WORDS, IMAGES AND IMAGINATION. A METAFICTION APPROACH IN AUSTEN'S NOVELS

Adela DUMITRESCU[*]

Abstract: *In Austen's novels there is a close relation between fiction and reality, a relation built with the help of words and the readers' awareness during the process of interpreting the fictional discourse. The language has an important role in the construction of the fictional world, but the audience play important roles and the study of characters in the novels may provide understanding of the subjectivity outside the novel world.*

Keywords: *imagination, words, metafiction, novel.*

The purpose of this paper is to analyse some of the effects of metafiction on ethic and aesthetic terms. Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which draws attention in a consciously way to the relationship between fiction and reality. Lately the writers tried to become much more aware of theoretical issues used to build fiction. The readers play important roles and the study of characters in the novels may provide understanding the subjectivity outside the novel world. If our knowledge of the world is now seen as mediated through language, then literary fiction (world constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of "reality" itself.

Language is an independent, self-contained system which generates its own "meaning". The linguist L. Hjelmslev developed the term *metalanguage* (Hjelmslev 1961). He defined it as a language which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to another *language*: it is a language which takes another language as object. (Waugh: 1984: 4)

In the eighteenth and nineteenth-century fiction, the individual is finally integrated into the social structure through family relationship - marriage, birth or death. Characters are created in order to achieve a task, to play a role. In metafiction, these characters "usually appear as inauthentic artists. They may be professional artists such as actors, writers or painters… […] They may be novelists writing novels…Some involve characters who manipulate others explicitly as though they were playwrights or theatrical directors" (Waugh, 1984, p. 116-117). This technique may confuse the reader while he tries to create the alternative worlds of fiction.

Another method used in a metafictional characterization is the appearance of their friends or "fellow writers into their work" (Waugh, 1984, p. 132) which joins the idea of including real characters. This technique might determine the reader to think that the work he is reading is a masked autobiography; therefore, authors would "remind the reader of their powers of invention" (ibid).

[*] University of Pitesti, adela.dumitrescu@upit.ro

BDD-A30017 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:20 UTC)

The reading process may be illustrated in this quotation:

> The reader must work to decipher the text as hard as the writer did to cipher it…[…] the act of reading becomes a creative, interpretative one that partakes of the experience of writing itself. These fictions [metafictional novels] are about their own processes, as experienced and created by the reader's responses. They also contain…in their self-consciousness, their own self-criticism… […] the reader, like the writer, becomes the critic (Hutcheon, 1980:144).

This last issue leads to what is most characteristic about metafiction, that is, its usage of intertextuality i.e. the allusion to literary references, direct literary references or quoting from other texts. Muller (1991) states that characters from different literary texts interact and that there is an interdependent relationship between them, he explains:

> A literary figure is extricated from its original fictional context and inserted into a new fictional context…it is, however, impossible to have entirely identical characters in literary texts by different authors… [in other words, a character or a literary figure] cannot reappear in its identical form in another author's work" (Muller,1991:101).

Metafiction may, as well "highlight the physical act of typing words onto the page…or involve the mechanical operations of bookmaking" (Klinkowitz, 1998, para. 1).

For Christensen metafiction is "fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making' (Cited in Cahill, 1983, p. 400). Linda Hutcheon considers that metafiction consists in two main focuses: "the first is on its linguistic and narrative structures, and the second is on the role of the reader" (1980:6). She thinks that the novel no longer seeks just to provide an order and meaning to be recognized by the reader. It now demands that he be conscious of the work, the actual construction, that he too is undertaking, for it is the reader who finishes the work of art and gives it life (p. 39).

Metafiction is completed when the reader decodes the text and constructs another story in the existing story. Barry Wood explains this process: "completion in metafiction results not when a story has been written, but rather when some sense of completion makes the writing of the story possible, feasible, or understandable" (1978;16). This seems to be rather a hard task; to write a story within a story, and to make sure that the reader would decode them both and understand them both.

The strategies or techniques used in metafiction are different from one writer to another and of course from one period to another. Novelists create fiction with the interest to make the audience feel pleasure while the reading process.

Northanger Abbey is the Austen novel in which the issue of reading and interpretation plays a most prominent role. Catherine, the protagonist characterized as an anti-heroine, is addicted to reading Gothic literature.

Jane Austen uses some words that appear across all her novels: adjectives "agreeable", "disagreeable", "amiable"; so too is the noun "opinion". These words share social and moral values. The reader is informed, early in their acquaintance, that "it was not

BDD-A30017 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:20 UTC)

in [Elizabeth Bennet's] nature to question the veracity of a young man of such amiable appearance as Wickham' (*Pride and Prejudice*, Ch. 17); Mr. Bingley, too, is described as "truly amiable" (Ch. 16), while Mr. Darcy is judged on his first appearance at the Meryton assembly rooms to have a 'disagreeable countenance' (Ch. 3). By the novel's end, Elizabeth's confession of her love for Mr. Darcy includes the statement, '"he is perfectly amiable"' (Ch. 59). In *Emma*, Mr. Knightley challenges Emma's description of Frank Churchill as "an amiable young man" by distinguishing between the French and English meanings of the term. In this patriotically English novel this is a sufficiently strong warning to the reader: '"No, Emma, your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very 'amiable', have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him."' (Ch. 18). Mr. Elliot, introduced as 'particularly agreeable' (Ch. 15), is eventually condemned in *Persuasion* for being 'too generally agreeable' (Ch. 17). The reiteration of these words is a special feature of Austen's style, subtle shifts in her usage suggesting how in learning to discriminate between true and false worth (true and false 'amiability') her heroines gain social and self-understanding.

A moral slipperiness attaches to Austen's favourite words, which can mislead reader and characters alike. Take the use of "opinion" in *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel is awash with 'opinions' whose robustness will be probed and dismantled in the course of the narrative. In particular, Austen exposes the tendency of 'opinion' to masquerade as informed judgement when it may be no more than ignorance or prejudice: '"My good opinion once lost is lost forever"' (Mr Darcy, ch. 11); 'mingling with a very good opinion of himself' (Mr Collins, ch. 15); '"I have never desired your good opinion ... my opinion of you was decided"' (Elizabeth Bennet, ch. 34); '"It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion, to be secure of judging properly at first"' (Elizabeth Bennet, ch. 18).

Time and again in Austen's novels, opinion substitutes for truth. Opinions are bandied about as if they are truths. Who speaks truth in Jane Austen's novels? The convergence of narrative voice with character voice, one of Austen's great legacies to the 19th-century European novel, is crucially an affirmation of opinion, or point of view, even of the gossip of village communities, over general truth. What this means is that just as her fictional worlds are constituted from multiple opinions, from people watching and commenting on one another's behaviour, in the same way, Austen argues, novels can teach readers the essential skills of interpreting character and learning to live in society, by bearing others' opinions in mind and knowing when to adjust our own.

Throughout Austen's novels, her characters, their behaviour and conversations, the language used, the setting and the plot can be interpreted as writing a novel about novels.

References

Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey,* Penguin Books, London, 1994
Hutcheon, Linda, *Narcissistic Narrative, The metafictional Paradox,* Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 1980

BDD-A30017 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:20 UTC)

Muller, Wolfgang, *Interfigurality: A study on the interdependence of literary figures*. In H.F. Plett (Ed.), Intertextualities. Berlin: de Gruyter,1991
Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London and New York, 1984

BDD-A30017 © 2018 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:34:20 UTC)