

- 23 *Growth through English* Revisited PETER SMAGORINSKY
- 30 Engaging Students in the Disciplines of English: What Are Effective Schools Doing? ARTHUR N. APPLEBEE
- 37 Metaphor as Renewal: Re-Imagining Our Professional Selves CANDIDA GILLIS AND CHERYL L. JOHNSON
- 44 Austen's Granddaughter: Louise Plummer Re(de)fines Romance JOHN BENNION
- 51 Living a Literate Life, Revisited DOUGLAS KAUFMAN
- 58 The Tactility of Writing WILLIAM T. AKERS
- 63 Authentic Intellectual Achievement in Writing KENDRA SISSERSON, CARMEN K. MANNING, ANNIE KNEPLER, AND DAVID A. JOLLIFFE
- 70 Whose Community? Where Is the "YA" in YA Literature? GAIL GAUTHIER
- 77 Reading the Complex World: Students Approach *The Scarlet Letter* from Multiple Perspectives LORRAINE CELLA
- 83 Teaching *Beloved*: Images of Transcendence VICKY GREENBAUM
- 88 Promoting Academic Literacy with Urban Youth through Engaging Hip-hop Culture ERNEST MORRELL AND JEFFREY M. R. DUNCAN-ANDRADE
- 93 The Art of Response DEBORAH E. CRONE-BLEVINS

**Columns and Features**

- 4 Call for Manuscripts 19 For Fun 113 Talk About Books
- 7 Letters to *EJ* 20 Teacher to Teacher 116 Young Adult Literature
- 9 From the Editor 99 English in the News 119 2001–2002 Reviewers
- 10 Speaking My Mind 102 Learning with Technology 121 Indexes to Volume 91
- 12 From the Secondary Section 106 Professional Links 135 NCTE to You
- 15 Cross Conversations 110 Poetry

# Austen's Granddaughter: Louise Plummer Re(de)fines Romance

JOHN BENNION

**A** few years ago my younger daughter discovered *Pride and Prejudice*. When I asked why she liked Austen, she said, "Because she's very witty, sarcastic. What she says is clear. And because you know there's going to be a happy ending." At sixteen my daughter was learning to read Austen's irony. I believe she prepared for that leap by reading contemporary authors whose cultural signs are more accessible than those in Austen's novels. As a teacher of junior high school English and of university students, I have come to believe that young people need contemporary authors who maintain the tradition

of the classics and who are bridges of understanding to the stories, values, and culture of the greatest writers in the western tradition. Sometimes the language of the classics seems stilted and overly formal to students. The issues, when clothed in the traditions of a century or more ago, seem foreign and irrelevant.

One answer to the dilemma is to have students read contemporary and classic novels together. I imagine such pairings as Harry Potter and *David Copperfield*, Sachar's *Holes* and *Candide*, McKinley's *Beauty* and *Wuthering Heights*. Such a comparative approach would enable students to investigate what has changed concerning love and life and what has remained constant in the past century or two. This approach could also lead teachers and students away from pure structuralism—the study of plot lines and patterns of imagery—toward a cultural studies approach—the ways novels and culture influence each other. In this essay I explore how teachers might link the novels of Louise Plummer and Jane Austen.

## Writing in Austen's Tradition

Plummer's intelligent, ironic voice reminds me of Austen. Sophisticated, funny, and hip, her novels can act as a bridge to the values and craft of Austen's

work. Both authors write about young women whose happiness is at first threatened by faulty judgment and then secured by solid decisions. Both examine the differences between love, which is enduring, and infatuation, which is transient. In addition to modeling the growth of female characters who gradually discover a reliable manner of loving, both writers contrast the qualities of young men who are worthy or unworthy of love. They also compare the ways stories of love are told, whether in the manner of romances, where excitement depends on insecurity and self-deceit, or of novels, where fidelity to realistic human behavior is the standard.

Specifically, Austen allows for *Persuasion* based on rational social judgment rather than on bias. She favors choices about love and marriage that involve objective social standards rather than either overweening *Pride* or distorting *Prejudice*. Her ideal basis of judgment is a balance of *Sense* and *Sensibility*. Her work is in reaction to the excesses found in the Gothic romance, but instead of merely being antiromantic, she endeavors to find a way to incorporate sentiment into her formula for successful love and marriage.

In like manner, Louise Plummer shows young women the difference between romantic ob-

sessions, infatuations, and a more self-actualized love. Her irony unmasks the manipulation and deceit found in modern romance novels, movies, and TV shows. She, like Austen, suggests that unbridled romantic emotion is a set-up for trouble. Her books, like Austen's, are novels of manners, because readers judge behavior through seeing the mistakes of the characters, who generally come to a stable vision by the end of the story.

Because love has to do with verbal as well as physical commerce, it's natural for both authors to explore the ways we talk and write about love. Some brief examples will show how Plummer and Austen criticize the excessive language and exaggerated manners of romance novels. As mentioned above, this comparison leads naturally to a discussion of how love and stories of love operate in the lives of students.

### Satirizing the Romance Novel

Both *The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman* and *Northanger Abbey* are satires of romance writing. Both books make clear that hyperbole or deceit in matters of love can produce terrible social damage.

Plummer mocks the conventions and language of romance novels by having her protagonist Kate write one. The story begins when Richard, whom Kate has long admired, comes home from college for Christmas vacation. Kate and her best friend Ashley become rivals for his love. Kate, who has read widely and well under the tutelage of an excellent English teacher, thinks of love as something that grows out of an enduring friendship. Ashley, who has steeped herself in romance novels, finds love to be immediate and transient. It becomes clear that Kate is writing the novel to work out her ideas about love. In the prologue she self-consciously imitates a romance:

This is one of those romance novels. You know, that disgusting kind with kisses that last three paragraphs and make you want to put your finger down your throat to induce projectile vomiting. It is one of those books where the hero has a masculine-sounding name that ends in an unvoiced velar plosive, like CHUCK . . . and he has sinewy muscles and makes guttural groanings whenever his beloved is near. In romance novels, the heroine has a feminine-sounding name made up of liquid consonants, like FLEUR, and has full, sensuous lips—yearning lips. I think the word “yearning” will appear at least a thousand times in this book. (1)

Kate knows about the genre from her friend Ashley, who not only reads but *lives* romances. Ashley believes that love involves manipulation and deceit more than it does honesty.

The situation in *Northanger Abbey* is almost identical to that in Plummer's story. The good-hearted but naive protagonist, Catherine Moreland, goes to Bath as traveling companion to a Mrs. Allen. In Bath she meets Isabella Thorpe, who is an expert dissembler, making play with manipulating the truth. Catherine falls in love with Henry Tilney, who is forthright in speech and behavior. Through the progress of the novel, readers judge between the romance and rational approaches to love.

---

Both writers show that the foils  
of their female protagonists  
have limited vision, seeing  
only the physical aspect of love  
instead of its emotional and  
philosophical complexity.

---

Austen embeds in her novel references to Gothic romances which are (to use Henry James's metaphor) like free-floating balloons, untethered from reality. The following conversation occurs early in the book between the heroine and Isabella:

“Have you gone on with Udolpho?”

“Yes, I have been reading it ever since I woke; and I am got to the black veil.”

“Are you, indeed? How delightful! Oh! I would not tell you what is behind the black veil for the world! Are not you wild to know?” (60)

After speculating breathlessly that it may be a skeleton behind the black veil, Isabella lists the gothic romances Catherine should read: “Castle of Wolfenback, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries” (61). Soon readers see that in Isabella's case life imitates fiction. She

speaks after the manner of what she reads—full of passion, improbability, and exaggeration. Through the course of the novel, Catherine discovers that Isabella is unreliable and that her freedom with truth harms herself and others.

Both writers show that the foils of their female protagonists have limited vision, seeing only the physical aspect of love instead of its emotional and philosophical complexity. Early in *The Unlikely Romance*, Plummer describes the following scene:

“None of that counts,” Ashley said, finally turning away from the mirror to look at me.

“What counts?”

Her tongue flickered between her teeth.

“Thighs,” she said slowly. “Boys’ thighs.”

That was it? Thighs? *Thighs?* What about warmth and kindness and humor? What about intelligence and stability? (47)

The foils in both these novels, Ashley and Isabella, could be sisters, both obsessed with physical appearance. Isabella says to Catherine:

Oh! they [men] give themselves such airs. They are the most conceited creatures in the world, and think themselves of so much importance!—By the bye, though I have thought of it a hundred times, I have always forgot to ask you what is your favourite complexion in a man. Do you like them best dark or fair? (63)

Both authors show that Ashley and Isabella are guilty of confusing shadow for substance and that their confusion is connected to taking romance writing seriously. In *The Unlikely Romance* Kate ironically suggests that her book is malformed because it has too much of real life in it. She writes, “Reality is not appropriate to the [romance] genre. I just read a couple of Harlequins, and I’ve got to edit out some of the reality in this novel as it is” (181). Her constant reference to the act of writing helps Plummer teach readers about the differences between romances and novels. Her novel is presented as a workshop on how to write about love. Plummer even includes “Revision Notes,” italicized sections in which she meditates on the difficulty of saying the truth, especially when her tools are the language and conventions of the romance novel. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine employs insight gained from reading romance novels as if it were her own insight. As she and Henry Tilney are walking along the Avon River in Bath, Catherine says:

“I never look at it . . . without thinking of the south of France.”

“You have been abroad then?” said Henry, a little surprized.

“Oh! no, I only mean what I have read about . . . in the ‘Mysteries of Udolpho.’” (121)

The chapter makes it clear that, while Henry has read more romance novels than Catherine, he has read them for mere enjoyment, not for insight in how to live.

The comparison of novels that are similar but separated by nearly two centuries of time can show students the enduring nature of the literary conflict between the romance and the novel. Both Austen and Plummer engage in this tradition by rejecting specific historical manifestations of the romance. Austen writes against the emotional sloppiness of the Gothic romance, which, late in the eighteenth century, had grown out of the sentimental novel. Plummer rejects the self-indulgence of Harlequin romances and of the bodice ripper style of writing. Both are wary of the effects on contemporary culture of mistaking assumption and intuition for psychological and historical insight.

For example, in *Emma* the protagonist paints a picture of her friend, Harriet, and makes the figure taller. Through irony and the voice of John Knightley, Austen pronounces that such artistic manipulation is serious, evidence of Emma’s propensity to imagine, distort, and misjudge in life.

---

The comparison of novels that are similar but separated by nearly two centuries of time can show students the enduring nature of the literary conflict between the romance and the novel.

---

Plummer also establishes in most of her works the connection between artistic vision and ethical judgment. In *My Name is Susan Smith. The 5 Is Silent.*, a girl becomes infatuated with her aunt’s runaway husband, Willy, who expands in her mind,

“godlike, with magical powers to make me fly through the air, soar like a bird right over the peaks of the Rocky Mountains. I never stopped loving Willy” (10). Years later, as a budding artist, the young woman meets Willy again, and he charms her again. She paints him, but one of her artistic friends points out the flaws, writing:

... I feel less sure of your sketches of your Uncle Willy. Does he really look like that? Is he that square-jawed, and do his eyes gleam in quite the way your highlights suggest? Is his hair that thick, that curly? Do his muscles shine like the photographs in those muscle-mania magazines? I feel reluctant to ask these questions, because I saw your portraits, Susan, saw your clear vision of other people, and have faith in that vision, but I have to say, quite honestly, that the sketches of your Uncle Willy seem distorted to me and therefore false. You make him look like He-Man. (189–90)

Through careful analysis of the rational ideal at the center of both writers, students in our media-saturated society can begin to see the connection between what they watch and what they think, how they act. Perhaps Austen best states this ideal in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth Bennet tries to change her sister’s sympathetic impression of an engagement. She says, “You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavour to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness” (174). Taking romance for reality has serious consequences.

### ***The Romantic Obsessions and Humiliations of Annie Sehlmeier***

Other pairings of Plummer and Austen novels can help students become astute readers, not just of stories, but of their cultural implications. *Emma* and *The Romantic Obsessions and Humiliations of Annie Sehlmeier* are similar in form and purpose. In both novels the authors follow a fairly consistent pattern of moving from false judgment to true judgment as the protagonists come of emotional age. Both praise the virtue of describing life in “plain, unaffected, gentleman-like English” (*Emma* 432).

In Austen’s novel, Emma sets herself up as a judge in matters of love. As a matchmaker, she wants to read and manipulate the exciting code of the heart. Unfortunately, she is not mature enough to have true understanding. Through the bulk of the

novel, Emma is ignorant of her true love for John Knightley. She believes she loves Frank Churchill, a gentleman who has been adopted by a family of high social status.

Plummer’s protagonist is newly immigrated from Holland. She has feelings for two boys, Jack Wakefield, who is a reliable friend and who loves her, and Tom Woolley, who plays at emotion, feigning passion for every girl he knows. So each novel is structured as a love triangle.

Both authors have their characters mistake infatuation for love. Austen’s protagonist meditates on her own apathy when she is separated from the supposed object of her affection, Frank Churchill: “Emma continued to entertain no doubt of her being in love. Her ideas only varied as to the how much. At first, she thought it was a good deal; and afterwards, but little . . .” (268). She catalogues the characteristics of deep love from romance novels—such as being unhappy and unable to focus on usual enjoyments—and finds that she is perfectly able to function. She imagines Frank’s faults clearly, so she must not be in love. The conclusion of every imagined scenario is that she refuses him: “When she became sensible of this, it struck her that she could not be very much in love; for in spite of her previous and fixed determination never to quit her father, never to marry, a strong attachment certainly must produce more of a struggle than she could foresee in her own feelings” (268). Emma believes she is in love, but she is wise enough to doubt how deep and enduring is her affection.

Plummer’s Annie Sehlmeier is more self-deluding. She criticizes her younger sister Henny for having only a surface love for a handsome and popular boy. She writes, “I really loved Woolley. It made me sick, I loved him so much. Real love. It was different with Henny. She had the hots. That was different from love. I was in love” (111). While the cultures on which the two novels are based are quite different, both authors use similar scenes to enable readers to question the depth of the attraction.

The young women in both novels have friends with cooler heads—the men who love them enough to be honest. This contrast enables Plummer and Austen to model stable male characters, but also to explore how a change in vision is required to admire realistic quality more than romantic heroism. The primary characteristic of the ideal male in both novels is his frank honesty. Austen writes, “Mr. Knightley, in fact, was one of



the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the only one who ever told her of them. . . . 'Emma knows I never flatter her,' said Mr Knightley. . . ." (42). In similar manner, Plummer gives Annie's friend Jack the quality of saying what he thinks without contrivance:

"I like you better than . . ."  
"Life itself," I finished for him.  
"No that's no good." He laughed. "Sounds like Woolley, the golden throat of insincerity."  
I drew my head back so I could see his face.  
"You think that?" I asked. "But he's your friend."  
"But he wouldn't be if he talked to me the way he talks to girls. I'd want to throw up. Like the way he's always telling you that you look like Meryl Streep. It's so insulting."  
"But Meryl Streep is lovely," I argued. "It's flattering to be compared with her."  
"Yes, but you're you. You're not one of those made-up movie star fantasies. You're real. You're better. I think you're prettier, for that matter."  
(123–24)

Through these scenes, both authors show how indulging in fantasy causes problems in relationships. One is that each protagonist misinterprets the actions and motivations of others. Emma believes that Frank Churchill is pining for her. She interprets his awkward silences for frustrated love for her:

He was silent. She believed he was looking at her; probably reflecting on what she had said, and trying to understand the manner. She heard him sigh. It was natural for him to feel that he had *cause* to sigh. He could not believe her to be encouraging him. A few awkward moments passed, and he sat down again. . . . He stopt again, rose again, and seemed quite embarrassed.—He was more in love with her than Emma had supposed. . . . (265)

He is actually in love with Jane Fairfax, a woman Emma dislikes. She mistakes his actions because she has constructed a false story to explain his behavior. Austen suggests that Emma is an "imaginist," leaping quickly to exotic interpretations of simple matters.

Although Plummer's Annie knows that Woolley is just flirting with her, she believes her own emotions are deeper than his. She allows herself to be affected by his advances because she has misinterpreted her own emotions, writing a false script for herself similar to the one Emma crafted. For example, when she meets Woolley in the library, she writes,

His body seemed to give off electrical charges. My insides trembled like Oma's chocolate pudding. . . . Then Woolley reached over and wrote lightly in

my notebook, "I love Annie Sehlmeier." He watched my face while I read it. I swallowed. I did not believe it, but I liked seeing it written in his hand. My face burned. (129–30)

Students who compare such passages can see that for centuries those who indulge in fantasy about love have made embarrassing and damaging mistakes of judgment.

In the lead-up to the following segment, Emma discovers that, through a misunderstanding, she has once again encouraged her friend Harriet to have hopes above her station and above any possibility of requitement: "'Good God,' cried Emma, 'this has been a most unfortunate—most deplorable mistake!—What is to be done?'" (397). Emma begins to realize how her romantic speculations have harmed not only Harriet, but also herself. She may lose the friend she has relied on consistently, John Knightley.

In like manner, Annie's excesses harm herself and her friend, Jack Wakefield. In the middle of the night she sneaks to Woolley's house and dances around his car, kissing it, and exclaiming her love for him. Then she discovers that she is watched: "That's when I heard a clear voice in the night: 'Stop it. Please stop it!' That was when a blinding light beamed directly into my eyes from the roof of the garage" (139–40). Her antics nearly cost her Jack's friendship. Like Emma, Annie is a good person who has been misled by her own emotions.

Toward the end of their novels, both authors allow their heroines to have epiphanies during which they meditate on their folly. Emma sees the damage she has done to Harriet:

Her own conduct, as well as her own heart, was before her in the same few minutes. She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on! It struck her with dreadful force, and she was ready to give it every bad name in the world. (398)

Through this revelation she demonstrates her growing maturity, her ability to see as an adult sees.

Annie's imagination plays over and over her foolish performance with Woolley's car:

I closed my eyes and saw the heads of my friends staring down at me from Woolley's garage. Maggie's face, crying. Jack's face. Jack. Had I put that pain there? Was I capable of that? I didn't mean

to. It was just my secret. It was just silly fun. I saw Woolley's face. He hardly seemed worth the humiliation now. My face was wet again. Really very wet. I rubbed it. I couldn't stop this silent crying. I must be getting sick I thought. I must be ill. (142)

Instead of allowing their characters to be destroyed by these minor crimes of romance, each author allows her protagonist to recover.

After self-delusion turns into self-realization, the characters evaluate what happened. In the following passage, Knightley talks about Frank Churchill, but Emma applies the advice to her own manipulative matchmaking:

Very bad—though it might have been worse. —Playing a most dangerous game. Too much indebted to the event for his acquittal. . . . Mystery; Finesse—how they pervert the understanding! My Emma, does not every thing serve to prove more and more the beauty of truth and sincerity in all our dealings with each other? (430)

She realizes that he describes her previous attitudes concerning love. Only luck and his good sense saved her from doing serious damage to her unformed friend, Harriet.

At the end of Plummer's book *Annie* and her sister talk about the nature of love:

"Do you love Jack?" It was an earnest question. She leaned against the porch post and waited for my answer.

"I honestly don't know," I said. "I haven't the vaguest notion of what love is. Do you love Roger?" I asked. . . .

"I like to kiss him." She laughed. "A lot." She bit her lip. "I don't think that's necessarily love, though."

"Well," I said. "The imitation is pretty heady stuff, if you ask me." I sighed. I felt as old as Oma. "And it doesn't feel that bad either." (170–71)

Plummer, like Austen, allows her protagonist to be burned a little, just enough that she respects passion and can see the difference between infatuation and enduring affection, but not so much that she is repulsed by love. The characters of both authors learn to balance emotion and reason and to distinguish between the cultural signs of deep and shallow love.

### Dangerous Men

The love triangles in the novels I've considered enable the characters (and the young readers) to play with choosing between a shallow person to love and

one with more significant values. The characters realize their mistakes of judgment early enough to recover, but in other novels both writers show women who are seriously damaged by their lack of judgment.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet's younger sister, Lydia, falls for Wickham, a shallow and dishonest soldier. They run away together, ruining her reputation, but eventually marry through the pressure of family and friends. Even after her forced marriage, Lydia doesn't see the significance of her poor judgment: "He was her dear Wickham on every occasion; no one was to be put in competition with him" (331). She describes her wedding to her sisters in bubbly, glowing terms, ignorant of the pain she causes them.

In *A Dance for Three*, Plummer has the protagonist suffer severely because of her mistakes of judgment. Hannah Ziebarth falls in love with Milo Fabiano simply because he can play the guitar like her father did. She thinks:

It is the first time Mama and I have seen or heard this guitar since Daddy died. Milo plays notes, not just chords. When he lowers his head, I see Daddy—the same dark hair, the same pose—Daddy sitting on the edge of the sofa playing the guitar. Daddy. I feel my chin tremble and bite hard on my bottom lip. (33)

Her fantasies about their relationship grow until the day she tells Milo she is pregnant with his child. He slugs her and then lies about having sex with her so that his senior year of high school won't be ruined. Still she perseveres in thinking that he will return to her, marry her, and protect her from harm the way her father did before his death. Her vision of Milo is so powerful that she has a psychotic break rather than see him as he is.

A close comparison of these two characters could enable students to feel the tragedy vicariously, gaining insights about life and love without the danger inherent in actual experience.

### An Arena for Defining Values

Through careful discussion, students can see the similarity between their own lives and those of the characters in these novels. My goal as a teacher of literature is not merely to teach biographical facts and information about artistic structure, but to enable students carefully to read literature in an open and relevant manner, so that they can, with the characters, make significant decisions about the deepest

values of civilization. Both Austen and Plummer explore the ways reading fiction is like reading life.

As my two daughters became teenagers and their relationships with boys became more complicated, they struggled to read the confusing cultural signs of romance. They had to make decisions: Would they foster several relaxed relationships or focus on one boy? How physical would their relationships be? How emotionally consuming? As we struggled through those years together I have been grateful for the novels of both Louise Plummer and Jane Austen. The voices of both women are like those of friendly aunts who know plenty of stories about love. Neither writer is as dogmatic as parents or as mercurial as peers. Reading these modern-day novels of manners is helping my daughters walk through the forest of adolescence. While the social codes, especially those pertaining to sexual passion, have changed dramatically in the two centuries between these writers, what is similar is their certainty that honest expression is better in matters of love than exaggeration and deceit. Behind their ironies of

people who make mistakes are two certain and steady voices, telling young women that they can trust their heads and trust their own judgment.

### Works Cited

- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. 1816. London: Penguin Books, 1966.
- . *Northanger Abbey*. 1818. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Plummer, Louise. *A Dance for Three*. New York: Delacorte, 2000.
- . *My Name Is Susan Smith. The 5 Is Silent*. New York: Delacorte, 1991.
- . *The Romantic Obsessions and Humiliations of Annie Schmeier*. New York: Dell, 1989.
- . *The Unlikely Romance of Kate Bjorkman*. New York: Delacorte, 1995.

---

JOHN BENNION teaches creative writing and British literature at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

---

## EJ 60 YEARS AGO

---

### Reading Across the Curriculum!

“Some day I hope to pick up a program of a mathematics or a science teachers’ conference and see that a section has been devoted to the improvement of reading on the high-school level. When the teaching of reading is taken out of the cradle of the English classroom and permitted to romp about and to gain attention in the classrooms of other subjects, I think that we shall have a sturdier, healthier reading situation.”

Marie Corrigan. “Reading Studies Go to Work.” *EJ* 31.1 (1942): 31–36.

---