

**The Parallels and Differences between the Urban and Country Ways
of Socializing in the Worlds of Jane Austen and Helen Fielding**

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Abstract

This paper focused on several aspects of life in Great Britain. I wanted to concentrate chiefly on two important points. Firstly, I tried to find and compare the differences in lifestyle and related entertainment in the country villages, towns and cities in the early years of the nineteenth century which I perceived as largely dominated by deeply rooted traditions and strict social norms. As the basic source for my research I selected some of Jane Austen's novels as they serve as real social chronicles of her times. Secondly, I did a similar analysis and comparison of the same aspects at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries as they were reflected in Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones' Diary*. I thoroughly analysed and compared the aspects of life, the habits, norms, rules and views, class affiliations, the snobbery, vanity and conceit of middle and upper classes in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The findings, based mostly on the strictly observed and applied rules of socializing showed that no matter what century we live in now, nothing much has changed between Austen's and present times when speaking of social rules, norms, class distinctions and equally importantly - position of women.

Keywords: *society; social status; dances; social events; marriage; traditions; social norms.*

1. Introduction

The feature defining the British society for some centuries is that Britain is one of the most urbanized countries in the world. The process of people leaving their land and moving over to towns started in the 14th century. It intensified with the enclosures during the Georgian era by which process small landowners lost their land and were forced to move to towns thus joining the working class, and has never ceased since then despite the keen trend of recent decades through which more and more people are trying to leave the hectic life in cities behind and seek more relaxed life in the country. Naturally, the city that grew most rapidly was London. "By the 1750s ... [t]he growth of Georgian London was rapid, and its place as the greatest and most dynamic city in the Western world was already secured." (Morgan 2010: 426) But the capital was not the only large urban area in Britain. Other towns were growing rapidly too thus making "Britain ... an industrial and largely urban country ... because of a series of industrial revolutions and inventions." (Oakland 2010: 4) As the town population grew, so grew the towns into cities¹.

People settling in towns and cities ranked from different classes and their lifestyles, which were varied, depended largely on several aspects. Apart from their class affinity, their background or wealth were of importance as well. Of these, wealth, more particularly its origin, was seen as a vitally important factor in judging which social circles one would fall to, associate with and be accepted by. For the families where wealth and social status had been acquired centuries ago and had a long tradition of being cultivated and handed down from generation to generation the so called 'newly rich' or 'social climbers' who amassed their wealth as men of profession and trade would be unacceptable and

¹ "...the United Kingdom currently has sixty-nine cities (updated 2019), a title many British people wrongly think is given to a town with a cathedral. City is actually a title of dignity conferred on towns of religious, commercial or industrial importance by statute, royal charter or tradition." (Storry & Childs 2010: 54-5)

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any associations with them unthinkable. No matter how rich they might be, they would always be looked down on by their 'superiors'.

If we want to speak of 'urban culture' today, we tend to imagine the lifestyle considerably different from the typical way of life in country towns or villages. It is interesting then to try and have a closer look at what these, seemingly different, phenomena comprise, what defines them and what the differences – if any at all – between them are. We will have a look at them through literary works that reflect life, compare the similarities and find the differences between particular historical periods, classes and surviving traditions or newly adopted values. Storry and Childs claim that

Towns do not have the large cultural life of cities or the close-knit community feel of small villages, but they combine aspects of each, providing a balance that many people feel is preferable to the bustle of the urban areas or the relative isolation of the countryside. (Storry & Childs 2010: 59)

This statement can be used as a starting point for a study targeted exactly at the cultural differences depending on the lifestyle in these three types of residence. Speaking of historical differences we would like to go back some two hundred years, more particularly to the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries and try to point at what we understand as 'urban culture' then and today. This study should be based on and helped by comparing the literary works of two women writers separated by two centuries – Jane Austen and Helen Fielding which, though separated by this historical gap, share more than one would expect. One point that has to be acknowledged is that Austen's novels rank among those literary works which have been studied, analysed and discussed many times in minute detail from practically all angles and aspects imaginable. Yet, what still deserves more attention is the question of the background against which her characters interact and associate. The differences between life in the country, in towns and in a larger city – in this case London – are not paid that detailed attention as

other aspects of life in that period and yet – they are there. In her novels, Jane Austen (1775-1817) managed to give a profound portrait of the society she lived in. Carter states that

[H]er novels [are] unique ... as documentation of an aspect of the provincial society of her time. ... What Jane Austen did ... was to apply the techniques of the novel to the acute observation of society in microcosm ... (Carter 2001: 236)

Austen spent most of her life living in the country, with periods spent in such towns as Southampton and Bath and with occasional trips to London where she gladly indulged in one particular activity – shopping as “[s]hopping boomed as a social activity for women ... [and] Jane Austen confessed to being a shopping addict” (Jenkins 2019: 128) Apart from her shopping expeditions, her periods of residence in London, Bath and Southampton provided ample opportunities for theatre going... (Byrne 2017: 4) ... whenever Jane and Cassandra were in town, [Henry]² was to be found arranging seats at the various theatres. (Byrne 2017: 54)

It is then quite startling that in her novels London is not presented in most favourable light, as will be dealt with below.

Today, Austen’s novels are often defined as romantic. It is one of the points of view, considering that practically all of them deal with the issues based on the relations between men and women. And yet, it is not an exaggeration to claim that there is much more to them than just the stories of love.

[Her] novels are full of public events: assemblies, dances, balls. ... one of the reasons you might go to an event of this kind was

² Henry Thomas Austen (1771-1850) – elder brother of Jane Austen, man of different professions, great supporter of his sister’s literary ambitions, helped to publish *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* after his sister’s death.

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to watch others in attendance, savouring their little triumphs, discomforts and deficits. (Hitchings 2013: 192)

Though limited to more or less her own, i.e. middle class, Austen's novels reflect, very often well masked underneath what is going on at the surface, all serious aspects of the English society of her period. This paper will focus on most of Austen's novels, particularly on the novel *Pride and Prejudice* as this one novel served as a source of inspiration for Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* which is also of importance for the issue dealt with.

2. Meryton – the model of the centre of social life in the country

In each of Austen's novels, a considerable part remains firmly rooted in the country. *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel which abounds in country seats. Some of them are more impressive, some are less so, depending on the social standing and economic situation of their owners. When concentrating on the most important ones (from the point of the role they play in the plot of the novel), they have one principal feature in common – they are within a walking distance from the nearest town of Meryton, the centre of local social life:

The village of Longbourn was only one mile from Meryton; a most convenient distance for the young ladies, who were usually tempted thither three or four times a week... when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt. (Austen 1994: 24)

People living in the area thus walked to Meryton 'when nothing better offered' as they had few opportunities to bring variety to their stereotypical lives filled with visits, dinners, playing cards or going to tea parties. These are the most often referred to activities by Austen

among the members of the 'leisure classes', evidently in accord with the general perception of the way of life in the period – as Morgan states: "Assemblies, providing dancing, cards, tea-drinking, and general social mixing, were commonplace by the middle of the century." (Morgan 2010: 445) Trips to Meryton represent a welcome alternative to the limited choice of entertainment not that much because of a slightly broader offer of activities as more because of opportunities to meet more people, occasionally new arrivals, and thus break the monotony of always having to socialize with the same familiar faces as Austen accurately points out through John Knightley's grumbling:

... here are we setting forward to spend five dull hours in another man's house, with nothing to say or to hear that was not said and heard yesterday, and may not be said and heard again tomorrow. (Austen 1994: 88)

Villages in Britain are traditionally associated with a close-knit society centred on a hall, which serves as a kind of community centre, a market, parish church, pub and a 'green' ... most villages therefore promote a strong blend of social identity, because people usually have a number of roles within the community, and personal identity associated with land ownership and family history ... it is often said that everyone will know everyone else's business. (Storry & Childs 2010: 63)

The otherwise stagnant waters of Meryton get stirred after the arrival of a new party from 'town', as Austen usually refers to London. From the very moment of their arrival at Netherfield, the members of Mr Bingley's company demonstrate quite diverse behaviour: Mr Bingley ... danced every dance, was angry that the ball closed so early, and talked of giving one himself at Netherfield. (Austen 1994: 10-11); while Mr Darcy "stood ... in silent indignation at such a mode of passing the evening... (Austen 1994: 22) The rest of their party behave with the same haughtiness, looking down on everyone and everything as is best illustrated by Miss Bingley's address to Mr Darcy:

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I can guess the subject of your reverie. ... You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner – in such society; and indeed I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed! The insipidity, and yet the noise – the nothingness, and yet the self-importance of all those people. (Austen 1994: 23)

Even the dances danced at local assemblies are despised by them as mere ‘country dances’, more vulgar than the dances commonly danced in London. While staying at Netherfield, Elizabeth gets involved in a dispute about dances and general taste in them with Mr Darcy who maliciously teases her about her supposed liking of reels³:

Mr Darcy ... said to her – ‘Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel? ... ‘Oh!’ said she, ‘I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to say in reply. You wanted me, I know to say “Yes”, that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; ... I have therefore made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all – and now despise me if you dare.’ (Austen 1994: 42)

Apart from occasional dances in private houses or public assemblies, another most common pass-time activity was playing cards – at Netherfield: “On entering the drawing-room she found the whole party at loo, and was immediately invited to join them ... [but] said she would amuse herself ... with a book.” (Austen 1994: 31); or at aunt Phillips’ in Meryton: “Mrs Philips protested that they would have a nice comfortable noisy game of lottery tickets, and a little bit of hot supper afterwards.” (Austen 1994: 60) Likewise, the Dashwoods (*Sense and Sensibility*) encounter a similar kind of company and activities when

³ Typical Scottish folk dance dating back to the Middle Ages.

they move to Devonshire. For Sir John Middleton “The arrival of a new family in the country was always a matter of joy...” (Austen 1995: 31) and his main interest was to provide his guests with entertainment allowed by the otherwise quite uneventful country life. Their acquaintance began with finding out about Marianne’s love of music “In the evening, as Marianne was discovered to be musical, she was invited to play. The instrument was unlocked, everybody prepared to be charmed...” (Austen 1994: 33) and presently developed into more varied social gatherings:

Little had Mrs Dashwood or her daughters imagined, when they came first into Devonshire, that so many engagements would arise to occupy their time as shortly presented themselves, or that they should have such frequent invitations and such constant visitors as to leave them little leisure for serious employment. ... the schemes of amusements at home and abroad ... were put in execution. The private balls at the Park then began; and parties on the water were made and accomplished ... (Austen 1994: 50)

3. Socializing in Weymouth and Lyme Regis

In the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries

[m]iddle-class work and study required middle-class play and diversion. The 18th century will forever be associated with the amusements of a fashionable oligarchical society, represented most notably in the prime of the first of the great spa towns. (Morgan 2010: 443)

Health resorts were very popular among those who could afford a stay there – and even among those who could not “The spas were ... a regional as well as a national phenomenon...” (Morgan 2010: 443) Weymouth is but fleetingly mentioned in *Emma*, but it “was already a

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flourishing resort by 1780" while "Margate and Ramsgate with easy access from London had established themselves even earlier". (Morgan 2010: 444) In the novel, Weymouth interferes in the lives of several people. It is the place where Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax meet for the first time and subsequently get secretly engaged. Through their illicit behaviour, both of them considerably affect Emma's life, each of them in their own way. Shortly after his arrival, Emma, impressed and flattered by Frank's lively interest in the society of Highbury, fancies herself in love with him:

... On his side were the enquiries,- 'Was she a horse-woman?- Pleasant rides?- Pleasant walks?- Had they a large neighbourhood?- Highbury, perhaps, afforded society enough?- There were several very pretty houses in and about it. - Balls - had they balls?- Was it a musical society? (Austen 1994: 144);

while Jane fails to win Emma's friendship because she outdoes Emma in all the accomplishments which makes the other one jealous. Nevertheless, despite the rivalry, the two manage to perform their social duties of entertaining the members of the Highbury community which Mr Knightley thus comments on:

'A very pleasant evening ... particularly pleasant. You and Miss Fairfax gave us some very good music. I don't know a more luxurious state ... than sitting at one's ease to be entertained a whole evening by two such young women; sometimes with music and sometimes with conversation.' (Austen 1994: 128)

Another destination is that of Lyme Regis, the place to which Captain Wentworth takes the Musgroves and Anne Elliot to visit his friend, Captain Harville. The sea-shore town appears in the novel (*Persuasion*) briefly, yet again, it interferes considerably in the plot of the novel, both in the positive and the negative way. The events that take place during the company's stay at Lyme mark the beginning of

Wentworth's and Anne's reconciliation, prompted by a couple of circumstances. As there is nothing much to do in Lyme in the autumn, the only entertainment on offer are walks. It is during one of these walks that Wentworth starts to take notice of Anne anew, prompted by an admiring look from a passer-by. Later on, due to Louisa Musgrove's serious injury during a walk, one part of the company must stay behind at Lyme - a duty on which, with typical Austenian irony, even snobbish Mary Musgrove who was originally supposed to take care of her sister-in-law comments that

... there has been so much going on every day, there had been so many walks ... and she had got books from the library, and changed them so often, that the balance had certainly been much in favour of Lyme. ... she had bathed, and she had gone to church ... and all this ... had made really an agreeable fortnight. (Austen 1994: 127)

4. Bath – the mingling of classes

When the plot of *Persuasion* is moved from the Musgroves' country seat to Bath, there is a scene that best illustrates the difference in atmosphere:

When Lady Russell ... was entering Bath on a wet afternoon, and driving through the long course of streets ... amidst the dash of other carriages, the heavy rumble of carts and drays, the bawling of newsmen, muffin-men, and milkmen, and the ceaseless clink of pattens, she made no complaint ... she was feeling ... that after being long in the country, nothing could be so good for her as a little quiet cheerfulness. (Austen 1994: 132-3)

However, *Persuasion* is not the first novel that is partly set in Bath. It was preceded long before by *Northanger Abbey*. Bath was a

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health resort that attracted not only ailing people – it was generally known as a ‘marriage market’, the role it retained in both novels.

[I]n the early 1700s ... Bath was ... an increasingly fashionable spa town, a symbol of the leisured classes and their aspirations... [e]ncouraging easy sociability in place of [its] existing culture of haughty elitism. (Hitchings 2013: 159)

It was not only Bath that fulfilled this important role in lives of the betters. At this point we have to get back to the role Weymouth was mentioned to have played in the lives of the protagonists of *Emma*. When Mr Knightley strives to make Emma see that he loves her and lets his jealousy of Frank Churchill show, he gives a very accurate, though disguised, definition of such places referring to Frank’s and Jane’s first meeting:

‘Frank Churchill is, indeed, the favourite of fortune. Everything turns out for his good. - He meets with a young woman at a watering-place, gains her affection, cannot even weary her by negligent treatment – and had he and all his family sought round the world for a perfect wife for him, they could not have found her superior.’ (Austen 1994: 324)

In *Northanger Abbey*, readers are taken to such a ‘watering place’ and encounter the two protagonists – Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe. Catherine Morland arrives in Bath as a naïve and inexperienced young girl, unaware of the trappings she is about to be confronted with:

Austen’s first Bath novel depicts a city of amusement, sociability and pleasure, though it can of course also be painful and humiliating if the social codes are misunderstood. Catherine’s innocent breaches of propriety do cause her distress, as do broken engagements and the absence of a dancing partner at a ball. Like the teenager that she is, Catherine oscillates between extreme happiness and despair.... (Byrne 2013: 169-70)

On the other hand, her counterpart, Isabella Thorpe knows only too well the purpose of her stay in Bath. Isabella's mind is set on getting a suitable, i.e. rich husband to provide for her and to prevent her from descending in social hierarchy. However, the task of finding a suitable partner is not only Isabella's desire – her brother John has the same goal. Though coming from a family of good social status, the Thorpes are poor – a disadvantage by which their ambitions can be seriously thwarted. Together, however, at least initially, both Catherine and Isabella grab at what Bath has to offer as entertainment.

Every morning now brought its regular duties; - shops were to be visited; some new part of the town to be looked at; and the Pump-room to be attended, where they paraded up and down for an hour, looking at everybody and speaking to no one. (Austen 1994: 14)

While Catherine sincerely enjoys the balls and dancing because for her “Bath is a city of pleasure, where she finds a husband in the first man she dances with...” (Byrne 2013: 170), Isabella, being aware of her material handicap sees the balls as the best way of catching an eligible man.

In *Northanger Abbey*, the spa town fulfils its reputation as a place devoted to the pursuit of social and sexual liaisons. Isabella hooks Frederick Tilney by playing him off against Catherine's brother. (Byrne 2013: 170)

As the novel was written while Austen was still a young woman full of life and expectations, the general atmosphere of the novel, particularly the part taking place in Bath, naturally reflects her state of mind which must have been exactly that – full of joy and humour:

Of all the leisure facilities that developed in Bath in this period, the two most popular were the public assemblies and the walks.

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Walking and dancing could be regarded as a form of exercise, but more importantly these pastimes provided for socializing and personal display. (Byrne 2013: 166)

In *Persuasion*, however, the tone is more subdued. Even Bath and its atmosphere are different – more serious – which is not surprising. The novels are separated by over a decade. Though completed about 1803, *Northanger Abbey* was not published until after Jane Austen's death, the time when the status of Bath as of a fashionable spa town was on decline. When compared to Catherine and Isabella, Anne Elliot, the protagonist of *Persuasion*, is older than the two, a more serious-minded, mature woman. Due to her personal experience of unhappy love, she is melancholy and withdrawn as if in accord with the town's slow decline. While staying in the country with the Musgroves, Anne is content with the entertainment provided during her stay:

The party at the Great House was sometimes increased by other company. The neighbourhood was not large, but the Musgroves were visited by everybody, and had more dinner-parties, and more callers, more visitors by invitation and by chance, than any other family. (Austen 1994:45)

Even though there is no mention of a proper ball in the story, “[t]he ... girls were wild for dancing; and the evenings ended, occasionally, in an unpremeditated little ball” (Austen 1994: 45) Paradoxically, much as she may dislike it, even Bath can provide Anne with things to enjoy – theatre and concerts. These things, though appreciated by Anne, are of an entirely different kind from those favoured by her family:

The theatre or the rooms ... were not fashionable enough for the Elliots, whose evening amusements were solely in the elegant stupidity of private parties in which they were getting more and more engaged; and Anne, wearied of such a state of stagnation

... was quite impatient for the concert evening. (Austen 1994: 178-9)

Two contrasting views are presented here – on the one hand the above mentioned things to enjoy in Bath (theatre and visiting the rooms) are ‘not fashionable enough for the Elliots’ whereas on the other hand still

... every creature in Bath ... was to be seen in the room at different periods of the fashionable hours; crowds of people were every moment passing in and out, up the steps and down, people whom nobody cared about, and nobody wanted to see...” (Austen 1994: 20)

What the two novels do have in common and what evidently has not changed in the course of the years are the similar forms of entertainment on offer, including theatre. As Byrne points out

In *Persuasion*, Austen includes only a few vague references to the Theatre Royal ... in Bath. However, she uses the same theatre in Northanger Abbey to structure an important plot link between John Thorpe and General Tilney. (Byrne 2017: 43)

If Anne, who has always hated Bath, follows her father and sister there reluctantly, she does find entertainment available there to her liking and it is there where in the end she manages to rekindle her romance with Captain Wentworth.

5. London – the city of success and failure

By mapping the constant move of Austen’s characters towards bigger venues – from Hartfield or Longbourn through Meryton, Lyme Regis and Bath - we get to London. London in those Austen’s novels in which it is mentioned at all e.g. *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*

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or *Emma* represents a counterpart to provincial but otherwise friendly town of Meryton or to peaceful life in Devonshire. Before Jane Bennet leaves for London, her aunt Gardiner makes it clear that considering the Bingleys and Darcys

‘...We live in so different a part of town, all our connections are so different, and, as you well know, we go out so little, that it is very improbable that they should meet at all, unless he really comes to see her. ... And *that* is quite impossible, for he is now in the custody of his friend, and Mr Darcy would no more suffer him to call on Jane in such a part of London!’ (Austen 1994: 112)

Jane’s uncle who is ‘in trade’ would be an unacceptable acquaintance to the kind of people the Bingleys and the Darcys represent and associate with and while Caroline Bingley had no other option but to accept Jane’s company at Netherfield, Jane would definitely be an unwelcome acquisition to her London circle. In this respect it might be of interest to have a detailed look at the reasons why the Gardiners chose to live in Cheapside:

[After the Great Fire] [w]ealthier citizens had taken temporary lodgings to the west, and many decided to stay. Merchants found they could work from Covent Garden as well as from Cheapside, or could walk from the one to the other. (Jenkins 2019: 82)

However marginal the role of London is within the context of the novel, this role definitely is negative. Jane, seeking refuge with her relatives there after her disappointment in Mr Bingley is confronted with the hostility of her presumed friend. Caroline Bingley’s evident

discomfort at being forced into entering Cheapside⁴, or rather having to associate with traders' family has at last a sobering effect on Jane who, at least for the time being, gives up her hopes of ever winning Mr Bingley's affection back. London also interferes in the lives of the entire Bennet family when Lydia, the youngest daughter elopes with Mr Wickham - "... where else can they be so well concealed?" (Austen 1994: 229)

Lydia, shallow and inconsiderate fails utterly to understand the negative impact her elopement has on the family. The more serious aspect of this breach of social norms is underlined by "[her] complete disregard to the disgrace that she has brought on the family by her elopement" (Byrne 2017: 42-3), her complete indifference towards its possible consequences, her only preoccupation or disappointment being that "... London was rather thin..." (Austen 1994: 319) as far as the choice of amusements is concerned. However, if her misconduct could be excused due to her being only sixteen, she is actually not made to repent because the affair is solved in the manner that saves her reputation not that much for her sake as for the sake of the other, innocent members of the family. The guilty party is the winner in the end. She is so insolent that she dares to declare "I am sure my sisters must all envy me. I only hope they may have half my good luck. They must all go to Brighton. That is the place to get husbands." (Austen 1994: 243) Here we are confronted with a sort of a paradox yet again – Jane, a sensible creature, though surrounded and protected by her loving relatives is unhappy in the hostile city, while Lydia, defying and breaking all the rules ends up lucky not even able to realize that Wickham's appointment in Newcastle is actually meant as punishment.

London and its snobbish society do not play a positive role in *Sense and Sensibility* either. Shortly after their arrival, the Dashwood

⁴ Cheapside – a street in the City of London. As it was always connected with people dealing in trade and business it was looked down on by the landed gentry.

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sisters experience first-hand the difference between their cosy country social dos and the glitter of London life:

They arrived in due time at the place of destination, and as soon as the string of carriages before them would allow, alighted, ascended the stairs, heard their names announced from one landing place to another in an audible voice, and entered a room splendidly lit up, quite full of company, and insufferably hot. When they had paid their tribute of politeness by curtsying to the lady of the house, they were permitted to mingle in the crowd... (Austen 1994: 169).

The insecurity in an unknown city and among strangers, though making them uncomfortable, is not as serious as is the disappointment Marianne suffers after she is shunned by Willoughby at the ball. Though taken to London with the best of intentions to be introduced to a different culture and environment from the ones the sisters have so far experienced in the country, the outcome of the scheme is opposite and very similar to Jane Bennet's case. During their stay in London, both Dashwood sisters are made unhappy and destitute.

Quite a different role was assigned to London in *Emma*. Contrary to the previous two novels, the protagonist, Emma, never goes to London though it is where her sister Isabella and her family live. At a relatively early age Emma Woodhouse became the mistress of her father's house and she is happy and satisfied with this arrangement. Contrary to the Bennet sisters, she does not even seem to be lacking or even missing any entertainment. This is a shift in Austen's approach – the previously mentioned novels, more particularly *Pride and Prejudice*, are quite full of balls and social dos. In *Emma*, such activities are limited to suppers, playing cards, visits, and walks within a very limited community while

[n]ot unfrequently ... [Mr Woodhouse] had some of the chosen and the best to dine with him, but evening parties were what he

preferred, and ... there was scarcely an evening in the week which Emma could not make up a card-table for him... (Austen 1994: 16)

The only exception is the ball held on Frank Churchill's instigation. Even the negative effect of London is not that strongly felt in the lives of the Woodhouses as in the above mentioned novels, the only nuisance being the fact that Mr Woodhouse's elder daughter and her family live there. On the other hand, it is in this novel that London is proved to also have a positive effect. When Mr Knightley knows that he has to put right what Emma has nearly ruined, he chooses London to bring Harriet Smith and Robert Martin back together:

He ... was asked by [John] to join the party the same evening to Astley's. ... They called for him in their way; ... and my brother asked him to dine with them the next day - which he did ...' (Austen 1994: 357)

The passage is brief, found almost at the end of the novel and yet very telling as Byrne confirms:

Astley's was known for its socially diverse audience. ... The spectacle that it offered clearly appealed ... to people of all classes... Austen had no compunction about visiting the minor theatres when she stayed in London. ... Given Jane Austen's scrupulous sense of class and realism, and the particular concern in *Emma* with fine discriminations within social hierarchies, it is by no means fanciful to attach considerable weight to her choice of Astley's for the reconciliation between Harriet and Robert Martin. Precisely because of its status as a minor illegitimate theatre, it was a place where a yeoman farmer and a girl who is without rank ... could mingle freely with the gentry. (Byrne 2017: 42)

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6. In pursuit of love – a single thirty-plus woman in modern London

Thus, we move fast forward and what was only vaguely touched by Austen over two-hundred years ago now takes the central position – life in a big city. As mentioned above, I will concentrate on one of the most recent attempts to set the story of Austen's most popular novel in the context of our modern times. It is Helen Fielding's bestseller of the turn of the centuries, the novel *Bridget Jones' Diary*, openly inspired by *Pride and Prejudice* which she acknowledged by naming one of her male characters after Austen's most remarkable character – Darcy. To get an answer to the question of 'why to use a classic literary piece to write a modern story?' it is perhaps best to quote the following statement: "We've had extensions of everything from Sherlock Holmes to *Pride and Prejudice*, because they come with a built-in readership and provide fan service." (Fowler 2018: 8)

Generally, literature based on the kind of topic Fielding presents in her novel is defined as 'chic-lit', meaning literature for women, dealing with women's issues. But, as it is wrong to define Austen's novels only as romantic, it is wrong to perceive this novel just from this – narrow – point of view. Fielding writes highly amusingly, the plot of the novel is really hilarious at places which, viewed superficially, may strike some as just that – a novel written to amuse and entertain. But there are aspects that make this novel more important than it might seem at one superficial look. When one is acquainted with the novel's model, *Pride and Prejudice*, one suddenly finds out that we have been presented with a novel that tackles more serious issues than Bridget's eternal disappointment with herself.

The number of times I've slumped, depressed, thinking how useless I am and that I spend every Saturday night getting blind drunk and moaning ... about not having a boyfriend; ... and am ridiculed as an unmarried freak, whereas Magda lives in a big house with eight different kinds of pasta in jars, and gets to go shopping all day." (Fielding 1998: 132)

Contrary to its model, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is an essentially urban novel. Though coming from a non-specified place in the English country, Bridget seems to be firmly settled in London. She also seems to be, if not happy, then definitely content with her life, visiting her parents only when it is really necessary, keeping in touch mostly by phone. Essentially a woman of the end of the twentieth century, Bridget even has a job consistent with the defining properties of modern London. Elizabeth Bennet's uncle, Mr Gardiner, was a man of trade, Bridget is part of different London, "[a] London that a century before had depended on money, manufacturing and distribution ... now turning more towards design, marketing, the arts and the media. (Jenkins 2019: 306) One thing she has in common with her predecessor, Elizabeth Bennet, is the overbearing and self-centred mother who manages to constantly interfere in Bridget's life and embarrass her in front of other people. As far as her father is concerned, he just lingers in the background, but if Mr Bennet cherished the solitude and peace of his library, Mr Jones has no word in the family. While Mrs Bennet fails to fight her husband's resigned indifference, Mr Jones is not allowed any interference in family issues. Mrs Jones, as a typical woman of the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries faces different challenges from those of Mrs Bennet - the middle-age crisis that, in our modern-day language, is also known as the 'empty nest syndrome' which even ends up in what in Jane Austen's time would have been unthinkable - her deserting her husband claiming:

'Darling, it's merely a question of realizing, when your father retired, that I had spent thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children-' 'Jamie and I are your children too,' I interjected, hurt. '- and that as far as he was concerned his lifetime's work was over and mine was still carrying on ... I've just made a decision to change things a bit and spend what's left of mine looking after me for a change' (Fielding 1998: 53-54)

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and finding a job eventually. What the two mothers do share, however, is the traditional view of the role of woman in the society. This is the point at which we find out that despite the difference in the way of life of almost two centuries, nothing has actually changed as far as the social norms applied to human relationships and social conventions are concerned. The social spheres that people move in may not be that strictly defined or observed, yet they still do exist and rule the society:

Many English people will tell you that there is no longer any Jane Austenish stigma attached to being 'in trade'. They are mistaken. And it is not just the tiny minority of aristocrats and landed gentry who turn up their nose at the commercial world. Upper-middle class people in 'respectable' professions, such as barristers, doctors, civil servants and senior army officers, can often be equally snooty. (Fox 2005: 164)

In one respect, Bridget finds herself in a more favourable situation from that of the Bennet sisters or Jane Fairfax. Living in the big city she is more anonymous and relatively free in her choices and her way of life. She is a woman for whom having a job and earning her own living is natural and nothing to be ashamed of – it gives her independence. Yet again, this freedom is only illusory and Bridget has to defend – often fiercely – her life of a 'singleton'. Her attitude to being single at the age of thirty-plus is quite contradictory. On the one hand, Bridget claims that she is a feminist: "'... I was thinking it over and trying, as a feminist, to see Mum's point of view'" (Fielding 1998: 54), referring to her mother's above mentioned desertion of her husband, evidently failing to understand what it means to be a feminist while on the other hand she is very keen on finding a partner who would be able or willing to look after her. Elizabeth Bennet, on the other hand, was still young (according the commonly accepted standards of the period) thus being given enough space and opportunities to analyze her inner self and her most intimate emotions as well as standards. She was able to

recognize, assess and make up for her faults and mistakes in her judgement and choose the right man in the end. Elizabeth initially openly dislikes Mr Darcy and befriends Mr Wickham but does not chase him. She is undisturbed when he shifts his attentions elsewhere. On the other hand, modern Elizabeth, i.e. Bridget, tries hard to win over modern Wickham, i.e. Daniel Cleaver at any cost while at the same time her mother does her best to set her up with Mr Darcy's modern counterpart – Mark Darcy: “‘You can drive up after work. ... Do you remember Mark, darling. He's one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced....’” (Fielding1998: 9) Mrs Jones does what Mrs Bennet did when she desperately tried to save the property and status of the family by trying to push Elizabeth into the inappropriate marriage with Mr Collins. However, in this case, there are no economic reasons for such exertion, it is just the pressure of conventions as Bridget is already over thirty years old. As the unwritten social norms stipulate, by this time she should be married with some children. Even though it has become quite common for women of her age to be single, it is very hard to resist such pressure. Interestingly enough, it is not just her mother who wants to get her daughter married. Bridget faces and fights the pressure from her acquaintance as well. First there is the always dreaded question of ‘...How is your love-life...?’ to which she remarks to herself:

‘... Why can't married people understand that is no longer a polite question to ask? ... Everyone knows that dating in your thirties is not the happy-go-lucky free-for-all it was when you were twenty-two...’ (Fielding 1998: 11)

Yet, this is but one aspect of her troubles. Bridget's social life is not very varied. Going out for drinks with her friends and getting drunk seems to be the most frequent after-work activity completely in accord with Fox claiming that

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... the English after-work drinks ritual functions as an effective de-stressor partly because ... the hierarchies and pressures of the workplace are soluble in alcohol, particularly alcohol consumed in the sociable, egalitarian environment of the pub. (Fox 2005: 201-2)

In accord with the statement, Bridget would not be prevented from drinking even by an impending visit to her parents:

‘Being set up with a man against your will is one level of humiliation, but being literally dragged into it ... while caring for an acidic hangover, watched by an entire roomful of friends of your parents, is another plane altogether.’ (Fielding 1998: 13)

Other, equally grim occasions faced by thirty-plus single women are dinners at their married friends’:

‘On top of everything else I must go to Smug Married dinner party at Magda and Jeremy’s tonight. Such occasions always reduce my ego to size of snail, which is not to say am not grateful to be asked.’ (Fielding 1998: 39)

There is nothing exceptional about Bridget’s looks or about her character nor is there anything wrong about her. She is not beautiful, she is just an average woman who can make herself attractive when she tries and has some charm and wit which makes her quite close to Elizabeth Bennet. Her ordinariness makes readers (women) identify with her easily. It is her wit that helps her face and survive the attacks by her ‘smugly married’ friends, mostly men, who do not seem to be taking an unmarried thirty-plus woman seriously. However, on closer inspection these attacks make one wonder – why do these men do this? Why must they attack a young woman whose only ‘fault’ is that she is unmarried? Is not there a bit of jealousy about her freedom and independence which she has still managed to retain and which they had lost by conforming to the rules imposed on them by the society? Bridget

is unable or perhaps unwilling to defend herself. The only feeble attempt at defiance she manages is an attempt at putting on an act: “‘Actually, I’m going on to a nightclub.’ I trilled, hurrying out into the street. ‘Thanks for a super evening!’ then I got into a taxi and burst into tears.” (Fielding 1998: 41) Her friend Sharon, a more credible feminist tries to cheer her up by saying:

‘You should have said “I’m not married because I’m a *Singleton*... And because there’s more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, ... the nation’s young men have been proved by surveys to be completely unmarriedable, and as a result there’s a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don’t need to wash anyone else’s socks... .’ (Fielding 1998: 42)

Another sort of nightmare for Bridget are official social events she is obliged to attend as part of her professional duties:

Am invited to a glittering literati launch ... next week... . Determined, instead of fearing the scary party, panicking all the way through and going home pissed and depressed, am going to improve social skills, confidence and Make Parties Work for me – as guided by article have just read in magazine. (Fielding 1998: 96)

Bridget is quite keen on going to parties and socializing and yet – this is an area at which she fails utterly – untrained in this kind of social conventions, she does not know how to behave or what to say to strangers.

... [he] suddenly bolted off towards the buffet, leaving me standing on my own by the bookshelf while everybody stared at

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me, thinking, 'So that's why Bridget isn't married. She repulses men.' (Fielding 1998: 15)

In this respect she is different from her alter ego as Elizabeth Bennet always knew how to behave and what to say and contrary to Bridget she never felt self-conscious or flustered and never embarrassed herself when confronted by her superiors, adversaries or unwelcome situations.

These examples of social events provide a reader with a welcome opportunity to contemplate, think and even compare. They present the backdrop against which the most important events in the lives of women take place largely stirring their lives in certain direction. Two hundred years ago a young woman of middle class was brought up to become a wife and mother. In this quest she was assisted by society events where she socialized hoping to eventually meet her future husband. Bridget, on the other hand represents a young, modern woman of the late twentieth century for whom to become a housewife and mother is not life's only goal however much she is being pushed into it:

The worst of it was that Una Alconbury and Mum ... kept making me walk round with trays of gherkins and glasses of cream sherry in a desperate bid to throw me into Mark Darcy's path yet again. In the end they were so crazed with frustration that ... Una threw herself across the room ... and said, 'Mark, you must take Bridget's telephone number before you go, then you can get in touch when you're in London.' (Fielding 1998: 15)

She wants to enjoy what life has to offer. In this respect, however, Bridget makes the most serious of all her numerous mistakes. Her values are quite distorted, yet again it is not just her own fault – she simply responds to the behaviour of those around her. In her quest to meet and get the 'Mr. Right', she often perceives a relationship through sex only. This way then we are confronted with a paradox in her personality – she longs to establish a working relationship with a man

but viewing all her relationships just through sex, she fails to see what is most important about them. This is a bit surprising finding as, judging by her unceasing pursuit of men and her disastrous encounters with them, we reach the point at which Bridget may remind us more of the youngest Bennet sister Lydia than the more mature and serious-minded Elizabeth.

Conclusions

Urban culture in its essence came to existence with the rise of first towns. People coming from different sorts of places naturally brought with them their customs, traditions, views, interests and sense of class affiliation. They started creating a specific way of life, distanced from what they had been used to before. As towns grew in size, the differences between lifestyle in the city and in the country, as well as within one urban community, grew. What has remained is the class awareness as a permanent trait in human population. In this paper I wanted to present a comparative view of the ruling social norms and their impact on life and habits of middle- to upper-classes inhabiting Britain's country and towns/cities as seen and reflected in the works of fiction by Jane Austen and Helen Fielding and, possibly, to find out what – if anything at all – has changed in this respect within two centuries.

The concept of concentrating on the so called 'leisure classes' seemed but natural, as they were the only ones whose social status allowed for the lifestyle filled with leisure time activities. Through the detailed look into such activities, we learn a lot about what life of the higher than working classes was like in Austen's lifetime. However, there was one other important aspect to this – the strict distinctions even within the upper layers of the society. Members of landed gentry – the genuine leisure classes – would rarely and unwillingly associate with people involved in trade or men of professions (e.g. lawyers). This is quite striking an attitude considering the fact that the choice of (free-time) activities was very much the same regardless of to which social

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group one belonged. Card games, dinners, tea parties and walks were the most common, thus very popular activities across classes, whereas entertainment with dances, e.g. assemblies and balls held in the country were generally perceived as of lesser level than those available in bigger towns or in London.

However, Fielding's portrayal of modern-time woman in the novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* presents a considerably different environment and heroine, or rather anti-heroine. Almost the entire novel is located in London, the modern metropolis inhabited by the likes of Bridget in many respects – single, free, independent and self-sufficient. But the pressing question is – is she/are they happy? London may be a modern city but people living there though ostensibly modern too, very often stick to the traditional (often outdated) values which one would rather expect to be confronted with in the country, thus making life for women seeking independence (not necessarily feminists) as hard and limited as they had to endure some two hundred years ago. The class differences as we encounter them in older literary pieces (not necessarily only in Austen's novels) have not disappeared either – on the contrary, they have survived and are ever present. Thus we have come to the conclusion that the past two centuries brought no significant changes in respect of the place of residence either – whether one lives in the country or in the city, the old norms do survive.

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