

“Large fat sighings” of a “large bulky figure”: identity-building and formation of new order in *Persuasion*

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Abstract. This essay provides a multifaceted analysis of Jane Austen's novel *Persuasion* through the lens of narrative consciousness, rhythm and sexual anxiety. Drawing on Lacanian theory, it examines the self-identification processes of the heroine Anne Elliot and Mrs Musgrove against, and with relation to patriarchal norms. By analyzing the dynamics presented in Mrs Musgrove's "large fat sighings", the essay explores the effect of incongruity between the human body and spirit; and it further examines Mrs Musgrove's Sphinx-like figure, who inspires desire and inhibitions in the Oedipus-like Captain Wentworth with a significant impact on the formation of community and order. The essay investigates long-neglected subjects presented in Austen's novels and enriches the complex portrait of Mrs. Musgrove as both Mother and Sphinx.

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

1.1.1 Introduction of *Persuasion*

Persuasion is the last complete novel by Jane Austen, published posthumously in 1817 and titled by Henry Austen.

For more than two centuries, *Persuasion* has been an enduring favourite among common readers and held in high esteem by scholars, with its twisted and moving love story where a young couple overcome social impediments when pursuing the marriage of true minds.

1.1.2 Former moralist interpretations

Since Austen's novels are consistently set around the confined subjects of courtship and marriage of the genteel class, her works are considered to concern the sense of restraint, domestic obligation and the English national identity (Johnson, 1997: 217)^[1]. Therefore, moral rectitude is often embedded inside the readers' imaginations of Jane Austen (Fu, 2018: 70)^[2].

As the apprentice of Samuel Johnson, Austen is indeed a moralist, and in fact, praises and preaches the virtue of reason and morality in her novels. This dominant view has significantly influenced the range and perspectives of critical studies on Austen's novels in academia (Geng, 2011: 58-61)^[3]; *Persuasion* is no exception; the preaching spinster is often considered pristine and her works sexless. The majority of the studies on *Persuasion* are focused on the dialectical connection between reason and passion, or rather sense

and sensibility, presented in the complex and intricate entanglement between Anne and Wentworth (Geng, 2011: 58-61)^[4].

1.1.3 Recent Lacanian readings

Despite the long neglect of the application of Lacanian theories in the field of Austenian studies, recent decades have witnessed a fervent upsurge of studies on Austen's novels in the context of Lacanian theory, as Austen's novels “connects her powerfully to some central Lacanian concerns” (Garofalo, 2019: 61)^[5]. The self-identification process of the heroine Anne Elliot has been analysed within the Lacanian framework of “the instant of glance,” where she attempts to locate herself in the imaginary register, comparing herself against the perfect ideal models constructed by society (Michalski, 2021: 77)^[6]. The same pattern could also be applied to the Mrs Musgrove's identification as a mother and woman in the patriarchal society.

1.2 Research purpose

1.2.1 Influence of narrative consciousness

As mentioned above, David Sigler (2019)^[7] explored, through a close reading of the dynamics presented in the joke, the effect of the relationship between narrative consciousness on building identities and shaping the community. This essay aims to further study the effects of the narrative consciousness in its triangular relationship with Mrs Musgrove and the readers, which can also be interpreted into the triangular structure of the joke, consisting of the joke teller, the listener, and the

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butt of the joke. Comprehension of this joke demands interactive involvement from the readers, on whom the danger of being put in the position of the butt of the joke is forced. And this susceptibility can be further interpreted as an argument for the legitimacy of the ridicule, that one who ought to be less rigid and more moderate in his demands of the common people, if in their case, they fail to live up to the “sublime ideals” (Eagleton, 2019: 24)^[8].

1.2.2 *The unharmonious rhythm of Mrs Musgrove*

This research takes the “large fat sighings” of Mrs Musgrove as the focal point. The comedy against the “large bulky figure” of Mrs Musgrove that express mental sorrows, is truly a marvellous demonstration of the incongruity between the human body and spirit. This conflict between the physical and spiritual will be further explored in this essay with a focus on its influence on the formation of community and order.

1.2.3 *The effect of sexual anxiety*

Within the theory of “the anxiety of influence,” Mrs Musgrove can be interpreted as the Sphinx that represents “natural” and “sexual anxiety” (Bloom, 1997: 39)^[9]. By studying this scene from the viewpoint of sexual anxiety, more profound insight and acute glimpses of Jane Austen's real speculation about the enduring topic of identity and identification, can be offered to scholars and researchers in academia. Furthermore, this research would lead to a more accurate portrayal of Jane Austen, instead of the mere stereotype of a middle-class spinster in the pre-Victorian era.

This study is also meant to present a more balanced examination of the long-overlooked subjects and elements like female lust and desire in Jane Austen's novels, which can be significantly valuable for interpreting subtle implications and deeper themes, which Austen so delicately set under the cover (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000: 146)^[10]. Projected onto the characters that Austen creates, it is possibly Austen's own anxiety as a writer in the face of all her predecessors (Zhang, 2019: 158)^[11]. In a word, this research can provide an illuminating and complex insight into the existing research in the Austen academia.

2 Narrative consciousness

2.1 The meta-narrator

2.1.1 *The criticism of the joke*

Persuasion is a novel about “loss, desire, sexual difference, and social competition,” whose dynamic tension is vividly demonstrated in the scene where Mrs Musgrove is being ridiculed (Michalski, 2021: 77)^[12].

“They were actually on the same sofa, for Mrs Musgrove had most readily made room for him;—they were divided only by Mrs Musgrove. It was no

insignificant barrier indeed. Mrs Musgrove was of a comfortable substantial size, infinitely more fitted by nature to express good cheer and good humour, than tenderness and sentiment; and while the agitations of Anne's slender form, and pensive face, may be considered as very completely screened, Captain Wentworth should be allowed some credit for the self-command with which he attended to her large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for.

Personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions. A large bulky figure has as good a right to be in deep affliction, as the most graceful set of limbs in the world. But, fair or not fair, there are unbecoming conjunctions, which reason will patronize in vain,—which taste cannot tolerate,—which ridicule will seize” (Austen, 2012: 67)^[13].

The “large fat sighings” and “comfortable, substantial size” of Mrs Musgrove, as ridiculed by the narrator, which may strike modern readers as fat-shaming, is an unusually harsh joke in Austen's works. The joke about changes in physical appearance has drawn fierce criticism and is considered to be a “savage caricature” (Mudrick, 1952: 212)^[14], or “infamous proclamation” (Heydt-Stevenson, 2005: 183)^[15], among others.

2.1.2 *The insertion of readers forced by the joke*

However vicious such remarks may be, according to George Orwell, “the aim of a joke is not to degrade the human being, but to remind him that he is already degraded” (Orwell, 1968: 285-286)^[16]. Joke as it is, Mrs Musgrove here as a fictional character within the story narrated, obviously cannot be reminded by the narrator; the reminding must be directed at the readers, who are also susceptible to the same danger of being ridiculed.

To comprehend this joke, the readers must have seen themselves as a norm in relation to the figure of Mrs Musgrove, which results in their identification not only with the joke teller but also with the butt of the joke (Sigler, 2019: 47)^[17]. Hence the joke may not directly apply to Mrs Musgrove, but still, through the readers, indirectly still succeeds in “reminding” the butt of the joke (to be), not the fact of already being degraded, but the possibility of being degraded, for the readers are subject to the same social norms that ridicule Mrs Musgrove. Hence the butt of the joke in this case now includes both the fictional characters and the reader.

2.2 The super-narrator

2.2.1 *Justification of the caricature*

As to “the narrating consciousness,” after ridiculing Mrs Musgrove, it acknowledges “a right to be in deep affliction” but also justifies the ridicule it has earlier made, which is considered a double structure of the meta-narrator and the super-narrator. In the question of the function of the super-narrator, when it simply mocks the meta-narrator and “justifies its cruelty,” Sigler

believes such a setting makes the narrator a butt of the joke, and a community is created through the dynamic operation of the joke, under the regulation of the superego (Sigler, 2019: 45-49)^[18]. This is a process, as described by the Lacanian philosopher, where “the ego ideal itself turns out to be the partial object” (Zupančič, 2008: 32)^[19].

However, “the narrating consciousness” can be considered to consist of, instead of the meta-narrator and the super-narrator, simply one more complex narrator. The super-narrator in Sigler’s analysis strikes an impression as a more “omniscient” narrator than the meta-narrator, with a more extensive view.

2.2.2 *The idea of “pastoral”*

Writing of William Empson, Terry Eagleton argues that the pastoral in Empson’s view could be understood as “a large-minded plebeian wisdom,” which asks oneself to live up to the “‘high’ human values” and accept the fact that others may not (Eagleton, 2019: 24)^[20]. From such a perspective, the narrator practices sublime wisdom by first vindicating the “right to be in deep affliction” of a body of whatever “personal size” and later accepting the fact that reason, the “high” value, cannot be forced upon others. On Sádor Ferenczi, Eagleton remarks that “yet we are amused because we acknowledge the force of the inhibition in the very act of violating it” (Eagleton, 2019: 13)^[21]. Therefore, by suggesting the possibility of the vindicated right being violated instead of criticizing this violation as a taboo to be inhibited, the narrator denies, or at least, deduces the power of such inhibition and the pleasure of breaking it, shaping the community of dynamic power balance.

Nonetheless, such a strategy also has its very own limitations, for the “irreverence,” in Eagleton’s term, signified by the justification of the ridicule that Mrs Musgrove suffers, actually, reinforces the “social norms by demonstrating how remarkably resilient they are, how good-humouredly capable of surviving any amount of mockery” (Eagleton, 2019: 14)^[22]. Therefore, though the performative process of jokes could “creates community through its very operations” (Sigler, 2019: 47)^[23], it is still susceptible to the social norms of a larger community.

3 Rhythm

3.1 General incongruity between body and spirit

In the field of humour studies, among the theories that repeat most frequently, there is incongruity theory (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004: 147)^[24]. Simon Critchley writes, “What is funny, finally, is the fact of having a body” (Critchley, 2002: 62)^[25], which Terry Eagleton immediately amends, “more precisely, one might claim, the incongruity involved in neither quite having a body nor quite being one” (Eagleton, 2019: 21)^[26]. The “large fat sighings” uttered by the “large bulky figure” of Mrs Musgrove, best demonstrate such a comic spirit, for the

humour of the joke derives from the incongruity as a result of the thingy “large bulky figure” sighing out human sorrows, which is exactly what Wyndham Lewis describes as “physical bodies, behaving as persons” (1928: 247)^[27]. In the latter part of this essay, the incongruity between the physical and spiritual will be further explored, through an analysis of the “large fat sighings” as a rhythmic pattern that connects the body and mentality.

3.2 The unharmonious bodily rhythm

3.2.1 *The sorrow of spirit in flesh*

The comical effects of the “large fat sighings” in building such social communities can be further explored, as a rhythmic pattern.

The definition of the verb “sigh” varies according to dictionaries, as defined as “to take and then let out a long deep breath that can be heard, to show that you are disappointed, sad, tired, etc” by Oxford English Dictionary^a, or “let out a deep breath, as a way of expressing feelings such as disappointment, tiredness, or pleasure” by Collins English Dictionary^b. The act of sighing, different from a more regular breathing pattern, emphasises on the process of letting out an audible breath. It is obvious that when the verb “sigh” is applied, the stress is arranged upon the process of breathing out in the rhythmic pattern of breathing.

According to Henri Bergson, the readers connect with the characters through the established “regularity of the rhythm” and the readers would expect the “periodic returns of the measure,” feeling the “graceful” pleasure of “holding the future in the present” (Bergson, 2001: 12)^[28]. The unbecoming conjunction of the figure and sorrow seems to divide the poor fat woman into two distinct parts. As the mindful sorrow of Mrs Musgrove seems to be “beside” her very own physical self, she becomes the “oddly plural” (Bevis, 2013: 21)^[29]. These hardly rhythmical nor graceful “large fat sighings” out of “a large bulky figure,” therefore, reinforce the ambivalence between the physical and the spiritual, and as mentioned in the beginning, “the incongruity involved in neither quite having a body nor quite being one” and hence broken is the illusion of mastery.

3.2.2 *The Bakhtinian fool*

Ridiculed as Mrs Musgrove is, for she is a butt of the joke though among many others, she is a Bakhtinian fool, “extremely mocked by the objective narrator” and “used as a mask for the author to criticize society” (Nodeh, 2013: 2)^[30]. Her “large bulky figure,” screening the admirable, pleasant-to-eyes Anne Elliot for Captain

^a OED (2023) Available from: https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/sigh_1?q=sigh [Accessed 27 March 2023].

^b Collins English Dictionary (2023) Available from: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/sigh> [Accessed 27 March 2023].

Wentworth, the rightful male, “makes strange the world of social conventions” (Bakhtin, 1981: 404)^[31]. The “unbecoming conjunctions” of Mrs Musgrove’s “personal size” and “mental sorrow” which as commented by the narrator, “reason will patronize in vain.” “Reason” here signifies a Cartesian cogito. When reason patronizes effectively, the “huge mathematical machine” keeps on extending and the world becomes still and lifeless (Bloom, 1997: 39)^[32]. And therefore, becoming a butt of the joke, Mrs Musgrove nullifies reason.

Schopenhauer writes that “humour depends upon a subjective, yet serious and sublime mood, which is in voluntarily in conflict with a common external world very different from itself” (Schopenhauer, 1887: 282)^[33]. And when, as in this scene, the dominating value of reason is denied and through the humour that derives from, the “diverting” scene where, in Schopenhauer’s term, “this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency,” the fool overturns her master (Schopenhauer, 1887: 280)^[34].

4 Sexual anxiety

4.1 Mrs Musgrove as mother

Unlike Mrs Bennet and Miss Bates, the other Bakhtinian fools in Austen’s works, Mrs Musgrove is special as a mother who can be said to have never cared about her son until his death, which is odd and peculiar.

The answer to the neglect Dick Musgrove suffers alive may be found in the narrator’s description of Mrs Musgrove as “more fitted by nature to express good cheer and good humour, than tenderness and sentiment.” “Good cheer” and “good humour” are the amiable qualities that engage one in pleasure-seeking while “tenderness and sentiment” are the ones for motherhood. Hence the neglect that Dick Musgrove suffers from can be understood as the result of Mrs Musgrove’s denial of motherhood by nature.

“For the human subject to emerge it must not simply be conscious of its own distinctiveness but must be recognized as a human subject by another,” which Hegel described as the dialectic of “Lordship and Bondage” (Homer, 2005: 23)^[35]. Therefore, despite Mrs Musgrove’s rejection against, she will always be identified as a mother as long as she is recognized so. However, according to Elias Canetti, “a mother is one who gives her own body to be eaten” (Canetti, 1962: 404)^[36]. Blackwell puts forward the idea that in the film adaptations, Anne Elliot’s anorexia signifies her resistance to being a mother (Blackwell, 2004: 160)^[37]. Though such anorexia is demonstrated more obviously in the film, there is a base in the text to justify such an assumption, for in this exact scene Mrs Musgrove’s “large bulky figure” indeed blocks Anne’s “slender form.”

Then in contrast to the slenderness that resists childbirth, the bulky figure of Mrs Musgrove is part of the flesh regained through the death of her son and it is not until the death brings back the flesh that the son has

“eaten,” did Mrs Musgrove realize what a child should mean to a mother. To Mrs Musgrove, the process of being identified as a mother is “a struggle of desire and recognition,” as the death of her son is also the death of herself (Homer, 2005: 24)^[38]. As her son dies, the alienating image of Mrs Musgrove perceived as a mother, dies along. Therefore, the “profitable” Dick Musgrove, “whom alive nobody had cared for,” has become the more amiable “poor Richard.”

4.2 Mrs Musgrove as Sphinx

4.2.1 Mrs Musgrove’s self-identification

Now to Captain Wentworth in the scene, Mrs Musgrove, screening Anne Elliot, has become the Sphinx that is, in Harold Bloom’s term, “natural” and “sexual anxiety” (Bloom, 1997: 39)^[39]. “The tripartite structure” of Captain Wentworth, Mrs Musgrove (in the middle), and Anne Elliot, creates “an intricate and eroticized interplay of desires and inhibitions” (Sigler, 2019: 47)^[40]. Anne starts to be reconciled with Wentworth, according to Blackwell, for “unburdening her body from the maternal role” and relaxing her nerves with the examples of “the childless Crofts” (Blackwell, 2004: 160)^[41]. And blocking Anne, as any Sphinx would do, Mrs Musgrove is also a muse to Captain Wentworth, with a “bulky figure” which bearing less motherhood now bears more flesh, the dislodging of the Sphinx must inspire him.

According to the text, Captain Wentworth “attending” such “large fat sighings” of a woman less fitted “by nature” to express “tenderness and sentiments.” Such “large fat sighings” can be considered sexual, for it is a most vivid sensual expression, to which “a large bulky figure has as good a right... as the most graceful set of limbs in the world”, that are, as described, in need of “self-command” to “attend to.” Erotic and sexual as they are, the sighings, which are the presence of a man, seem to locate in the gap between autoeroticism and heterosexual coitus and can best identify with masturbation, which nevertheless “seems to challenge the historicizing impulse” (Sedgwick, 1991: 820)^[42]. Mrs Musgrove here is one perfect example of, in Sedgwick’s term, “The Muse of Masturbation” (Sedgwick, 1991: 818)^[43]. The masturbation of the mother, who has lost a son, is set free from the narrative of reproduction, and therefore seems to affine with “ahistorical or history-rupturing rhetorics,” which is a challenge to the history as which the heterosexual history “masquerades so readily” (Sedgwick, 1991: 820)^[44].

On Lacan’s thought experiment about prison and identification, Derek Hook remarks, “I can have no full understanding of what I ‘objectively’ am” (Hook, 2013: 128)^[45]. And so cannot Mrs Musgrove, whose notion of “self” relies upon the alienated image others perceive; her identity as a mother is truly at the mercy of others.

4.2.2 Mrs Musgrove as a muse with her riddle

When the history of reproductive heterosexuality is challenged by the masturbation of the woman no longer

fertile, which is “no insignificant barrier indeed,” Captain Wentworth now, like Oedipus, faces the blockage of Sphinx. However, unlike Oedipus, “who did not know that the Sphinx was his Muse,” Captain Wentworth, attending to her sighings, realizes that the answer to the riddle-like sighings, “non-motherhood by nature,” is also what the Muse offers, as it is put forward that a man’s desire is activated only in a triangular relation to the desire of other people (Bloom, 1997: 39; Michalski, 2021: 78)^[46].

But this is not the only thing she offers, that prevents him from a tragic fate, like the one of Oedipus. A large part of Oedipus’ tragedy can be attributed to his Cartesian cogito, through which he fails to know the world (Yan, 2021: 120)^[47]. Captain Wentworth, however, avoids such a fate when he carefully listens to the sighings, “which reason will patronize in vain.” As the consequence of the omniscient power of reason being challenged, the authority of the Cartesian cogito is also challenged and the social norms, which should regulate society, can no longer be trusted. The denial of the proper functioning of reason challenges the world where everything is supposed to be orderly and though oppressively, meaningful. When the meaning of grand narrative is deprived by the ill-functioning reason, the world seems to, to a certain extent however minor, turn into a Bakhtinian carnival that “scrambles distinctions and revels in the collapse of meaning” (Eagleton, 2019: 10)^[48].

Therefore, in a way, the fool has succeeded in adding to the world the touch of carnival, and as limited as the influence of one so ridiculed may be, she provides “a momentary respite” from suffocating blandness (Eagleton, 2019: 10)^[49].

5 Conclusion

It has become a truth universally acknowledged that Austen’s novels are closely associated with Lacanian studies and in desperate want of discusses the application of Lacanian theory in the analysis of Jane Austen's novel, *Persuasion*. The double triangular structure, one that consists of Mrs Musgrove, Anne Elliot, and Captain Wentworth, which is in another of Mrs Musgrove, the reader, and the narrator, fits perfectly into another triangular structure of the joke-teller, listeners, and the butt of the joke, which provides a rich context where multiple perspectives on the interpretations of Austen’s power. Austen delicately arranges the triple triangular structures, so that readers could directly interact with characters through identification. The application of Lacanian theories has proved itself to push the Austenian studies beyond the mere moralist value of restraint and domestic obligation.

The idea of incongruity and the ambivalence between the physical and spiritual embedded in the “large fat sighings” of Mrs. Musgrove, disrupt the regularity of the rhythm and reinforce the oddity of having both body and spirit. The author also discusses Mrs. Musgrove's role as a mother and the sexual anxiety she creates as a Sphinx-like figure, blocking Anne Elliot's slenderness and

inspiring Captain Wentworth. Finally, the author explores Mrs. Musgrove's identity as a muse of masturbation and how her notion of self relies upon the alienated image others perceive. The incongruity of the large fat sighings has succeeded in shaping and bestowing readers, characters, and the narrating consciousness, new evolving identities, onto which the past and the future project.

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