The argument continues for some time, but eventually Lady Catherine realizes Elizabeth will not be swayed. She is determined to live her own life, and not be dictated to by the forces around her. Lady Catherine is forced to withdraw, with graceless parting remarks. In this confrontation, Elizabeth proves the victor against Lady Catherine. The same stubborn nature shared by the women ensures a spirited argument, but in this instance Elizabeth’s acknowledgement of Mr. Darcy’s worth, even over the opinion of his aunt, trumps Lady Catherine’s overwhelming snobbery, and the dowager is forced to withdraw. In the face of insurgence, the lady who has always intruded on the affairs of others is put in her place by a challenger cleverer than she expected. This is a rebuke directed at older females to adhere to courtesy no matter their financial circumstances; the fact that it was delivered by a younger character emphasizes both the dowager’s failings and the heroine’s courage.

Jane Austen includes many different types of widow in her novels, a state likely experienced by an older woman during a period where, if she survived giving birth to children, a female’s life expectancy surpassed a male’s. Widows with negative character traits speak to the anxiety the Regency patriarchy felt concerning independent females, believing that they dominated those around them and frankly overshadowed the men. In the cases of Mrs. Ferrars and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Austen designates them as antagonists whose wealth has inflated their sense of worth. They feel great pride in their families and show opposition to anyone who threatens their fortune. In truth, these characters discriminate against the heroines because of their youth and lower rank. The offended young ladies, in turn, are not interested in following their prejudiced example. Lady Catherine and Mrs. Ferrars are not the only older ladies of fortune
in Austen’s works; they serve as a warning to the heroines about the negative influence money and wealth can have on an individual’s ego.

Although the second group of older ladies does not antagonize the heroines, their attempts to provide aid are hampered by exaggerated flaws that render them foolish and suggest unreliability. Austen’s motivation being to weaken intergenerational attachments, she distributes traits to these women that discourage the heroines from depending entirely on their advice and support. Mrs. Allen from *Northanger Abbey* becomes the sponsor of Catherine Morland, inviting her to Bath to experience the town’s social life. However, her single-minded obsession with fashion keeps her from being an effective guide into the public world, leading the heroine to look for counsel from other sources. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs. Dashwood is presented as an overly sentimental woman who takes the part of her like-minded daughter over the objections of her rational firstborn. Nonetheless, she does show signs of competence, as she takes action against the forces seeking to oppress her and her children after the death of her husband. The central matriarch of *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet, is a silly woman obsessed with getting her five daughters married; a considerable task for even a sensible matron. She lacks insight concerning the financial circumstances surrounding the family, and her zeal in husband-hunting embarrasses her daughters frequently. The unmarried Miss Bates from *Emma*, while friendly, is rebuffed by Emma Woodhouse for possessing an overeager personality, particularly in the realm of chitchat. Austen demonstrates how being a member of multiple disadvantaged groups adversely affects Miss Bates, as she feels compelled to adopt an sycophantic manner in order to continue acquaintance with social superiors. The foolish nature of these four characters, contrasted against the maturity and rationality shown by the heroines, makes them comical figures at best. Their age
dictates that respect be shown to them, but their flaws discourage the heroines from fully trusting their elders and selecting them to be role models.

*Northanger Abbey* being Austen’s earliest work, the characterization of the female characters is more simplistic here than in her later works. The older women in particular suffer from a narrow-minded standpoint, devoting themselves to one pursuit alone. For example, the attention of Catherine Morland’s mother is enveloped by the goings-on of her large family and little else. A more detailed case concerns Catherine’s sponsor, Mrs. Allen. As the novel opens, the community of Fullerton is presented as out-of-the-way, with little opportunity to engage in high-society events. To remedy this, Catherine steps out into the world in the company of the Allens, a wealthy though childless couple. Mr. Allen proves to be a responsible adult, but the same cannot be said of his wife. Austen goes so far to say that Mr. Allen, like many of her other male characters, married his wife for the façade of gentility she displayed without searching for greater depth: “She had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner. The air of a gentlewoman, a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind, were all that could account for her being the choice of a sensible, intelligent man like Mr. Allen” (*NA* 10). Her great passion in life is not the social welfare she can offer the Fullerton community, but fashion. Having no children to occupy her, Mrs. Allen is free to indulge her whims to their fullest. Her care of Catherine, while well-meant, is annoying in its hollow nature. She becomes fixated on whatever topic is at hand and can do little to deviate from it. At Catherine’s first ball, this becomes apparent as a lack of social connections forces the two ladies to retire away from the main activities. A more interested chaperone would perhaps have made polite inquiries around the room, to gauge the nature of the company. Mrs. Allen does not make the effort to alleviate Catherine’s boredom by proactive
means; rather, she intensifies it with her passive complaints. John Dussinger notes
that even the sheltered Catherine can distinguish the inadequacy of her guardian’s
communication, though not realizing as of yet what this might lead to:

Mrs. Allen’s discourse fails both as constative and as performative
speech, but the narrator emphasizes the former specifically. It is for
Catherine, however, to register firsthand the boredom Mrs. Allen's
(monotonous) conversation elicits; and her discernment here aligns
her perfectly with Henry when he pronounces on the quality of life
at Fullerton: “What a picture of intellectual poverty!”(116)

The high society crowd that centers on Bath establishes its superiority over the
less cultured visitors from Fullerton. The older woman is shown at as much of a
disadvantage as her younger protégé in this environment; despite the benefits of
experience and rank she possesses, her vapid mentality leaves her in a passive
position.

To emphasize the dearth of substantive content that Mrs. Allen’s
uninspiring state of mind brings about, Austen pairs her with a second woman as
unwavering in her obsession as the first. Mrs. Thorpe is a widow with several
marriageable children, and their accomplishments take as much of her interest as
fashion does Mrs. Allen’s. Her primary goal is to marry off eldest daughter
Isabella, in the hopes that she might further aid her family with her husband’s
money. She is equally proud of her son John, who shows an interest in Catherine.
At another ball, both he and Henry Tilney vie to be Catherine’s dance partner,
which the result being she dances with neither. The extent of Mrs. Thorpe’s bias
is made clear, as she mistakes the discussion of one for the other:
“Ah! He has got a partner, I wish he had asked you,” said Mrs. Allen; and after a short silence, she added, “he is a very agreeable young man.”

“Indeed he is, Mrs. Allen,” said Mrs. Thorpe, smiling complacently; “I must say it, though I am his mother, that there is not a more agreeable young man in the world.”

This inapplicable answer might have been too much for the comprehension of many; but it did not puzzle Mrs. Allen, for after only a moment’s consideration, she said, in a whisper to Catherine, “I dare say she thought I was speaking of her son.” (NA 45-6)

The situation between the two women arises from a lack of true communication, despite the gossip each shares. In the enclosed world each has created, their singular concerns overrides all else. Neither woman is shown to care so much as when her area of expertise is admired. Their own concerns fill their conversations with empty civilities, and very little of substance. Mrs. Allen is not troubled by this, and looks forward to frequent visits with the Thorpes. Austen’s view of the older woman’s world is less than promising: each participant communicates in a shallow manner, contrasted by the younger set’s more interesting and thought-provoking discourse. The intellectual barrenness of Mrs. Allen’s company causes Catherine to desert her for members of her own age group, eliminating any opportunity for the mentorship to develop further.

Even if the intergenerational friendship between Catherine and Mrs. Allen had deepened, Austen proves the older character incapable of guiding the younger through the social complexities of the time that would prove or damage her standing. Mrs. Allen’s lack of good judgment causes her to be much more permissive than a chaperone should be, as Catherine’s excursions with her
newfound friends edges towards impropriety. The acquaintance Catherine has with the younger Thorpes is unequal in terms of worldly experience. They wear away at her in the attempt to sway her to their way of thinking, going so far as to bring her brother, James, into their discussions. As Catherine’s chaperone, Mrs. Allen should censor inappropriate ideas out of hand. Due to her familiarity with Mrs. Thorpe and her own disinterest, she does not interfere, leaving questions of propriety to her husband. Such a predicament arises when Isabella and John insist Catherine go out for a carriage ride with them, in conflict with a prior engagement to visit the Tilneys. Mr. Allen comments on the lack of supervision, while Mrs. Allen only echoes his apprehension:

“I know you do; but that is not the question. Do not you think it has an odd appearance, if young ladies are frequently driven about in (carriages) by young men, to whom they are not related?”

“Yes, my dear; a very odd appearance indeed. I cannot bear to see it.”

“Dear madam,” cried Catherine, “then why did not you tell me so before? I am sure if I had known it to be improper, I would not have gone with Mr. Thorpe at all; but I always hoped you would tell me, if you thought I was doing wrong.” (NA 84)

While it is to be commended that Mrs. Allen agrees with her husband, it also displays the weakness of her own ideals that she follow him so blindly. This attitude does not change after her return to Fullerton: upon hearing how Catherine has been mistreated by General Tilney, she allows her husband to voice his opinion and echoes his thoughts once more. The lack of effort Mrs. Allen puts into responding to the social environment highlights the seclusion of Fullerton. Austen’s decision to place a woman so obsessed with fashion, to the exclusion of
other cares, in a position of authority for the local population implies that this narrow-minded way of thinking is common in the area; this encourages the reader to support Catherine as she leaves the intellectually stifled community for a more enlightening life with Henry Tilney. Mrs. Allen is an example of older femininity is a character made undiscerning by luxury; due to her wealth, she is able to indulge her zeal for fashion to the exclusion of other, more worthy pursuits. As such, the older woman is praised for taking a protégé out of the dull country environment, but her narrow focus guarantees that she is incapable of offering concrete advice on the workings of Regency society. With Catherine’s decision to leave Mrs. Allen to explore Northanger Abbey, Austen suggests that the company of insipid elders is inferior to the charms offered by one’s own age group.

Though Mrs. Allen is remembered for her dim awareness, a far-reaching stereotype pertaining to women is that they possess excessive sentimentality, throwing fits over the slightest upset. Mrs. Dashwood from the novel Sense and Sensibility is characterized as such; the presence of this trait at her age indicates a lack of control, and weakens the character. Upon her introduction, she is described as being ruled by her emotions, whether positive or negative: “In seasons of cheerfulness, no temper could be more cheerful than hers, or possess, in a greater degree, that sanguine expression of happiness which is happiness itself. 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 9). However, at this point Mrs. Dashwood has reason to feel overwhelming sensations. The recent loss of her husband, coupled with the impending occupation of her home by her stepson John Dashwood, abruptly alters the lady’s lifestyle from prosperous wife to dependent widow. Georgia M. Barrow and Patricia A. Smith write in their book that the process of emotional healing after bereavement leaves the widow in her
own world as she contemplates the future: “Grief work for the widow takes time and may bring a temporary withdrawal from past social activities and responsibilities as she reassesses her life. Once she answers the question ‘where do I go from here?’ she can become re-engaged in society” (108). Austen treats this newly widowed character in a sympathetic manner, but also makes clear that her melodramatics do not aid her daughters in their own grief. One might expect compassion and understanding from those familiar with Mrs. Dashwood. However, her history of extreme sentimentality makes this difficult, and her age makes the expression of histrionics disgraceful in unfriendly eyes.

Although she is a dramatic character and less than ideal role model for her daughters, Austen illustrates Mrs. Dashwood’s protective instincts through her interaction with a character unsympathetic to the family’s plight. While Mrs. Dashwood’s daughters either share or abide by the whims of their mother, the opinion of her daughter-in-law Fanny is less indulgent. The control of the Dashwoods’ fortune rests in her hands, due to her husband’s obedience to her, and she is reluctant to part with more than she must. The two women, possessing divergent personalities, must endure each other’s company while both remain in Norland; some issues are unable to be handled civilly. Of particular note is the hasty assumption the two make that Edward Ferrars’ interest in Elinor Dashwood will lead to marriage. In Mrs. Dashwood’s mind, they are well-matched and the matron will not be dissuaded from indorsing the relationship: “It was contrary to every doctrine of hers that difference of fortune should keep any couple asunder who were attracted by resemblance of disposition; and that Elinor’s merit should not be acknowledged by everyone who knew her, was to her comprehension impossible” (S&S 14). Mrs. Dashwood’s support of her daughter is countered by Fanny, who stands with her own mother in believing her brother Edward should
ally himself with a wealthy wife. The clash between the two Mrs. Dashwoods erupts into an argument that holds no opinions back; especially cutting is Fanny’s warning against penniless girls attempting to seduce her brother. While not naming names, Mrs. Dashwood recognizes the insult towards her daughter. In response to this attack on Elinor, Mrs. Dashwood abandons her grief to put thought into her family’s future. After searching for housing in the vicinity, she leaves her former home to her stepson’s family, moving her own brood to Barton Cottage, under the protection of Sir John Middleton, her relative. Her sensibility may cloud her judgment, but in this situation, Mrs. Dashwood is able to set aside her emotions and take action to defend her children.

For an older female character, however, the strong expression of positive traits can be as damaging as demonstrating negative traits. In Mrs. Dashwood’s case, Austen provides her maternal love at a price, as it extends to favoring similarly-sentimental Marianne over the emotionally steadfast Elinor. Once established in Barton Cottage, Mrs. Dashwood allows her sentiments to sway her in her middle child’s favor. Firstly, Marianne becomes acquainted with Willoughby, whose charming personality engages the family’s trust. The evident infatuation between the two young people again prompts Mrs. Dashwood to believe that an engagement has taken place. Austen underscores the generational conflict in the Dashwood household in this particular exchange. Sensible daughter Elinor is rightfully skeptical, but Mrs. Dashwood, eager to share Marianne’s happiness, argues for their attachment:

“Concealing it from us! My dear child, do you accuse Willoughby and Marianne of concealment? This is strange indeed, when your eyes have been reproaching them every day for incautiousness.”
“I want no proof of their affection,” said Elinor, “but of their engagement I do.”

“I am perfectly satisfied of both.” (S&S, 59-60)

The daughter is forced to attend to details and the serious implications surrounding courtship, while the mother is distracted by the emotional surges of love. Mrs. Dashwood carries this indulgent view of Marianne and Willoughby’s relationship far into the novel. She is equally trusting of Sir John’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, willing to send her daughters with the widow to experience the London season. Again, Elinor protests in vain as her mother envisions the benefits to the trip. The kindness Mrs. Jennings shows in her invitation is recognized by Mrs. Dashwood as a direct benefit to Marianne. Her favoritism is pronounced, given Elinor’s resigned response to being unheeded. At this point, the novel leaves Mrs. Dashwood for a time, but near the work’s end, the sisters return home to Barton Cottage. Their mother remains the same in her fondness for Marianne, but it takes a tragedy to make Mrs. Dashwood realize the emotional depths her eldest daughter possesses. Upon hearing news that suggests Edward has actually married Lucy Steele, Elinor is overcome with emotion. Austen grants the matron insight and slight development, as Mrs. Dashwood recognizes the depth of her daughter’s passion and acknowledges her error in judgment: “Marianne’s affliction, because more acknowledged, more immediately before her, had too much engrossed her tenderness, and led her away to forget that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude” (S&S 251-2). Her sudden understanding of Elinor’s feelings brings her own indulgence of Marianne’s sentimentality (and her own) into question. This consideration, coming as late as it does, does not provide her with much growth as a character, but serves to balance her partiality towards Marianne with
appreciation of Elinor. With this portrayal of an overemotional older woman, Austen perhaps hopes to evoke sympathy for her more level-headed heroine. This situation is similar to Sir Walter Elliot’s exclusion of daughter Anne to the preference of vain Elizabeth Elliot; Mrs. Dashwood favors Marianne due to their equally strong sentiments, and misunderstands Elinor’s reserve as dispassion. Although she is not an antagonist, the older woman’s excessive sensibility inverts the representation of the mother as the decisive guide of her daughters; it falls to the younger character to balance the elder’s irrationality with prudent advice. Elinor serves as the Dashwood family’s voice of reason; Mrs. Dashwood’s reliance on her eldest daughter’s advice takes authority away from her, granting it to the heroine.

Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* shares a predilection for the dramatic with Mrs. Dashwood, but adopts a single-minded, if not aggressive, goal to ensure prosperous marriages for her daughters that the heroine Elizabeth refuses to endorse. To the Regency reader, this stance would have been familiar and equal parts humorous and threatening. As the previous section of Chapter Two concerning Mr. Bennet showed, Mrs. Bennet is not the sort of wife an introspective man would seek to attach himself to. Her once great beauty masks a foolish mind, one that is distressed by the lack of a male heir to Longbourn, the family estate, and hopes to rectify the situation through marrying her five daughters well. The joint desperation and practicality of such a quest is very much a part of the times, as there are fewer men of fortune than women hoping to marry one. Daniel Pool writes that with the laws of primogeniture in place, women seeking to improve their fortunes had few options besides enticing a first-born husband: “In a society where the general rule among the wealthy is that the eldest son gets everything, then a population producing a roughly equal number of boys
and girls…will witness a mad scramble among the girls—or their mothers—to try and land one of the relatively limited number of eldest sons” (93-4). To that end, Mrs. Bennet encourages the relationships surrounding her brood. Early in the novel, her project is engaging eldest daughter Jane to the wealthy newcomer to the neighborhood, Mr. Bingley. In her haste to see the two matched, she sends Jane to visit his home riding in the rain, resulting in her catching a cold. Rather than stay concerned, Mrs. Bennet praises herself for the plan, taking advantage of Jane’s illness to have her remain at Netherfield. While Mrs. Bennet is willing to go to great lengths to keep eligible suitors for her daughters close, she lacks the same prudence to keep from alienating those she deems unpleasant. In particular, Mr. Darcy does not make as good a first impression on the matriarch, leading to Mrs. Bennet snubbing the gentleman when he calls. Her most open attempt comes as the company discusses country life; her contribution confuses the group, giving her an undeserved sense of victory.

“The country,” said Darcy, “can in general supply but few subjects for such a study. In a country neighborhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.”

“But people themselves alter so much, that there is something new to be observed in them forever.”

“Yes, indeed,” cried Mrs. Bennet, offended by his manner of mentioning a country neighborhood. “I assure you there is quite as much of that going on in the country as in town.”

Every body was surprised; and Darcy, after looking at her for a moment, turned silently away. (P&P 44)

Mrs. Bennet’s impulsive nature compounds the lack of education she evidently possesses. A point in her favor is that the matriarch defends her perspective, and
that of other women. Dussinger allows that her ability to voice her opinions, while contributing an off-putting cast to her personality, gives her some influence in the community: “Mrs. Bennet’s principal role in the novel is to compensate for women’s inferior social position by wielding power through offensive speech and by resorting to her ‘nerves’ as a defense whenever convenient” (122). And in the framework of *Pride and Prejudice*, there is much to be anxious over. One of the most significant plot points is the nature of Longbourn’s entail. In this case, only male heirs are allowed to inherit the estate, and it is only with intense legal measures that that status can be altered. However, Mrs. Bennet cannot grasp the complexity of the proceedings and prefers to lament over the future loss of her home:

“I do think it is the hardest thing in the world, that your estate should be entailed away from your own children; and I am sure if I had been you, I should have tried long ago to do something or other about it.”

Jane and Elizabeth attempted to explain to her the nature of an entail… but it was a subject on which Mrs. Bennet was beyond the reach of reason…. (*P&P* 60-1)

Mrs. Bennet’s rejection of the standing practice frustrates her girls, who are themselves aware of the situation. Pool describes the dilemma, significantly the trauma of being ejected from what would likely be the only home these girls had ever known: “But at least the other boys had a chance to inherit if the eldest son dropped dead. The girls, however, could never inherit, yet the deep attachment to the family property … obviously produced emotional scars when they had to leave” (93). As such, it is within Mrs. Bennet’s interests to have as many of her daughters marry as soon as possible, to reduce the number of dependents she must
provide for should Mr. Bennet die before her. It is within her understanding to note that the future owner of Longbourn is single. And soon it is her plan to marry one of her daughters to Mr. Collins, in order to preserve her and her family’s way of life. Mrs. Bennet’s intentions do have merit, but her strong-minded pursuit of husbands for her girls is a comment upon the aggressive tactics used by actual women to secure marriage to a wealthy man; Elizabeth’s disapproval mirrors society’s censure of such unabashed campaigns for prosperous unions, further distancing mother and daughter ideologically.

Throughout her works, Austen forestalls effective intergenerational communication by introducing factors that raise distrust between the elder and younger party. This interpersonal cut-off is meant to weaken the credibility of the former and discourage the latter from emulating the unsuitable role model. For example, she gives Mrs. Bennet flaws that dissuade the clever Elizabeth from taking her mother seriously. The matriarch, with her nervous temperament and silly nature, is as dissimilar to the heroine as she is to her husband. What compounds matters is her willingness to overlook any objections her offspring have to her husband-hunting schemes. Mrs. Bennet is eager to have a match made for her daughters where they will obviously be happy, but financial security is the primary consideration. With one daughter on the verge of being engaged, she believes the remainder will follow Jane’s lead and settle down. The arrival of Mr. Collins to Longbourn leads Mrs. Bennet to encourage him to select a bride from among her unspoken-for daughters, believing they will submit to her wishes. However, his choice settles upon headstrong Elizabeth, who rejects his suit outright. On receiving the result, Mrs. Bennet strives to limit the damage and desperately seeks to delay Mr. Collins’ acknowledgment of his failure. Her marked threat against Elizabeth in particular speaks to the frustration the older
woman bears towards the younger’s opposition: “But depend upon it, Mr. Collins,” she added, “that Lizzy shall be brought to reason. I will speak to her about it myself. She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will make her know it” (P&P 102). Despite Mrs. Bennet’s pleas, Mr. Collins cannot be swayed, and chooses to wed Charlotte Lucas, the daughter of the Bennet’s neighbor, instead. Mrs. Bennet is infuriated by this turn of events, and anticipates the worst scenarios concerning the pair that she can think of. She goes so far as to complain to her husband, who lacks the sympathy to take her words seriously. The disappointment Mrs. Bennet feels towards Elizabeth makes leaving Longbourn a welcome diversion for the beleaguered girl. Though confused over her friend’s decision to marry Mr. Collins, she agrees to visit her in her new home, and so escapes further judgment for a time. The mother’s ire thus serves as an unconstructive deterrent to marriage, no doubt intensified considering Elizabeth’s opposition to the match. However, Austen metes out punishment for her character’s mercenary behavior, as Mrs. Bennet’s enabling of youngest daughter Lydia’s forward behavior leads to the girl’s (and the family’s) disgrace.

Mrs. Bennet’s capability to guide her children is very much limited due to her imprudence and unstable temper. While Elizabeth dismisses her mother’s direction, her younger sisters eagerly follow the matriarch’s example, and she responds in kind. Mrs. Bennet’s indulgence of their careless pursuits only intensifies their rebelliousness, especially Lydia’s. Mrs. Bennet supports Lydia’s desire to see more of the world, but cannot anticipate the girl’s impulsive decision to elope with the rakish Wickham. Elizabeth is rushed home from her own excursion, and left to weather the storms of Mrs. Bennet’s dismay. For all of her encouragement, she did not expect her favorite child to cause such scandal; her melodramatic nature asserts itself as she sees fault with everyone’s behavior but
her own. Given her drive to marry her daughters off, she is stunned by this elopement. Her panic is justified by the fact that this disgrace will carry over onto her four remaining daughters, limiting (if not destroying) their own chances for marriage. The flaw in Mrs. Bennet’s thinking is in disregarding signs that Lydia would act upon her wild impulses. It is also the case that Mrs. Bennet’s flighty personality has been passed directly to Lydia, in much the same way as Mrs. Dashwood’s sentimentality was inherited by Marianne in Sense and Sensibility.

Barrow and Smith write that the social aspects of a family are adopted or rejected by offspring due to varying factors:

> Social, political, or technological events may intervene …and alter the roles and values within the family context. Consequently, the authority of older members of the family may be strengthened, weakened, or changed in some way such that parent-child relationships may also be altered. (65)

So, while Mrs. Bennet was lucky enough to attract her husband without revealing her silly nature, her endorsement of the younger girls’ interest in men becomes license for Lydia to run away with George Wickham. Thankfully, the circumstances fall in the family’s favor as Mr. Darcy forces Wickham to agree to marry Lydia. The reversion of Mrs. Bennet’s behavior is immediate, as her nightmare of social disgrace is transformed into her fondest dream: a daughter married. “She was now in an irritation as violent from delight, as she had ever been fidgety from alarm and vexation. To know that her daughter would be married was enough. She was disturbed by no fear for her felicity, nor humbled by any memory of her misconduct” (P&P 259-60). All of the distress Lydia put the family to leaves Mrs. Bennet’s mind as she hears the news. Even as her husband and other children seek to remind her that this will do nothing to correct
Lydia’s folly, Mrs. Bennet views the hasty union a success and immediately plans to bring her daughter home in style: “The marriage of a daughter, which had been the first object of her wishes, since Jane was sixteen, was now on the point of accomplishment, and her thought and her words ran wholly on those attendants of elegant nuptials, fine muslins, new carriages, and servants” (P&P 263). Unfortunately for Mrs. Bennet, the terms of Wickham and Lydia’s marriage include moving to the north to join with his new regiment. After a short visit, mother and daughter are parted, and Mrs. Bennet reflects in her capricious way upon the joys and sorrows that children’s marriages bring. Mrs. Bennet’s heightened sensibility causes her to live in the moment: from her despair to her exuberant celebration, all she knows is what she feels at that moment, without consideration for the past. The rest of the Bennet family’s disapproval of Lydia’s wild behavior is lost on Mrs. Bennet, who is only pleased to have accomplished one-fifth of her maternal goal.

Austen might not condone Mrs. Bennet’s unrelenting husband-hunting drive, but as Pride and Prejudice is a romantic comedy, she allows the matriarch’s ambition to be fulfilled. With the scandal of Lydia’s elopement negated by marriage, the courtship of the remaining couples continues. Mr. Bingley returns with Mr. Darcy to court Jane, leading the mother to show distinct preference for the company of her eldest daughter’s suitor. By doing this, she snubs the man who, through his influence, saved her family from disgrace. Both Jane and Elizabeth catch their mother’s behavior and feel the insult themselves. The marked difference in behavior goes against the hostess’s responsibility to the guests in her home; if anything, Mr. Darcy’s wealth should make him the noticed one. All this changes, however, as Darcy asks Mr. Bennet for Elizabeth’s hand in marriage. Elizabeth, charged with telling her mother the news, approaches her
cautiously. But as shown earlier, any news of marriage causes Mrs. Bennet to throw her previous beliefs out the window. She is stunned by the announcement, one of the few times she is speechless in the work:

Its effect was most extraordinary; for on first hearing it, Mrs. Bennet sat quite still, and unable to utter a single syllable. Nor was it under many, many minutes that she could comprehend what she heard; though not in general backwards to credit what was for the advantage of her family, or that came in the shape of a lover to any of them. (P&P 320)

Now it is Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy’s turn to be the favored couple, as Mrs. Bennet imagines the estate and fortune her daughter will marry into. Elizabeth fears her excitement will be as unpleasant as her disdain was before, but her mother reins in her sensibility and treats her guest with newfound respect. This controlled and proper performance by Mrs. Bennet comes as a triumph, as three of her daughters have been matched, two quite well, ensuring that the remaining family members will be cared for as well. Her goals met, she can exult as she pleases, with little change on her part. Throughout the work, Mrs. Bennet is portrayed as a caricature of the anxious Regency mamma, one that offends her cleverer daughter with her attempts at securing wealthy sons-in-law. Her like-minded daughters are shown to have behaved imprudently due to their mother’s advice, going so far as to risk the family’s reputation, while the heroine disregards her attempts at control and makes her own decisions. In this situation, the lengths the older female will go to insure a profitable marriage for her dependents is taken too far. Austen’s use of the husband-hunting mother stereotype, paired with a lower intelligence compared to her husband’s and Elizabeth’s, reduces Mrs. Bennet’s effectiveness as a proper example for her children. The urgency of Mrs. Bennet’s serious goal is
compromised by her erratic temperament; as a result, Elizabeth’s education and her mature response to difficulties places her outside of her mother’s influence, claiming the autonomy to make her own decisions and again asserting the superiority of the younger characters over their elders.

While Mrs. Bennet’s position in society remains secure, the fall of the Bates women in *Emma*’s social hierarchy explores how being the victim of multiple discriminations can affect characterization. In this novel, the social reality facing widows and singlewomen when those providing for them pass away is exemplified. With the death of Mr. Bates and without male relations, the two women are impoverished, forced to leave their home in the vicarage to the newcomer Mr. Elton. The extreme age of Mrs. Bates renders her invalid, prompting the gentry of the area to care for her out of friendship and civic duty: “Mrs. Bates … was a very old lady, almost past every thing but tea and quadrille. She lived with her single daughter in a very small way, and was considered with all the regard and respect which a harmless old lady, under such untoward circumstances, can excite” (*Emma* 35). Miss Bates, too, is regarded with pity; the primary caretaker of her mother, she strives to be agreeable to all. This role consumes a good deal of her time and energy; though Ruth Harriet Jacobs writes of the toll caretaking takes between friends, the bonds between mother and daughter only increases the pressure to tend the ailing party well, as Miss Bates endeavors to do: “[R]ealistically, many women have learned that friendship at older ages may sometimes become a burden. If the friend is more frail or becomes sick or needy in other ways, the woman who is stronger may have to deal with giving help, worrying, and taking responsibility” (23). The signature trait Miss Bates possesses is her talkative, though humble, nature. The extreme deference she displays is protective, seeking to avoid offense. With her connections, she is
able to pass gossip around the neighborhood, though her nature decrees she use ten words when one would suffice. Miss Bates shields herself from the difficulties life places before her through her friendly nature. She lacks Emma Woodhouse’s clever turn of mind, and so busies herself with doting upon her family and entertaining the guests the pair receive. Due to her position and good nature, she is well-thought of by the community. Austen sets Miss Bates as a positive figure in the novel by her generous description:

She loved everybody, was interested in everybody’s happiness, quick-sighted to everybody’s merits… and surrounded with blessings in such an excellent mother and so many neighbors and friends, and a home that wanted for nothing. The simplicity and cheerfulness of her nature… were a recommendation to everybody, and a mine of felicity to herself. (Emma 35)

Miss Bates’s generous personality encourages the community to aid her and her mother. They are fortunate to receive the charity of Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. Knightley, and the courtesy visits from the leading lady of Highbury, Emma Woodhouse. However, due to their lower status, it is doubtful that Emma would deign to take advice from either a somnolent old woman or a gossiping singlewoman; as noted earlier, her ageist approach necessitates an observance of courtesy, but any further association with the older women is unwelcome.

Although they are individuals in need in the village of Highbury, Austen assures the reader that Mrs. and Miss Bates still hold some remnants of prestige from their previous position in society. While certainly not on the level of the dwellers at Donwell Abbey or Hartfield, they are yet acceptable company, entitled to more than the cursory aid given the common folk. This holds especially true for female/female interactions; social visitations played a significant part in the daily
life of high-ranked ladies, who could delegate demeaning household tasks to servants. Emma Woodhouse’s aversion to calling upon the Bates women does single her out as neglectful. Even though their response to her visits is unerringly polite and generous, Emma excuses herself from attending them as she should. The primary reason she gives would be Miss Bates’ tendency to gossip ceaselessly once a topic has been introduced, but she also fears that consorting with people of lower status would reflect poorly upon herself. Emma holds these negative views, then, out of disdain. However uncomfortable Emma may be associating with the Bates family, she is not at liberty to express it. When Miss Bates approaches her for an audience accompanied by Mrs. Weston, Emma is captive to her request:

“My dear Miss Woodhouse…I am just run across to entreat the favor of you to come and sit down with us a little while, and give us your opinion of our new instrument; you and Miss Smith. How do you do, Miss Smith?—Very well, I thank you.—And I begged Mrs. Weston to come with me, that I might be sure of succeeding.”

“I hope Mrs. Bates and Miss Fairfax are”—

“Very well, I am much obliged to you. My mother is delightfully well; and Jane caught no cold last night….” (Emma 194)

The meeting is successful on Miss Bates’ part because Emma cannot disengage from the older woman without having her excuses questioned by her close acquaintances. As such, both Emma and her companion Harriet are obliged to attend Jane Fairfax’s impromptu piano performance. The heiress’s internal thoughts reveal her to be less than impressed with the arrangement, though she remains outwardly polite. Lacking the methods of easy communication enjoyed in the modern day, one can understand Miss Bates’ excitement for the small-town news and events and her eagerness to share information. Nevertheless, the text
would have treated a level-headed character that brokered information with more respect; Austen’s implementation of a silly individual in this position sets up conflict, as her demonstrative manner of speech causes the heroine to reject her offered intelligence.

Despite the effusive language Miss Bates uses, Austen acknowledges a positive trait, the singlewoman’s perceptive skills, in two separate instances. The grand social event of the Highbury ball is anticipated by young and old members of the community. Upon receiving an invitation, and leaving her mother in the company of Mr. Woodhouse, Miss Bates enters the hall praising the surroundings in her usually lavish style:

Her gestures and movements might be understood by any one who looked on like Emma, but her words, every body’s words, were soon lost under the incessant flow of Miss Bates, who came in talking, and had not finished her speech under many minutes of being admitted into the circle at the fire. (Emma 258)

Her exclamations are such that Austen devotes whole pages to Miss Bates at the time, to emphasize the overwhelming nature of her speech. They continue until the assembly is called to eat, and her mouth is otherwise occupied. Though her role as a social player has been diminished, Miss Bates demonstrates acceptance of her standing by complimenting the decisions of those higher than her. Because the occasion is so rare, this praise is even more elaborate than usual. Dussinger acknowledges her discomfort with addressing her peers and superiors, saying what is sure to please them: “Whenever called upon by her society to perform, Miss Bates stands rather like Watteau’s Gilles—momentarily isolated and awkward, pathetically aware of the clown costume she is expected to wear for her part in the Highbury world….” (131). In this situation, a more elaborate performance than
usual is, in her mind, appropriate. On the second occasion, Miss Bates is part of a large gathering at Hartfield, a more common occurrence than the ball. While discussing Frank Churchill’s mysterious foreknowledge of the possible acquisition of a carriage by the local apothecary, Austen allows a clue to slip into Miss Bates’ speech about the hidden relationship between her niece Jane Fairfax and the young man. Rather than believing Miss Bates’s talk of precognition, the reader can link Frank’s knowledge of events to his close connection with Jane Fairfax. By reading Miss Bates’s letters to her niece and/or listening to the gossip, Frank’s knowledge of Highbury life is increased. The drawback to this is that he knows more than a newcomer to the community should, which raises the suspicions of a few characters. But Miss Bates is not punished for her gossip. Her memory not only encapsulates the present, but serves as a connection to the past, as Dussinger recalls how these ties even enfold Miss Woodhouse: “Besides her power to conjure up the whole community’s threatening presence in her flow of speech, Miss Bates’ age endows her with the authority of the collective past and makes available an awesome range of language against Emma’s narrow intent on living in the present” (137). With the support of the townspeople of Highbury, the Bates family can still mingle to a degree with the gentry, without rebuke. Their poverty makes them victims to be cared for and attended. Nonetheless, Miss Bates’s age and unmarried status are portrayed as disadvantageous; while the position those factors place her in grants her insight into the workings of the community, her flighty personality discourages Emma Woodhouse from accepting the older woman’s amity.

These four female characters were created based upon sexist stereotypes that devalue the intelligence of women. They also embody ageist stereotypes because Austen distributed the negative characteristics in order to give plausibility
to the high competence levels of her young heroines, and emphasize the superiority of the second generation over members of the first. The older ladies are deeply involved in what seem like trivial affairs; while their intentions are good, their flaws inhibit them from aiding the heroines through personal issues. Mrs. Allen’s generous offer to take Catherine Morland to the social gathering places of Bath is offset by her ineffectiveness to participate meaningfully in areas not related to her expertise in fashion. Mrs. Dashwood is an active and concerned mother, taking action against the forces seeking to oppress her and her children after the death of her husband. However, her sensibility hinders her efforts, as she allows her emotions to rule her reasoning. Mrs. Bennet’s flightiness and extreme sensibility are a drain on her family’s patience, as she single-mindedly seeks to marry her daughters off before the family’s patriarch dies. Miss Bates’s strong network of communication is not valued by Emma Woodhouse, due to the heroine’s intolerance of her excessive verbosity. The older women in this group are not meant to be role models for the heroines, but neither are they meant to antagonize them. Their ineptitude encourages the heroines to branch out beyond the influence of their elders and solve problems on their own. The wisdom and experience aging may have given them are disregarded, as the older women are portrayed as less mature than the heroines, making them dependent on the younger characters. Because they are viewed as foolish individuals, the author insures that their opinions are not taken seriously, and that the reader’s loyalty remains with the heroines.

Austen’s use of negative character traits to debilitate older female characters is demonstrated most pointedly in Mansfield Park. In order to gain sympathy for the morally correct, but extremely passive Fanny Price, the characterization of her mother and aunts center on flaws such as sloth, negligence
and envy. All three women were raised at the same social and economic level, but after marriage their personalities shift into prescribed modes of thinking by economic circumstances. The middle child, Lady Bertram, has the most prosperous marriage, but the presence of unearned wealth makes her indolent to the point of insipidity. Her elder sister becomes Mrs. Norris, the wife of a clergymen who serves the estate of Mansfield Park, placing her below her younger sibling in rank; to compensate, she seeks to control as much of the estate as she can. The youngest sister marries below her station, and must struggle to keep a household with many children in line, with only limited resources and half-hearted results. The ensuing rivalry and power plays between the sisters encourage the next generation to emulate their poor habits, save for the heroine, who develops a strong moral code without their influence. By establishing the young heroine of Mansfield Park as the most competent female in the work, Austen criticizes aspects encountered in the mature women’s lives: the long-reaching effects of rivalry, the misfortune of hasty marriages and the idleness of the wealthy.

Austen disrupts the female social network of the estate by targeting the woman who would have had the most influence: Lady Bertram, the wife of Sir Thomas. Although she is the second of three daughters in the Ward family, she attracts the wealthiest match with her beauty. There is a cost to attaining this life of luxury; without any further motivation to strive and improve herself, she slips into a languid existence and in a change from other female characters, her sensibility falls by the wayside. In his essay, “Mansfield Park: The Revolt of the Feminine Woman,” Leroy Smith remarks on Lady Bertram’s loss of personality after achieving her ambition:

Lady Bertram is an extreme example of the reduction of the female to virtual non-being by the patriarchal system. Having achieved a
fortunate marriage, she has no further sense of purpose in life. She is helpless without masculine support, totally selfish and self-centered, too indolent even to enjoy her daughters’ social success.

With her aspirations fulfilled, Lady Bertram indulges in her wealth, to the exclusion of further growth. The most severe flaw is in her lack of energy towards asserting healthy family ties. When her sisters feud over the younger’s unsuitable marriage, Lady Bertram’s response is to personally distance herself and follow her elder sister’s lead, rather than get emotionally involved herself. The lack of concern she shows towards the doings of her own family is also troubling. As the lady of the house, she is expected to be a role model for her two daughters. However, she cannot muster the energy to follow their lessons, leaving their care to their aunt and their governess. This view also pertains to Fanny Price, as the quiet girl comes to represent an additional companion to Lady Bertram rather than a foster daughter. Not as handsome or clever as her own children, Fanny does not distinguish herself in her aunt’s eyes save for her obedience and humility. Lady Bertram’s characterization is an admonition against succumbing to luxury. This woman, who should set the example for her household, allows others to take her authority and use it as they see fit. Austen uses the stereotype of the wealthy and indolent individual and creates a character whose passive selfishness encourages the vices of her family to thrive, while doing little to ease the heroine’s sense of ostracism. This stereotype is criticism against the upper classes and against females; her dependency on others to take action does not speak well about her age and her capacity to lead.

Lady Bertram’s apathy does not abate with the advent of her children’s adulthood, a time when most parents would be apprehensive. Not even the
absence of her husband motivates her to take a firm stand against the younger Bertrams’ moral lapses. True to form, she stays ignorant of the significant disruptions brought by outsiders to the estate; of particular note, the introduction of the play “Lover’s Vows” to the household has the young people engaged in questionable roles. From the overt flirtation between Maria Bertram and Henry Crawford to the temptation faced by Edward Bertram from Mary Crawford, the mother dozes between rehearsals and pays no heed to the redecoration of her husband’s favorite room. As a result, upon Sir Thomas’s return to the estate from Antigua, his wife is innocently pleased to see him, in marked contrast of her guilty offspring. Austen emphasizes Lady Bertram’s sole “She had no anxieties for any body to cloud her pleasure; her own time had been irreproachfully spent during his absence; …and she would have answered as freely for the good conduct and useful pursuits of all the young people as for her own” (MP 124). Lady Bertram’s own leisure is her only concern. Only when the affairs of others trouble her enjoyment does she act. As Fanny Price makes her first formal dinner outing to the Grants’ parsonage, Lady Bertram is confused as to whether she can spend the night without the young lady’s company and must seek advice. When Sir Thomas settles the dilemma in Fanny’s favor, Lady Bertram yields to her husband’s guidance and allows Fanny to go. If her placidity possesses one advantage, it is that she does not become agitated by inconveniences like her sister Mrs. Norris. But truly, her awareness is so dull that few matters interest her.

Lady Bertram, in a realistic manner, pays the most attention to issues when she can relate them to herself. The one instance Fanny attracts her notice is when the heroine catches the attention of Henry Crawford, enough to prompt a marriage proposal. The wealth of the suitor, compared to Fanny’s poverty, reminds Lady Bertram of Sir Thomas’s own courtship of her. As a woman who was elevated
above her station by marriage, she is moved by the rare opportunity for advancement presented to her niece: “Lady Bertram took it differently. She had been a beauty, and a prosperous beauty, all her life; and beauty and wealth were all that excited her respect. To know Fanny to be sought in marriage by a man of fortune raised her, therefore, very much in her opinion” (*MP*, 225). This sudden sense of camaraderie leads Lady Bertram to impart words of wisdom towards her niece; an act that has never occurred before. Her siding with the socially mercenary views of the time puts added pressure upon Fanny to accept the proposal, as she had done many years before:

“No, my dear, I should not think of missing you, when such an offer as this comes your way. I could do very well without you, if you were married to a man of such good estate as Mr. Crawford. And you must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman’s duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this.”

This was almost the only rule of conduct, the only piece of advice, which Fanny had ever received from her aunt in the course of eight years and a half. — It silenced her. (*MP* 226)

From her perspective, Lady Bertram means to assure Fanny that accepting the proposal is the sensible course of action. However, a more objective interpretation is that Fanny is considered expendable for the right price. The heroine experiences internal conflict as her aunt’s instruction clashes with her own disapproval of Crawford’s immoral behavior, but ultimately decides to follow her own instincts and refuse. With her piece spoken, Lady Bertram retreats to the background of the novel as the action moves to Liverpool. Her esteem for Fanny receives a boost by the fruitless courtship, but she does not provide any further
guidance. As such, her role as dispassionate observer is set, until events in the novel’s climax rouse her into sensibility.

The character of Mrs. Norris, as compared to her sister Lady Bertram, is industrious and clever, but also bears intense jealousy towards the family at Mansfield Park. This comes as no surprise, as Lady Bertram’s elevation of rank supersedes Mrs. Norris’ initial position in the birth order, and her marriage to a clergyman offers her an establishment but no equal elevation. Such is her disappointment that when her youngest sister marries far below her station with dire consequences, Mrs. Norris is too happy to demonstrate charity by convincing Sir Thomas to raise the oldest Price daughter. Her primary motivation is to bring someone lower than herself into the fold so that she can feel superior, though her remarks to her patron insist it is for the child’s own good:

“A niece of ours, Sir Thomas, I may say, or at least, of yours, would not grow up in this neighborhood without many advantages. I don’t say she would be so handsome as her cousins… but she would be introduced into the society of this country under such very favorable circumstances as, in all human probability, would get her a creditable establishment.” (MP 7)

While she is aware of the cost and care of raising a child, Mrs. Norris does not ever intend to take young Fanny for her own. Rather, she plans to leave her in the Bertrams’ care, while taking full credit for the plan. So with her suggestion, Mrs. Norris brings Fanny Price into Mansfield Park to take her place as needy relation. The child’s position is such that even a clergyman’s wife can demonstrate charity towards the unfortunate one. However, she stresses the social separation between Fanny and the Bertram daughters intensely. With only half-hearted attention being paid by the other adults, Fanny internalizes the rebukes Mrs. Norris pays
her, fully aware of the debt she owes. The girl’s saintly temperament keeps her female cousins uninterested in including her in their circle, and so she grows into adulthood with her own clear and determined view of life. Mrs. Norris, well aware of Lady Bertram’s failings, takes a strong interest in Maria and Julia’s development into gentlewomen, and sets about the critical task of matchmaking for her favorites.

Mrs. Norris’s attempts to dictate the affairs of Mansfield Park in her brother-in-law’s absence can be seen as reprisal against Lady Bertram’s fortuitous marriage, which elevated her above her elder sister’s station. With his absence and her indolence, Mrs. Norris promotes her own agenda, which extends to securing suitable husbands for her nieces. The most eligible bachelor in the vicinity of Mansfield Park is Mr. Rushworth of Sotherton, and Mrs. Norris quickly introduces him to Maria Bertram. He becomes attracted to her beauty, she becomes attracted to his fortune, and Mrs. Norris views the match a success. To further their attachment, she proposes an escorted visit to his home with the other young people in residence at Mansfield. The presence of Lady Bertram is expected, but Mrs. Norris circumvents the insistence and goes in her sister’s place. Her position as chaperone to the girls is ineffectual, as Maria gives her fiancé the cold shoulder, preferring newcomer Henry Crawford to the dull heir of Sotherton. She little suspects the flirtation between the young people that Fanny is witness to. With this self-confidence, Mrs. Norris runs the social life of those living in Mansfield Park. This sense of supremacy lasts as long as Sir Thomas is away, as upon his return, the patriarchal pattern begins to reassert itself and in turn sets Mrs. Norris in her place.

The absence of Sir Thomas brings a marked freedom to the lives of his children, one that is only loosely monitored by Mrs. Norris. However, this
relaxation of protocol is just as swiftly suppressed when he returns to Mansfield. Not only must the Bertram children readjust, but from the moment he arrives Mrs. Norris loses a great deal of her authority. The woman who prides herself on preparedness is thrown into confusion by his sudden entrance, leaving her unable to act with her usual forthrightness. Not only do her efforts to be of use fall flat, but her decorum is called into question upon Sir Thomas’s discovery of the younger characters’ playacting. Deeply concerned with his family’s image, he inquires why his sister-in-law, if not his wife, could not put a halt to this potentially scandalous activity. Mrs. Norris’s failure is seen as twofold: her inattention to the consequences the children could have incurred by acting out, and her uncertainty that her censure would be as well received as her frequent praise:

Mrs. Norris was a little confounded, and as nearly being silenced as ever she had been in her life…for she was ashamed to confess having never seen any of the impropriety which was so glaring to Sir Thomas, and would not have admitted that her influence was insufficient, that she might have talked in vain. (MP 130)

By distracting her brother-in-law, Mrs. Norris saves herself from further rebuke. The fact that Fanny stands against the play raises Sir Thomas’s opinion of her, which Mrs. Norris takes as a slight against his own daughters. This aversion intensifies after the marriage of Maria Bertram to Mr. Rushworth, as both the new bride and her sister leave the estate. Fanny reluctantly takes steps towards entering the social scene, signaled by her acceptance of a formal dinner invitation. Mrs. Norris wastes no time in reminding the young woman of her good fortune. Her response to her niece’s invitation is to reassert the heavy obligation Fanny owes her relations for their care of her. She makes a direct comparison to Maria and Julia, pointedly rejecting Fanny’s rights to happiness and her burgeoning
growth as a lady: “I do beseech and entreat you not to be putting yourself forward, and talking and giving your opinion as if you were one of your cousins—as if you were dear Mrs. Rushworth or Julia. That will never do, believe me” (MP 151).

Fanny does, as always, take these words to heart, but also manages to impress Henry Crawford, enough to pursue her as a potential bride. This, as we shall see, serves to further aggravate Mrs. Norris.

The antagonism Mrs. Norris feels towards Fanny, triggered by a need to keep the younger character subjugated, intensifies as the heroine receives a lifestyle-altering proposal similar to that accepted by her more fortunate sister. With Maria Bertram married to Mr. Rushworth and Julia accompanying the pair on their honeymoon, Henry Crawford focuses his attention on the remaining heroine. As Fanny loves her cousin Edmund, she is not swayed by Crawford’s sweet declarations. In turn, her rejection encourages Mr. Crawford even more. While Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram are pleased by this development, Mrs. Norris takes offense to the young woman is attracting a suitor far above her station, a suitor who would be much better paired with Julia. For example, with the visit of Fanny’s brother William drawing to a close, Sir Thomas declares the time right for a ball at Mansfield. Mrs. Norris believes he will wait for the return of his daughters, but is corrected immediately. Since the ball is for Fanny and William, it would not do to wait on their cousins returning from their own enjoyment. Mrs. Norris is shocked, and unable to even voice a protest. The social order established by Fanny’s arrival to Mansfield Park is shifting, as she begins the transition to adulthood. Her newfound eligibility in the marriage market places her in high esteem with her uncle. Sir Thomas begins to notice the unfavorable treatment Fanny receives as Mrs. Norris’s “unfavorite” and is shown to disapprove. As Mrs. Norris’s social image is based upon the debasement of Fanny, the fact that she
manages to attract a wealthy and handsome suitor like Mr. Crawford irks the older woman. Tara Ghoshal Wallace notes that the marriage of her niece to a landowning gentleman would subvert Mrs. Norris’s initial purpose for bringing Fanny to Mansfield Park: to elevate her own standing:

Her behavior throughout the novel becomes comprehensible once we see it as compensation or vengeance for her sense of undeserved inferiority. It is this sense of inferiority and competition that motivates her to bring Fanny to Mansfield, not only because someone else can be “lowest and last” (221), but also because Fanny’s arrival sustains a fiction of being equal to the Bertrams. (60-1)

Her response to Fanny’s receiving an offer of marriage is certainly outrage. Even after Fanny rejects this generous proposal, the perceived insult still galls the older woman. Though unable to confront her niece directly, Austen notes that Mrs. Norris seethes over the upheaval to the park’s social order this offer presents: “It was an injury and affront to Julia, who ought to have been Mr. Crawford’s choice; and independently of that, she disliked Fanny, because she had neglected her; and she would have grudged such an elevation to one whom she had been always trying to depress” (MP 225). Part of this vehement response is to declare Julia’s superiority as a marriage candidate as the daughter of a gentleman. However, this can also be seen as Mrs. Norris being reminded of her own fate, as the eldest daughter being outshone by a younger sibling marrying well. This jealousy is central to her favoritism of the Bertram daughters over Fanny, in the hopes that the one female lower than Mrs. Norris will fare poorly in the marriage market.

Though the position of Mrs. Norris in the Bertram household is lower than she would have preferred, it is more than is granted her unfortunate sibling. Mrs.
Price, the youngest Ward sister, serves as a warning and disappointment to her daughter Fanny. Marrying “to disoblige herself”, as her siblings believe, she finds herself with an abundance of children and a lack of time and resources to nurture them all. At the start of Mansfield Park, she is taken pity on by her sisters and releases her eldest daughter into their custody. The opportunity presented years later to Fanny Price by Sir Thomas, to return home after her rejection of Henry Crawford’s suit, is welcomed as an escape. Upon her arrival to Liverpool, Fanny is initially welcomed back by her mother, fully aware of the long separation. But soon the initial rush of maternal instinct runs its course, and life resumes as usual for the Price family. With her upbringing in Mansfield Park, Fanny no longer fits into the rhythms of lower-class life: her delicate constitution makes interacting with her siblings and coping with the uncultured environment difficult. Mrs. Price offers no aid to ease her daughter’s transition, demonstrating the damage done to the mother-daughter bond through her inattention: “Every flattering scheme of being of consequence to her soon fell to the ground. Mrs. Price was not unkind—but, instead of gaining on her affection and confidence…her daughter never met with greater kindness from her, than on the first day of her arrival” (MP 264).

Such is Fanny’s disappointment that it stains her opinion of her mother and the way she is living her life. Her criticism is strong, especially from a normally mild young woman. Of particular interest is the way she condemns the management of the household. She begins by comparing her mother to her aunts Bertram and Norris, whose temperaments the reader is familiar with: one made idle by wealth and the other eager to take advantage of any opportunity to gain more prestige. The conclusion, thus, that Fanny reaches is that her mother really did lower herself by marrying Mr. Price, and that she is out of place as the manager of a large and underprivileged family. It is all she can do to get by, and attempts by Fanny to get
closer to Mrs. Price are futile. Fanny’s harsh judgment of her mother, out of all the characters that mishandle her, arises from her injured feelings and her rejection of the Price family’s unstructured lifestyle:

She might scruple to make use of the words, but she must and did feel that her mother was a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children, whose house was the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end, and who had no talent, no conversation, no affection towards herself… and no inclination for her company that could lessen her sense of such feelings. (MP 265)

In the end, when Fanny is retrieved by the Bertrams after the scandal Maria Musgrove brings to Mansfield Park, she gladly takes her sister Susan with her, away from the misery of their mother’s household. The separation of mother and daughter leads to emotional disconnection; Fanny can no longer relate to the environment into which she was born, while Mrs. Price, deeply entrenched into a bustling life, cannot spare any sympathy for Fanny.

Austen leaves Mrs. Price to her home in Liverpool and returns the characters to Mansfield Park for the conclusion of this novel. Maria Musgrove’s elopement with Henry Crawford and Julia Bertram’s escape with Mr. Yates impacts the elder Ward sisters heavily. For Lady Bertram it further compounds the stress brought by her son Tom’s illness. The return of Fanny and arrival of Susan enables the lady to communicate her distress and be provided with distraction. For Mrs. Norris, the situation strikes more to home as her plans for the family falls apart: “Mrs. Norris, however, as most attached to Maria, was really the greatest sufferer. Maria was her first favorite, the dearest of all; the match had been her own contriving, as she had been wont with such pride of heart to feel and
say, and this conclusion of it almost overpowered her” (MP 304). This causes a depression to fall upon Mrs. Norris that upends her personality completely. Once a busybody eager to take control of situations, she is reduced to shocked apathy. All of the power she has accumulated in the household is lost. Even her sister Lady Bertram recovers from the experience and resumes her daily routine, but Mrs. Norris is left bereft. Ultimately, she can no longer muster the energy to challenge the authority of her sister and brother-in-law. Mrs. Norris is thus charged to accompany Maria in exile, where they serve as each other’s company and punishment. Mrs. Norris’s bid for control over the lives of the Bertrams comes to naught in the end, as Maria’s lax morality causes the collapse of her aunt’s prestige. She is mastered by the system and silenced, leaving the remainder of the family to heal from the caustic divisions she placed upon them.

It is due to the Ward sisters’ disinterest in Fanny Price, the most self-effacing Austenian heroine, that she avoids developing the flaws of luxury, competition and envy that damage the interpersonal relationships of Mansfield Park’s occupants. Lady Bertram, though the middle child, was able to attract the richest husband, and settled into a life of ease and comfort. The excess of wealth however stunted her drive to be an active member of the estate, performing only the most perfunctory duties and most significantly, not providing a strong moral example for her daughters to follow. Mrs. Norris, the eldest Ward sister, was overshadowed by Lady Bertram’s success and married the clergyman serving Mansfield Park. She grew envious over her younger sibling’s good fortune, and seeing Lady Bertram’s lack of awareness prompts her to take as much control as she dares of the household in her stead. She takes particular notice of the Bertram daughters, spoiling them as well as demeaning Fanny Price. This poor faith is punished, as Fanny is elevated throughout the text while the Bertram sisters
scandalize their family, leading to Mrs. Norris’s downfall. The youngest Ward sister, Mrs. Price, married below her station. Her temperament being more similar to Lady Bertram’s than Mrs. Norris’s, she struggles to run her household, proving to her daughter Fanny how fortunate she was to be taken away from the borderline neglectful home. The sisters’ personalities are strictly shaped by the world of their husbands; Lady Bertram’s indolence allows her to fritter her life away in leisure, while the same trait forces Mrs. Price to work against her tendencies as the manager of a crowded household. Mrs. Norris’ industrious and thrifty nature is trumped by her vindictive attitude towards her kin, leading her to pursue avenues of authority. Due to the ages of the older characters, their detrimental values are not only firmly engrained, but transmitted to members of the next generation. The implantation of a perfectly honorable younger character into the damaged household as the source of redemption has ageist undertones; the customs of the older characters must be challenged and a new regime set into place. Fanny’s obedience, enforced by her appreciation of the debt she owes her wealthy relatives for fostering her, becomes the cornerstone of a stringent moral code that withstands the pressure to conform to the scandalous behavior introduced by the Crawford siblings. After the Bertram sisters scandalize the family, her steadfast loyalty to the Bertrams is rewarded and her relations reform or are banished for the estate. When the faults of the older women deny the heroine significant acknowledgement due to her retiring nature, she develops an unshakeable system of morality that in the end strengthens her adopted family and allows them to recover from their disgrace. *Mansfield Park* serves as the novel with the harshest view of older femininity, with each character selfishly pursuing their aims and neglecting personal obligations to the extent that a much younger heroine must re-establish the importance of those ties and save her family from itself.
Even the most effective role models Austen creates for her heroines are not exempt from having negative traits attributed to them. In two cases, the younger women are supported by their elders far beyond simple consideration, but do not accept their efforts easily due to an awareness of their failings. Mrs. Jennings from *Sense and Sensibility* is a jovial woman who, by virtue of her age and status, is unbound by the strict propriety of the time. Although her sense of humor does cause discomfort among the Dashwood sisters, she has a good heart and aids the family however she can. In *Persuasion*, the closest female confidant Anne Elliot has is Lady Russell--a well-bred and intelligent woman, whose bias on the side of wealth and power blinds her to the potential happiness of her charge. Her reputation is such that her intellect is feared as well as admired by those not in her immediate social circle. The skepticism shown by the heroines towards these characters mirrors the uncertainty the patriarchal society of Regency-era England felt towards widows with wealth. Thus, despite their endeavors on the heroines’ behalf, Mrs. Jennings and Lady Russell are given traits that dissuade the girls from trusting them completely.

Much like her son-in-law, Sir John Middleton, Mrs. Jennings from *Sense and Sensibility* displays a sense of humor that shocks the Dashwood sisters. Her physical attributes are meant to correspond with her jovial nature, as Austen introduces her:

Mrs. Jennings, Lady Middleton’s mother, was a good-humored, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar. She was full of jokes and laughter, and before dinner was over had said many witty things on the subject of lovers and husbands; hoped they had not left their hearts behind
them in Sussex, and pretended to see them blush whether they did or not. (S&S 27)

The liberty Mrs. Jennings takes with her jests, on par with Sir John, emphasizes the social freedom being a widow of means gives an older woman. She may be critiqued in private by those that disapprove of her sport, but never in the work is she punished. However, autonomy of the sort Mrs. Jennings enjoyed may have been viewed as disruptive to the social order. Ann Gerike notes in her essay, “On Gray Hair and Oppressed Brains,” how threatening a woman like Mrs. Jennings might appear to the male population:

In a patriarchal society, the power and privilege of women reside in their utility to men. They must be able and willing to bear children, and be willing to remain in a subservient position. In such a society, women beyond menopause are useless; they obviously cannot bear children. They may also be dangerous: with the growing assertiveness that often comes to women as they age, many are unwilling to remain subservient. (37)

With her husband deceased and her daughters successfully grown and married, she is free to pursue her interests and live how she likes. Her primary occupation is in matchmaking- a quick observer of character, she wastes no time in pairing up the eligible young gentlemen and ladies who cross her path. She is not shy in proclaiming her discoveries, even when the objects of her study protest. While Marianne’s love life presents the most exciting conjectures, not even the modest Elinor is immune from their speculations. Mrs. Jennings’ keen powers of observation and support of the relationships presented, despite the bawdy manner that she uses to voice them, are not just for show. John Dussinger writes that the
authenticity of her perceptions gives her choice of occupation better success than most:

Unlike other matchmakers, particularly Mrs. Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, Mrs. Jennings is remarkably observant and often lucky in guessing at the potential outcome of the action. Her power of instilling fear in Elinor as well as in Marianne is a function of her penetrating curiosity and quickness in discovering relationships in reflexive imitation of the author. (117)

However, the Dashwood girls are less than impressed with Mrs. Jennings’ declarations. Both view her comments as invasions of their privacy; Elinor with her quiet censure and Marianne’s spirited disavowal of the import of the older woman’s words. After having a private outing with Willoughby exposed, she exclaims, “If the impertinent remarks of Mrs. Jennings are to be the proof of impropriety in conduct, we are all offending every moment of all our lives. I value not her censure any more than I should do her commendation” (S&S 52).

But dissuading the widow from pursuing her craft is out of their power. With a like-minded gentleman like Sir John as a son-in-law, she is granted license to engage in matchmaking in his home. The Dashwoods accept her uncomfortably as a woman of means; her eccentricity defies their sedate model of “normal older femininity,” and makes them doubt her ability to chaperone them properly.

Upon leaving their home to visit London, the Dashwoods do not know what to expect from their new guardian. By this time, they fully anticipate being the recipients of her jovial nature, but are uninformed as to the depths of her hospitality. Once in her own home, Mrs. Jennings is shown to be a generous and worthy hostess to Elinor and Marianne. In fact, they can find no other reason to be distressed than by finding Mrs. Jennings still in contact with people in trade.
Other than that, she makes her home comfortable and takes the young ladies to visit acceptable, if not enjoyable company. A vital aspect of social mastery is the distinction between hosting guests and being a guest in another’s home. As David Monaghan points out in his work, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision*, the responsibilities of both parties complement each other out of necessity.

Certainly, there are aspects of life in Mrs. Jennings’ house that would not be unfamiliar to Sir John or Lady Middleton, because she continues to gossip and to intrude. Nevertheless, there is a crucial difference… the essential point of which is not to provide the host with entertainment, but to meet the needs of the guests. (55)

In a prime display of this principle, Mrs. Jennings’ primary concern is supporting her charges. Her championship of the Dashwood sisters is more than simply providing for their physical needs. When Willoughby rejects Marianne for the wealthy heiress Miss Grey, the older woman takes offense at her ill-treatment: “Well, said I, …that if it is true, he has used a young lady of my acquaintance abominably ill, and I wish with all my soul his wife may plague his heart out… and if ever I meet him again, I will give him such a dressing as he has not had this many a day” (*S&S* 136). In taking Marianne’s side in the case, Mrs. Jennings spares no expense comforting the heartbroken girl. Her efforts are not met with quite the warmth she was expecting; her style of indulgence is better suited for younger children. Marianne would be insulted, if she was not so distraught, and Elinor must tolerate the actions and make excuses for her sister to save face.

Though Mrs. Jennings means well, the Dashwoods are disinclined to encourage the older woman’s endeavors. Their familiarity with her forward nature makes them predisposed to turn away from what are meant to be well-meaning and sympathetic gestures. David Monaghan allows that, boisterous nature aside, her
firm defense of Marianne against Willoughby defines her ultimately benign qualities: “Mrs. Jennings’s repeated acts of kindness towards Marianne, and her evident distaste for Willoughby’s materialism, reveal her as a much more substantial person that could ever have been suspected from her behavior at Barton” (Structure 51). Such is her attachment to the Dashwoods that even an outsider to the action such as Mr. John Dashwood can identify it. Of course, his perspective is entirely on the monetary gains of this friendship, which Elinor is quick to note are non-existent. The generosity Mrs. Jennings demonstrates only increases towards the Dashwoods as the time comes for them to return home. The ageist attitude Elinor and Marianne possess against the older woman is proven to be unjust; while her jests discomfort them, Austen makes her motivations pure and worthy of a lady of means.

The service Mrs. Jennings does for Elinor and Marianne goes beyond patronage. She becomes a second mother to them, so far from home. However closely she follows the events concerning Marianne and Willoughby, she is kept less informed of the tumult surrounding Elinor and Edward Ferrars. The eldest Dashwood sister keeps her silence about the engagement between Edward and Lucy Steele, and furthermore voices credible enough disinterest to prevent Mrs. Jennings from catching onto her own attachment. But it is not enough that Mrs. Jennings offers assistance in matters of the heart. With their time in London drawing to a close, the girls accompany Mrs. Jennings to Cleveland, the home of her younger daughter, Mrs. Palmer. They look forward to returning to their mother, but Mrs. Jennings entreats them to stay. For once, her words do not sway the pair. However, as Marianne succumbs to her grief and falls ill, Mrs. Jennings’s steadfastness is acknowledged. The Palmer family leaves Cleveland to protect the health of their newborn child, but Mrs. Jennings remains behind to help
tend to the sisters. The Dashwood sisters reevaluate their prejudiced views of the older woman; even Marianne sees the good woman’s efforts as praiseworthy, and tries to accept her with better grace than she deigned to before.

The inclusion of a character like Mrs. Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility* influences the Dashwoods in a positive manner. She combines insight and social awareness with good nature, escorting Elinor and Marianne through the London season safely and with every care towards their comfort. Though her observations make the pair uncomfortable at times, they provide a more nuanced view of the relationships and the world around her, as Dussinger writes, “From the beginning, Mrs. Jennings’s loquacious presence helps to free the narrative from the rigid eighteenth-century dichotomy implied by the title of the novel and thus to allow a broader range of ethical language than Elinor’s conduct-book vocabulary provides” (117). In this instance, her age provides an amount of autonomy—without her husband or any young children of her own to look after, she can tend to others as she pleases, whether by providing her own home to encouraging their love lives. Mrs. Jennings prompts the heroines in the work to look beyond her age and exuberant personality and acknowledge the authenticity of her earthy wisdom.

In contrast to Mrs. Jennings, Lady Russell of *Persuasion* is a dignified woman who serves as a surrogate mother-figure to Anne Elliot, the daughter of her good friend. Maternity in Austen’s works is difficult to touch upon. As her main characters are typically young ladies eligible for marriage, the importance of mothers as guides intensifies and yet, for the sake of strengthening the heroine’s resolve and character, their authority must be limited. They must be proven silly, unworldly or simply lax. In the case of ideal women, one solution would be to remove them from the story through death. Lady Elliot is just such a parent as Austen describes her in the opening chapter of *Persuasion*:
She had humored, or softened, or concealing (Sir Walter’s) failings, and promoted his real respectability for seventeen years; and... had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit them. (Pers. 4)

Due to her forbearance with her marriage and her husband’s narcissistic ways, Anne’s mother is granted an angelic status and proves too good for the earthly realm. The passing of Lady Elliot leaves Anne at the mercy of a father and elder sister, with only one outlet of support.

A neighbor of Sir Walter Elliot and the close friend of Lady Elliot, Lady Russell becomes Anne’s primary advocate. With her late husband’s fortune in her possession, she is able to live independently; with her reputation, her right to do so is unquestioned. Austen defends her choice, remarking “[t]hat Lady Russell, of steady age and character, and extremely well provided for, should have no thought of a second marriage, needs no apology to the public, which is rather apt to be unreasonably discontented when a woman does marry again, than when she does not...” (Pers. 4). There are numerous factors that contribute to widows not seeking a second husband. For the wealthy widow, the independence they find after their husband’s death makes the idea of attaching themselves to a second unpleasant. From another viewpoint, it is a matter of age and pragmatics, such as Erdman B. Palmore explains:

Apparently, men of all ages tend to view women who are older than themselves as less attractive potential mates than women their own age or younger. Similarly, women tend to prefer men older than themselves. Therefore, older women find it very difficult to remarry, both because of the shortage of unmarried men their age or
older and because of the discrimination against them by men of all ages. (135-6)

Of the bereaved adults in *Persuasion*, Sir Walter Elliot is the one questioned for his continued singlehood, despite his clearly narcissistic personality. While not the owner of an estate, Lady Russell behaves as a gentlewoman should, with none of the silliness of character that haunts many Austen females. Her levelheadedness and benevolent nature prove her worth, though she is not without flaw. She possesses bias for those with higher status than she, as Austen writes: “She had a cultivated mind, and was generally speaking, rational and consistent—but she had prejudices on the side of ancestry; she had a value for rank and consequence, which blinded her a little to the faults of those who possessed them” (*Pers.* 9).

This particular flaw, in the midst of her many virtues, invests Lady Russell with a more complex characterization than may be apparent at first glance. Austen continues her overview of Lady Russell by detailing the alliance Lady Russell holds in regards to Sir Walter, based upon her respect of his rank. Though he is a narcissist and quite neglectful of a worthy daughter, Lady Russell seeks to protect him and ease his difficulties as he faces the loss of his estate. She does this as she is tied to the family in various respects. Significantly, she takes on the role of mentor to Anne, who while a middle child, holds much promise. Anne in turn, while young, follows her advice with little questioning. For the most part, the mentorship is positive; however, Lady Russell’s disdain of Anne’s suitor, the future Captain Wentworth, causes Anne to break the couple’s engagement leading to heartbreak on both sides:

[It] might yet have been possible to withstand her father’s ill-will…—but Lady Russell, whom she had always loved and relied on, could not, with such steadiness of opinion, and such tenderness of
manner, be continually advising her in vain. She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—indiscreet, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it. (Pers. 19)

Lady Russell, believing young Wentworth unsuitable for Anne, opposes the match strongly, and Anne is swayed. As a result of this heartache, from the moment of separation to the start of the novel proper, Anne suffers from a state of decreased vitality. She comes to realize that her mentor is not infallible, and regrets following Lady Russell’s advice so readily. Even the best of Austen’s older women possess flaws; the effects of Lady Russell’s classist viewpoint on Anne are the most enduring, leading to years of loneliness for the heroine. The perceptions of others, however, remain in the older woman’s favor, while her own opinions shift in various ways according to events.

The respect granted to Lady Russell reflects her idealized role as mentor in the novel. Outside of Kellynch Hall, she is well known, and held as a paragon of virtue. The Musgroves think well of her, especially Anne’s agemates. Henrietta Musgrove voices her opinion to Anne, complementing Lady Russell’s intelligence and charisma. Of special note, Henrietta mentions the skill Lady Russell has with persuasion. It is a talent spoken of with awe. On the other hand, a woman of high intelligence could be viewed with suspicion, as Venetia Murray writes: “Wit, after all, was just as much at a premium during the Regency as amongst the previous generation…As the nineteenth century progressed, however, with its inherent prejudice against the education of women, the term acquired slightly pejorative connotation” (77). Having been on the receiving end of Lady Russell’s silver tongue, Anne agrees for politeness’s sake. And just as others have their conceptions about Lady Russell, she possesses several of her own concerning various individuals. Captain Wentworth receives scorn anew as Lady Russell
discovers his interest in Louisa Musgrove: “Lady Russell had only to listen composedly, and wish them happy, but internally her heart reveled in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt, that the man who at twenty-three seemed to understand somewhat the value of an Anne Elliot, should, eight years afterwards, be charmed by a Louisa Musgrove” (Pers. 82). The older lady’s thoughts on Louisa are not particularly negative; she just does not compare to Anne. However, she considers herself justified in her previous judgment, that he is still unworthy of her favorite charge.

In truth, it is Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot who prove unworthy of Anne. Their ill treatment of the middle daughter does not improve upon her reunion with them in Bath, and Lady Russell lacks the authority to convince them otherwise. Elizabeth’s preference of Mrs. Clay’s company over Anne’s still upsets her, as Austen writes, “The sight of Mrs. Clay in such favor, and Anne so overlooked, was a perpetual provocation to her there; and vexed her as much … as a person in Bath who drinks the water, gets all the new publications, and has a very large acquaintance, can be vexed” (Pers., 96). Her prejudice for the gentry works in Anne’s favor, in this occasion, as the Elliots’ favoritism of Mrs. Clay becomes too evident to be ignored. With as much respect as she feels for Sir Walter’s position, Lady Russell notes the neglect of Anne and disapproves of it. It is this blindness that causes her to misjudge the characters seeking the Elliot sisters’ hand in marriage; her very influence makes her mistakes potentially more detrimental than any other woman’s.

In Bath, Lady Russell encounters several characters about whom she has strong judgments. Of particular interest are Captain Wentworth and Mr. Elliot, the heir-presumptive of Kellynch Hall. Lady Russell’s view of Captain Wentworth, as explored above, has not improved over eight years of absence. Even though he
is a wealthy and successful member of the Navy, she still considers him an upstart that threatens the social standing of Anne. The opposite is true of Mr. Elliot, whose good manners and prospects at Kellynch Hall encourage Lady Russell’s goodwill. Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that Lady Russell’s life experiences prompt her to keep an eye out for the most worthy suitors for Anne, as she writes: “Austen’s fictional mothers and aunts...bear a comfortable relation to the society they inhabit, supporting that society’s assumption that young women exist to marry and young men to be married...They understand also the social connection of love and money and feel no shame at attempting to further prosperous matches...” (162). The girl being pursued, Anne holds reservations, despite the encouragement of Lady Russell. Mr. Elliot’s sudden interest in Sir Walter’s family after snubbing them years ago makes her suspicious. To Lady Russell, this seems like a sign that Mr. Elliot has realized the importance of good relations with his benefactor. But, as the reader discovers, this partiality of Lady Russell is finally corrected as Mr. Elliot’s true character is revealed. He possesses far more avarice for his future position than deemed proper, seeking to insure his inheritance by keeping Sir Walter a widower. This, plus Anne’s reconnection with Captain Wentworth, forces her to reassess her opinions:

She must learn to feel that she had been mistaken with regard to both;...she had been too quick in receiving them as the certain result of the most correct opinions and well regulated mind. There was nothing less for Lady Russell to do, than to admit that she had been pretty completely wrong, and to take up a new set of opinions and of hopes. (*Pers.* 165-6)

In a rare turn for an older character, Lady Russell recognizes her mistakes. What’s more, she becomes determined to change her one area of fault. The quality of her
moral character is justified by this decision, and insures that while Anne may not follow her blindly, at least the two women will remain close friends.

Even effective role models for the heroines, such as Mrs. Jennings and Lady Russell, are inconvenienced by Austen’s ageist distribution of characteristics. Marianne Dashwood’s prejudice against those outside her age group is increased by her disgust towards Mrs. Jennings’ earthy sense of humor, while the usually proper Elinor feels uneasy accepting the older woman’s forthright generosity. Anne Elliot, on the other hand, had trusted Lady Russell completely, until the widow’s classist advice caused the young girl to reject a marriage proposal from an otherwise suitable man. While the Dashwood sisters learn to appreciate Mrs. Jennings’ acts of kindness, Anne becomes aware of Lady Russell’s shortcomings and strengthens her will to avoid relying so heavily on the opinions of others. Notably, these two women are allowed to develop past their flaws, with Mrs. Jennings chaperoning Elinor and Marianne in an admirably appropriate manner, while Lady Russell make amends after realizing the most worthy person for Anne is the one she rejected out of hand years earlier. Nonetheless, the heroines cannot bring themselves to trust these ladies, driving home the point that one’s own self alone can be relied upon.

Jane Austen’s novels are populated by such a diversity of female characters suggests that she encountered the inspiration for them over the course of her social life. They range in terms of economical circumstance, intelligence and social grace; whether they seek to aid or hinder the main heroines or simply live to please themselves, each presents a different glimpse into Regency life. There are some, such as Pride and Prejudice’s Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mansfield Park’s Mrs. Norris, that try to maintain the status quo established prior to the story, denying the heroines advancement and happiness. Opposition coming from
the patriarchal heads of family could endanger a young woman’s financial place in society. Likewise, receiving censure from another woman could imperil her social reputation along with her family’s. On the whole, however, the older females are benevolent towards their charges, some to the point of trying too hard to advance them. To the well-bred gentlewoman, imposing too greatly is as undesirable as neglect. As a result, the heroines may be prompted to avoid or refuse these gestures, which could hurt the feelings of their mentors. The flaws given to the older women impress upon the reader the superiority of the young heroines, as they learn to determine the intentions of the females they encounter and treat each with the respect they deserve. By regulating the older characters to comedic or villainous roles, Austen reduces their influence over the girls and insures that the choices made by the heroines are made according to their own moral code, not that of their elders.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The task of compiling information concerning nine gentlemen and fifteen ladies, alongside the opinions of seven different heroines and numerous sources from the present, grew from a simple question into the research gathered here. There are indeed instances of ageism portrayed in the novels of Jane Austen, and many characters bear traits that could be deemed stereotypes of their age. In her novels, she explores issues of power and powerlessness through the struggles between generations. Characters victimized because of their age may also face other types of discrimination, based upon their sex or social class. Ultimately, there are several overarching observations I have found that bear consideration concerning ageism in Austen’s texts.

Perhaps the most pivotal finding is the allowance that the plots of the novels could not have possibly progressed as they did if the older men and women were not flawed. The works are coming-of-age stories for the heroines; in order to achieve growth, the central figure is prompted to leave hearth and home. This venture could take a literal slant, with the character undertaking a journey. Or it involves the acquisition of knowledge that weakens the character’s dependency on her family. Traditionally, the males in charge of the household possess access to the home’s financial assets; a young female would not, unless she owned a fortune in her own right. For one of Jane Austen’s heroines, rising from a juvenile’s status into the adult world, gaining the agency to face calamity on her own terms requires vulnerability on the part of the elders. Men such as Sir Walter Elliot and Mr. Woodhouse do not inspire much confidence, whether in their management skills or their fortitude, and their daughters seek to aid them beyond their filial duty. In *Northanger Abbey*, Mrs. Allen’s inattention exposes Catherine to
potentially compromising situations, and when Catherine is given the choice to accompany her friends or stay with the older woman, she does not hesitate to leave. Individuals that possess power and resources can be tempted to wield them offensively, in an effort to manipulate the heroines; Mrs. Ferrars and Lady Catherine de Bourgh both try to dissuade less wealthy heroines from courting their wealthy relatives, while General Tilney and Sir Thomas Bertram prove willing to dismiss heroines from their homes in order to silence them. The faults of even well-meaning individuals, such as Miss Bates and Mrs. Jennings, make the heroines too uncomfortable to trust them fully. The seeming incompetence of their elders forces Austen’s heroines into a more active role, enabling them to make decisions and act upon them.

Another factor that could have motivated Austen’s method of characterization is that the author, seeking to make the characters more relatable, gave them flaws her readers could recognize and remark upon. Austen’s writings are stories of day-to-day life concerning subjects she was familiar with: travel, social engagements, and courtship, to name a few. Her heroines encountered imperfect people in the novels; some flaws were meant to be humorous and amuse the reader, and others were created to rouse questions. The hardships of the legal system of primogeniture and the limited education opportunities for females, for example, do affect the heroines as often as uncivil company. As the heroines confront these issues, readers can find themselves taking interest, even taking sides. Again, novels led by a young heroine would be dull if her elders were completely competent. The traits given to the older characters are meant to elicit a response from the readers: amusement if they are comical, or scorn if they violate social ideals. Instead of presenting an idealized view of life on the country estate, Austen created characters that have family problems and troublesome personality
quirks. Their problems are meant to be talked about, discussed and analyzed, whether they do wrong or right in the work.

On that note, the behavior of the overtly ageist characters is depicted as erroneous. The three I have distinguished are confident individuals, secure in their place in the world and their youth. Emma Woodhouse is a part of the social elite in Highbury, while Marianne Dashwood and John Willoughby are passionate and quick to judge those different from themselves. Their opinions stem from their own experiences, and at the start of both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma*, they do not associate themselves with older individuals from outside the family group. While Willoughby’s wealthy relation Mrs. Smith does not appear in person, he clearly feels that she imposes upon him, using her wealth as leverage, and he resents her. Marianne rebuffs attempts at familiarity from Mrs. Jennings, and grants that Colonel Brandon’s love of music is his sole redeeming feature. Emma’s remoteness from the Bates family is a protective measure to keep from “sinking to their level.” Austen does not condone their prejudice, and demonstrates this through her other characters: Mr. Knightley upbraids Emma, and Elinor Dashwood argues against both Marianne and Willoughby, both serving as reminders of the proper respect due to elders. Their considerate actions towards the older characters also assert the expected mode of behavior. To further her statement, the author levels appropriate chastisement towards these characters. Willoughby’s careless behavior leads him to lose Marianne as well as Mrs. Smith’s favor. Though by book’s end he regains favor and accepts his new life, his views do not seem to change. In the cases of Marianne and Emma, there is an effort to change after being enlightened. Marianne is abandoned by her cohort Willoughby, and after being helped through a perilous fever by Mrs. Jennings and Colonel Brandon, she comes to appreciate them both better. Emma’s outburst at
Box Hill and subsequent scolding from Mr. Knightley awaken her to the needs of the aged, and she is shown actively seeking to make amends. They both recognize that their proud beliefs have been alienating them from worthy acquaintances; their growth as individuals necessitates maturing past their preconceptions and better attending to the needs of those around them, of all ages.

While there are ageist characters within the works of Austen, her portrayal of older characters does not appear to be overtly ageist. The negative traits she chose to emphasize in her older characters do not result in a singular statement concerning age. The older gentlemen are estate-owning individuals; many strive to provide for their families, even as they remain distant from its members, while others prove unworthy of the responsibility. The ladies are family-oriented, ranging from overly concerned mothers to those insensible to the needs of the children, down to those who seek to dominate their brood. There are youthful characters in her works that possess less than ideal traits. There are also examples of good and wise elders that Austen praises when it is due. Nonetheless, she sought to empower her heroines by weakening the figures of authority above them; she targeted older characters because they possessed higher rank and more life experience than the young women, not because of their age. By this rationale, Austen chose to create characters with ageist views, whereas her decision to give negative traits to older characters with authority demonstrates incidental, not designed, ageism.
WORKS CITED

Primary Resources:


Ageism:


The British Regency Period:


California State University, Fresno

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