
Woman voice to challenge immorality

Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* novel is one of her most decadent Victorian novels which challenges mainstream morality through its protagonist Lady Susan herself. As the epistolary novel proceeds, the written exchanges among the character demonstrate indignation at Lady Susan's contrariness: her flirtation, extramarital affair, machinations, lies, hypocrisy, and determines slander turns the family with whom she lives upside down. During the course of the book, Lady Susan runs amok as her plots thicken and seem to come to definite fruition. Fortunately, at the end the moral voice of the omniscient author interposes and hands down justice to each one of the characters. Austen uses the voice of Mrs. Vernon as the voice of reason and morality to condemn Lady Susan's behavior and to reason which those blinded by her manipulations. Mrs. Vernon lifts her voice as the voice of reason in the novel where she refuses to excuse or dilute Lady Susan's excesses. With the womanly intuition of her she is able to unveil Lady Susan's true character although many of the characters' eyes are closed to it.

"So Lady Susan is the temptress manipulating men and employing personal charms" (Byrne). As a consummate temptress, Lady Susan entices the willing men into her trap. She uses her feminine wiles, subtlety, and manipulative skill to enmesh the men into her trap. Early in the novel, Reginald De Courcy hears that Lady Susan is "the most accomplished coquette in England" and "a very distinguished flirt" (Austen 4). Lady Susan possesses a duplicitous character which her attractive looks and pleasing manners entice and enchant. Austen describes her as "excessively pretty...delicately fair, with fine grey eyes and dark eyelashes, ...possessing an uncommon union of symmetry, brilliancy, and grace ... her address was gentle, frank, and even affectionate" (Austen 7). Here Austen has prepared the physical and social setting for a deception for here is a woman who boasts unparalleled beauty but whom it is discovered hides a black heart. This description comes from the pen of Mrs. Vernon who is the first to smell danger when Lady Susan introduces herself to her brother Reginald De Courcy. Well acquainted with the tricks of the coquettish trade, she endeavors to remove the blindfold from Reginald's eyes. Ironically, Reginald still gets trapped by Lady Susan. The Greek Gorgon/Medusa myth fits the depiction of Lady Susan. According to the tale, in her halcyon days, Medusa represented the paragon of beauty among her sisters however, a curse turns her hair into snakes and her body grows like a scaly snake. Since then, beholding Medusa causes the observer to be petrified, literally transforming into stone and die. In the novel, Lady Susan personifies a gorgonic Medusa who charms men; and as they look upon her, they become captivated and powerless to withstand her beauty and seduction. Sir Reginald De Courcy Sr., cognizant of Lady Susan's Medusa-like qualities warns his son, Mr. Reginald De Courcy Jr. of his liking for her. Suspecting that he has been taken in, the Sir De Courcy Sr. cautions his son to regard Lady Susan's feminine splendor "without being blinded to her faults" (Austen 9).

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Here one observes the juxtaposition of sight and blindness; beauty and temptation.

Two icons whom Lady Susan incarnates are Eve and Pandora, who stand as temptresses. They both throw the world into confusion because of their willingness to gratify their immediate pleasurable longings and who in the end, pay a high price for their corrupt proclivities. Eve is accountable for tasting the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and then coaxes her husband, Adam to eat of the fruit. As the Sacred Text goes, they both ultimately die as punishment for their transgression; nevertheless in this story, an evil serpent is responsible for indulging in proscribed desires. To a certain extent, this story parallels Medusa for the serpentine presence, sexual seduction, and imminent death. Pandora also serves to seduce Epimetheus, her husband, and deludes him into opening the jar which lets loose a host of evil into the world (Tyree). Pandora, like Eve, was the quintessence of female beauty that catches the eye and the heart.

The quest for pleasure is Lady Susan's sole joy and reason for being. A proficient puppeteer, she manages to control the scenes, dominates the conversations, and maneuvers the minds of those in her social circle. The reader is introduced to the hedonistic, voluptuous Lady Susan by first words written in her letter to her brother Mr. Vernon: I can no longer refuse myself the pleasure of profiting by your kind invitation. However, it escapes Lady Susan the pain which her pleasure costs others. Lady Susan reports to Mrs. Johnson of "the exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit ...to acknowledge one's superiority" (Austen 7). She goes after the men who despise her for the pure rush of the hunt as well for the gratification of her own vanity. She seduces married men and bachelors alike, never regarding the moral compromises. Mr. Reginald De Courcy hears rumors of Lady Susan dangerous, unwarranted flirtation where she "aspires to the more delicious gratification" (Austen 4) than the average individual. What holds prime importance for her is her own pleasure. She does not even don a motherly heart to cherish and love her daughter Frederica. The first bit of information of her scandalous quest for pleasure is the news of an extramarital affair which has resulted in social embarrassment and a wrecked home. This reference points to Mr. Mainwaring and his double dealing with his wife, Mrs. Mainwaring and his amorous attentions to Lady Susan, who throws herself on him in her pretentious grief after her husband's passing. Throughout the novel, Lady Susan maintains correspondence with three men: Mr. Mainwaring, Sir James Martin, and Mr. Reginald De Courcy until the latter is disabused of his illusion. To his son, Mr. Reginald De Courcy Jr., Sir Reginald De Courcy Sr. lays bare Lady Susan's profligacy, levity, and adultery: "*Her neglect of her husband, her encouragement of other men, her extravagance and dissipation, were so gross and notorious*" (Austen 11). The marriage of convenience theme runs throughout the novel where female characters determine to make a conquest in order to avail themselves of the fortunes of a wealthy man. Although the Victorian period necessitated that a woman be married, due to her lack of occupation and inability to inherit, Lady Susan goes over and above by calculating to secure rich estates. Sir James Martin and Mr. Reginald De Courcy become

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Lady Susan's preys where she aims live a life of frivolity, ease, and affluence. At the end of the novel, Lady Susan employs her scheming to pack off Frederica to Mr. and Mrs. Vernon while she marries the moneyed Sir Martin. Lady Susan and Frederica bitterly argue about the marriage question since Lady Susan tries to impose an unwanted union between her daughter and Sir Martin. In this situation, her only interest lies in the estate and in the financial advantages she hopes to reap.

One literary critic remarks that "in ending as it does—with an abrupt and disingenuous turn to omniscience and moral authority—*Lady Susan* effectively exposes its close as a damping down of the largely indeterminate and pleasurable text that has preceded it (Galperin 368). Jane Austen elects to conclude the novel using an authoritative, moralistic tone for the omniscient author. First of all, the form radically changes from the free-styled letters giving a step by step revelation to each individual character's observations and intimate communications among one another to the more universal prose where all the characters' inside thoughts and actions are disclosed by the omniscient author. The mono-faceted correspondences transpose into a simultaneous multifaceted look at all the characters and their lots where the characters receive their dues. At the novel's beginning Lady Susan faces social ostracism to the point that she has to leave her lodging and seek refuge at her brother's house. In the end, her best friend, Mrs. Johnson has to sever ties between them because of the repugnancy of Susan's actions have caused a deep rift in the Johnson's home. The Vernons rescue the virtuous and much nobler Frederica from the clutches of Lady Susan and prove instrumental in saving her from future, improvident relationships devised by her mother. The omniscient voice also gives reason to hope that Frederica would eventually marry her love, Mr. Reginald De Courcy.

Lady Susan and Sir Martin's marriage is incompatible and although the authorial authority places doubt on knowing for certain their wedded bliss, Lady Susan would invariably continue cuckolding Sir. Martin and would only be kept happy as long as his fortune lasts. Sir Martin also has some grave decisions which he must pay for because in the entire novel he has shown a marked spinelessness – allowing himself to be tossed between the conspiracies of mother and daughter. Married to Lady Susan to fulfill her selfish desires, he too shows the same shifting morals as his wife – consequently, he receives a life sentence with her. Nonetheless it is Mrs. Vernon who expresses herself as a trustworthy, moral authority in the letter accounts and in the conclusion. The omniscient author selects Mrs. Vernon's voice as the voice of omniscience since she is never misled by Lady Susan and can be trusted for her integrity. The conclusion relates Mrs. Vernon's motherly determination to help Frederica return to the country to live with her and her uncle and her sense of appall at Lady Susan's unwavering lack of propriety and regret for the shameful past and stubborn persistence in her hypocrisy, insouciance, and selfishness.

In sum, Jane Austen's portrayal of Lady Susan encapsulates the character of a seductive,

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pleasure-seeking temptress and pits her image against the Mrs. Vernon and the omniscient author's moral standards. This disparity highlights that some like Lady Susan who shows the untamed and liberal, sexual female is incongruous in Victorian England. Austen implements this flighty, temperamental, and selfish depiction of a Victorian woman with no scruples in order to emphasize the need for more level-headed women who take control of their own lives instead of trying to orchestrate and manipulate another's.

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