FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

DEPARTAMENTO DE FILOLOXÍA INGLESA E ALEMÁ

Traballo de fin de grao

The Historical Romance: From Jane Austen to Lisa Kleypas

Adriana Parada García

Supervisado por Dra. Margarita Estévez Saá

Curso Académico 2024-2025

Xullo, 2025

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

para a obtención do Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

UNIVERSIDADE
DE SANTIAGO
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Inspired by Jane Austen's enduring relevance in contemporary times and the frequent presence of her works in social media, in "The Historical Romance: From Jane Austen to Lisa Kleypas" I will try to explore why a novel as universally celebrated as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) continues to captivate readers and writers, especially women, to this day. To delve deeper into this phenomenon, I will draw a comparison between Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas, a bestselling American author of historical romance fiction. Kleypas's novel *It Happened One Autumn* (2005) bears notable similarities to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), providing an interesting lens for comparison.

While the differences between these two authors are outstanding, not only due to the moment in which they wrote but also in relation to the critical reception and significance of their work, this comparison offers valuable insights. Jane Austen, a cornerstone of English literature, played a crucial role as a female writer in nineteenth-century England. She is revered for her sharp social criticism, often cloaked in irony, sarcasm, and humour. Her heroines, though often romantic to a fault, too fond of gossiping, easily persuaded or with questionable reading habits, are always marked by their intelligence and determination. Austen's novels, while popularly seen as classic love stories with happy endings, are much more complex, offering biting critiques of the social customs of her time. Although many readers and filmed adaptations focus on the romantic elements, regretfully overlooking the deeper social commentary, Austen's influence remains profound, and she is often hailed as a proto-feminist figure.

In contrast, Lisa Kleypas does not hide the real intentions behind her novels, allegedly focused on simple love stories. Her heroines, whether they are shy wallflowers, reformed thieves, or board game designers, are

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

similarly intelligent and determined to Austen's protagonists. Despite the dissimilar literary prestige between Austen and Kleypas, both authors share a certain place in readers' imaginations: one as a literary icon, the other as a popular bestselling figure.

Though the styles and literary value of these two authors differ significantly, their works have entered a shared cultural space, particularly among female readers, and within the tradition of the historical romance novel. There is something about historical romance that transcends traditional literary standards, something that can only be fully explained by the readers themselves. The enduring popularity of both Austen and writers like Kleypas suggests that these stories fulfil a deeper need or desire in readers inviting further exploration into the emotional and cultural impact of these works.

Santiago de Compostela, 31 de Marzo de 2025.

SRA. PRESIDENTA DA COMISIÓN DO TRABALLO DE FIN DE GRAO

RESUMO

Inspirada pola vixencia de Jane Austen na actualidade e pola frecuente presenza das súas obras nas redes sociais, en "O romance histórico: de Jane Austen a Lisa Kleypas" tentarei explorar por que unha novela tan universalmente celebrada como *Orgullo e prexuízo* (1813) continúa a cativar lectoras e escritoras, ata o día de hoxe. Para afondar neste fenómeno, realizarei unha comparación entre Jane Austen e Lisa Kleypas, unha autora estadounidense supervendas de novela romántica histórica. A novela de Kleypas, *Sucedeu en outono* (2005), presenta semellanzas notables coa trama de *Orgullo e prexuízo* (1813), o que ofrece unha perspectiva interesante para o seu estudo comparado.

Aínda que as diferenzas entre estas dúas autoras son notables, non só polo momento no que escribiron, senón tamén pola recepción crítica e a relevancia das súas obras, esta comparación ofrece reflexións moi valiosas. Jane Austen, unha figura fundamental da literatura inglesa, xogou un papel crucial como escritora na Inglaterra do século XIX. É admirada pola súa aguda crítica social, a miúdo envolta en ironía, sarcasmo e humor. As súas heroínas, malia que ás veces son excesivamente románticas, demasiado afeccionadas ás rexoubas, facilmente influenciables ou con hábitos de lectura cuestionables, distínguense sempre pola súa intelixencia e determinación. As novelas de Austen, a pesar de seren popularmente vistas como historias de amor clásicas con finais felices, son moito máis complexas, ofrecendo críticas mordaces ás convencións sociais da súa época. Aínda que moitos lectores e adaptacións cinematográficas se centran nos elementos románticos, pasando por alto a máis fonda dimensión social, a influencia de Austen segue a ser profunda, e adoita ser considerada unha figura protofeminista.

En contraste, Lisa Kleypas non agocha as verdadeiras intencións das súas novelas, aparentemente centradas en sinxelas historias de amor. As súas heroínas, sexan tímidas ”floreiros”, ladroas reformadas ou deseñadoras de xogos de mesa, comparten tamén a intelixencia e determinación das protagonistas de Austen. A pesar da diferenza no prestixio literario entre Austen e Kleypas, ambas autoras ocupan un lugar significativo na imaxinación das lectoras: unha como icona literaria, a outra como figura supervendas de éxito popular.

Malia que os estilos e o valor literario destas dúas autoras difiren significativamente, as súas obras ocupan un espazo cultural compartido, especialmente entre lectoras e dentro da tradición da novela romántica histórica. Hai algo neste xénero que transcende os estándares literarios tradicionais, algo que só pode ser plenamente explicado polas propias lectoras. A popularidade duradeira tanto de Austen como de autoras como Kleypas suxire que estas historias satisfán unha necesidade ou desexo máis profundo nas lectoras, o que convida a afondar no impacto emocional e cultural destas obras.

Palabras chave: Jane Austen, Lisa Kleypas, canon literario, romance histórico, novela rosa, narrativa feminina, cultura popular.

RESUMEN

Inspirada por la vigencia de Jane Austen en la actualidad y por la frecuente presencia de sus obras en las redes sociales, en “El romance histórico: de Jane Austen a Lisa Kleypas” intentaré explorar por qué una novela tan universalmente celebrada como *Orgullo y prejuicio* (1813) continúa cautivando a lectoras y escritoras, hasta el día de hoy. Para ahondar en este fenómeno, realizaré una comparación entre Jane Austen y Lisa Kleypas,

una autora superventas estadounidense de novela romántica histórica. La novela de Kleypas *Sucedió en otoño* (2005) presenta semejanzas notables con la trama de *Orgullo y prejuicio* (1813), lo cual ofrece una perspectiva interesante para su estudio comparado.

Aunque las diferencias entre estas dos autoras son notables, no solamente por el momento en el que escribieron, sino también por la recepción crítica y la relevancia de sus obras, esta comparación ofrece reflexiones muy valiosas. Jane Austen, una figura fundamental de la literatura inglesa, jugó un papel crucial como escritora en la Inglaterra del siglo XIX. Austen es admirada por su aguda crítica social, a menudo envuelta en ironía, sarcasmo y humor. Sus heroínas, aunque a veces puedan ser excesivamente románticas, demasiado aficionadas a los cotilleos, fácilmente influenciables o con hábitos de lectura cuestionables, se distinguen siempre por su inteligencia y determinación. Las novelas de Austen, aunque popularmente vistas como historias de amor clásicas con finales felices, son mucho más complejas, ofreciendo críticas mordaces a las convenciones sociales de la época. Aunque muchos lectores y adaptaciones cinematográficas se centran en los elementos románticos, pasando por alto su profunda dimensión social, la influencia de Austen sigue siendo grande, y se la suele considerar una figura protofeminista.

En contraste, Lisa Kleypas no esconde las verdaderas intenciones de sus novelas, supuestamente centradas en sencillas historias de amor. Sus heroínas, ya sean tímidas "floreros", ladronas reformadas o diseñadoras de juegos de mesa, comparten también la inteligencia y determinación de las protagonistas de Austen. A pesar de la diferencia en el prestigio literario de Austen y Kleypas, ambas autoras ocupan un lugar significativo en la imaginación de las lectoras: una como icono literario, la otra como una figura superventas de éxito popular.

Aunque los estilos y el valor literario de estas dos autoras difieren significativamente, sus obras han entrado en un espacio cultural compartido, especialmente entre las lectoras y dentro de la tradición de la novela romántica histórica. Hay algo en la novela romántica histórica que trasciende los estándares literarios tradicionales, algo que solo puede ser plenamente explicado por las propias lectoras. La perdurable popularidad tanto de Austen como de autoras como Kleypas sugiere que estas historias satisfacen una necesidad o deseo más profundo en el público lector, lo que invita a una mayor exploración del impacto emocional y cultural de estas obras.

Palabras clave: Jane Austen, Lisa Kleypas, canon literario, romance histórico, novela rosa, narrativa femenina, cultura popular.

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Jane Austen's enduring relevance in contemporary times and the frequent presence of her works in social media, in "The Historical Romance: From Jane Austen to Lisa Kleypas" I will try to explore why a novel as universally celebrated as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) continues to captivate readers and writers, especially women, to this day. To delve deeper into this phenomenon, I will draw a comparison between Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas, a bestselling American author of historical romance fiction. Kleypas's novel *It Happened One Autumn* (2005) bears notable similarities to the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), providing an interesting lens for comparison.

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sarcasm, and humour. Her heroines, though often romantic to a fault, too fond of gossiping, easily persuaded or with questionable reading habits, are always marked by their intelligence and determination. Austen's novels, while popularly seen as classic love stories with happy endings, are much more complex, offering biting critiques of the social customs of her time. Although many readers and filmed adaptations focus on the romantic elements, regretfully overlooking the deeper social commentary, Austen's influence remains profound, and she is often hailed as a proto-feminist figure.

In contrast, Lisa Kleypas does not hide the real intentions behind her novels, allegedly focused on simple love stories. Her heroines, whether they are shy wallflowers, reformed thieves, or board game designers, are similarly intelligent and determined to Austen's protagonists. Despite the dissimilar literary prestige between Austen and Kleypas, both authors share a certain place in readers' imaginations: one as a literary icon, the other as a popular bestselling figure.

Though the styles and literary value of these two authors differ significantly, their works have entered a shared cultural space, particularly among female readers, and within the tradition of the historical romance novel. There is something about historical romance that transcends traditional literary standards, something that can only be fully explained by the readers themselves. The enduring popularity of both Austen and writers like Kleypas suggests that these stories fulfil a deeper need or desire in readers inviting further exploration into the emotional and cultural impact of these works.

Key words: Jane Austen, Lisa Kleypas, literary canon, historical romance, romance novel, women's narrative, popular culture.

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Introduction

It was during an ordinary summer in my teenage years when I first encountered a historical romance novel titled *The Spanish Rose* (1987) by Shirlee Busbee. The book belonged to my mother, and little did I know that it would mark the beginning of a long-lasting fascination.

Shirlee Busbee soon led me to other authors of the genre, most of them American women, and among them, Lisa Kleypas quickly became a favourite. As my interest in historical romance deepened, I also found myself drawn to the English literary canon, particularly to Jane Austen, who, along with Kleypas, plays a central role in this project. What has always intrigued me is the connection between these two literary authors, one considered canonical and the other traditionally considered too popular or less worthy of critical attention.

However, although critics dismiss historical romance, the genre has a vast and devoted readership and remains one of the most commercially successful genres in the publishing industry. This disparity between critical reception and popular success suggests that academic criticism is mainly guided by ideas about literary quality without always considering the readers' taste. It was from this tension, between classic and popular fiction, between canonical authors and works and historical romance in general, that the idea of this project was born.

Austen's novels remain extremely popular today and their strong presence on social media reinforces her image as a timeless writer who continues to resonate with modern audiences. Similarly, Lisa Kleypas is one of the most celebrated and

commercially successful authors in contemporary historical romance, with a devoted fan base and a reputation as a leading voice in the genre.

Therefore, my objective, is to examine how Jane Austen serves as a source of inspiration for the historical romance genre, and particularly for the work of Lisa Kleypas. This will be illustrated through a comparative analysis of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Kleypas's *It Happened One Autumn* (2005).

In order to understand this influence, I have selected Austen's most recognised and celebrated work, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a novel that has been emulated in different ways over the years and adapted to the big screen on multiple occasions. In parallel, I will examine *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), one of Kleypas's most popular novels and part of the well-known *The Wallflowers* series. By comparing these two works, this study seeks to identify key similarities, such as character dynamics, moral development, sexual antagonism and the role of misunderstandings, as well as significant differences, including the treatment of sexuality and gender expectations.

The first section begins with a brief contextualisation of Jane Austen's life and literary career, with the aim of understanding how her personal experiences, education, and reading habits may have shaped her writing and inspired the themes present in her work. In a similar vein, the second section explores Lisa Kleypas's life and professional career in order to better understand the development of her work and the factors that have contributed to her popularity. Particular attention is also put on her education, reading habits, and the literary evolution from her early novels to her later, more mature works.

Section three focuses on the historical romance genre, a literary space that it is connected with both Austen and Kleypas, though they approached it from very different perspectives and time periods. The chapter begins with an overview of the genre's origins

and development, from its foundations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its strong association with female authors and readers, to the commercial boom of historical romance in the 1970s and its ongoing popularity today. This section also considers the criticisms often directed at the genre, as well as the reasons for its lasting success.

Finally, section four draws on the knowledge obtained from previous sections to compare *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), examining how Kleypas's novel reflects the influence of Austen's work. This final analysis highlights how the English literary canon continues to shape contemporary romance fiction, and how a genre often regarded as lowbrow can, in fact, engage meaningfully with canonical literature.

With my analysis thus organised, I aim to shed some light on the literary development of the historical romance genre and its connection to the English literary canon. I also seek to address the criticism often directed at historical romance fiction, in order to highlight a broader dynamic that continues to affect female writers and readers all around the world.

1. Jane Austen's Enduring Legacy

Jane Austen remains culturally significant in various ways, through her novels, her stories, and her characters, all of which continue to inspire audiences around the world. Although written over two centuries ago, her works have become part of the collective imagination, brought to life through numerous feature films[1] and television adaptations[2]. A recent example is Netflix's forthcoming adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice,* scheduled for release in 2026[3]. There is definitely something timeless about Jane Austen and her stories, as they have been continuously adapted, emulated, and even reinterpreted over the years.

Jane Austen's influence extends beyond television and cinema screen, reaching social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok, where thousands of pages are dedicated to her books and their adaptations. These pages refer to Austen's novels in various ways: by emulating favourite scenes, highlighting memorable quotes, or analysing character personalities. Moreover, Austen's narratives and characters are frequently used to comment on contemporary life and social dynamics, offering a unique

[1] Jane Austen's novels have been adapted numerous times for the big screen. Notable examples include *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), directed by Ang Lee, and *Pride and Prejudice* (2005), directed by Joe Wright.

[2] The BBC has produced numerous adaptations of Austen's works. The 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* miniseries remains one of the most acclaimed and widely beloved among fans. Other notable productions, such as *Emma* (2009) and *Persuasion* (2007), also offer faithful tributes to Austen's novels.

[3] Netflix upcoming adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*: See: *Tudum* by Netflix: "https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/pride-and-prejudice-cast-photos-release-date-news.

connection between the twenty-first century and the nineteenth-century society she portrayed.

Charlotte Lucas's personal situation in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), is one of the most frequently emulated and referenced passages online. Its highly "*memeable*" nature has made it a recurring feature across various social media platforms, where it is often reinterpreted through humorous or critical lenses. Charlotte, portrayed as a woman in her late twenties with limited prospects, is commonly seen as a character who must adapt to her social circumstances and accept marriage as a means of securing independence, despite her evident lack of affection for her suitor.

In consequence, the scene featuring Charlotte Lucas in the 2005 film adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which she delivers a now-iconic line, has been widely emulated and circulated online, often in a humorous tone. In the famous scene, Charlotte informs Elizabeth Bennet of her engagement to Mr Collins, a man portrayed as socially inept and disagreeable. She then explains the real reasons behind her decision, despite feeling no affection or physical attraction: "I am 27 years old. I have no money and no prospects. I am already a burden to my parents. And I am frightened".

This moment has resonated strongly with modern audiences, particularly those who feel that it accurately reflects their own social or economic anxieties. Examples like this illustrate how Austen's work remains relevant and present in contemporary culture. While some references serve to honour her literary achievements or the enduring romantic appeal of her narratives, others adopt a humorous or ironic lens to reinterpret her characters and themes. These reinterpretations often highlight ongoing issues such as women's precarious financial situations or their delayed independence in adulthood.

In parallel, there are numerous web pages dedicated to Jane Austen's persona, life, and career. Probably the most important is the Jane Austen Society website[4], which provides valuable information about the writer's life. This association was founded in 1940, and its main objectives include promoting the study of Jane Austen's life and family, preserving their manuscripts, letters, and memorabilia, and publishing scholarly works about her and the Austen family. Additionally, the society supports Jane Austen's house in Chawton, where Austen lived with her mother and sister, Cassandra, from 1809 to 1817. The association is registered as a charity.

To celebrate the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, the society is organising a special activity for her global fanbase. Known as Janeites, enthusiasts from various countries are invited to submit a two-minute recording on "What Jane Austen Means to Me", called "The 2 Minute Tribute"[5]. Accordingly, submissions will be published by the society, allowing everyone to hear how Austen has influenced readers across the world.

In addition to official initiatives, numerous informal websites also celebrate Austen's legacy and remain highly popular among fans. Notable examples include *The Republic of Pemberley*[6], *Austen Interlude*[7] or *Jane Austen Org*[8], each devoted to different

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[4] For more information on Jane Austen's legacy and community engagement, see *The Jane Austen Society*, https://janeaustensociety.org.uk/.

[5] For details about the "2 Minute Tribute" initiative, see *The Jane Austen Society,* "2 Minute Tributes", https://janeaustensociety.org.uk/jane-austen/2-minute-tributes/.

[6] For fan discussions and forums, see *The Republic of Pemberley*, https://pemberley.com/.

[7] For Austen-inspired fanfiction, see *Austen Interlude*, https://austeninterlude.com/.

[8] For biographical information and study resources, see *Jane Austen Org*, https://www.janeausten.org/.

aspects of the Jane Austen world. *Austen Interlude*, for instance, offers a different way of approaching the author's world, as the site is dedicated to publishing fanfiction inspired by her novels. The stories sometimes continue the original novels, imagining what would have happened to the characters. For example, the short story "A Wanton Woman" begins three weeks after Darcy and Elizabeth's marriage. It is noteworthy that many of these stories incorporate erotic elements; this particular one includes a disclaimer stating: "The following story was written for the express purpose of being naughty (…) It should not be read by anyone who has not reached the age of majority, nor should it be read by adults who are uncomfortable with sexual content"[9].

These and many other examples demonstrate how Jane Austen remains relevant, even within the landscape of twenty-first-century social media. Her influence seems endless; even in periods without new adaptations of her novels, filmmakers continue to draw inspiration from her life and literary legacy. This is evident in the 2007 film *Becoming Jane Austen*, directed by Julian Jarrold, or the unconventional 2016 adaptation *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, directed Burr Steers. Modern retellings like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), directed by Sharon Maguire and based on *Pride and Prejudice*, further illustrates how Austen's narratives are continually reinvented to reflect evolving cultural contexts.

In sum, it is evident that, whether through films, television series, social media or fanfiction, contemporary reinterpretations of Austen's work attest to its timeless relevance.

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[9] For fanfiction continuation of Austen's work, see *Austen Interlude* website, "A Wanton Woman" by Ellen, https://austeninterlude.com/ellen/ww/ww.html.

1.1. Biography and Early Education

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was born on 16 December 1775 in Steventon, Hampshire. She was the seventh child of George Austen, rector of Dean and Steventon and Cassandra Leigh. George and Cassandra married on 26 April 1764 in Bath, and together they had six sons and one daughter, in addition to Jane: James, George, Edward, Henry Thomas, Francis William and Charles John and another daughter called Cassandra Elizabeth (Butler 4).

The three eldest boys (except for George) were prepared for Oxford University, as was customary in the family. The remaining children, including Jane and Cassandra, were left under the guidance of their competent mother, Cassandra (Butler 5-6).

Austen's childhood is frequently described as a happy one, marked by a close bond with her parents. The family spent evenings playing board games, card games, puzzles or charades. They also entertained the neighbours, and dancing was also one of the favourite pastimes of the family. In addition, they often read novels aloud before bedtime (Butler 6-7). This image of Austen's early home life, filled with games and creativity, offers insight into the development of her narrative voice.

Additionally, one of the most significant relationships in Austen's life was the one she shared with her sister Cassandra. As a result, the sisters were rarely apart, and Mrs Austen referred to them as "the girls". When speaking of Jane individually, she would emphasise her close bond to her sister. Mrs Austen used to say that "if Cassandra were going to have her head cut off, Jane would insist on sharing her fate". We owe this accurateness of information to the *Memoir* (1870), the first extended biography of the author (Butler 7).

Throughout their lives, the sisters shared a room, a bed, and an emotional world of secrets, laughter, sorrow, and dreams. This relationship has often been viewed as a real-life counterpart to the fictional bonds Austen depicted between sisters, such as Elinor and Marianne[10] or Elizabeth and Jane[11] (Giret and Saim 24). This sisterly devotion provides valuable context for interpreting Austen's female characters and their interpersonal relationships.

The sisters went through important life events together, including their early education. In the spring of 1783, they were sent to Oxford under the care of Mrs Ann Cawley. During the second term, and without consulting the Austens, Mrs Cawley moved the girls to Southampton, likely to reduce costs. Unfortunately, the city was then suffering an epidemic, probably typhoid, which they caught, though they eventually recovered (Butler 9).

After one year, George Austen decided that his daughters should attend the Abbey House School in Reading, where they remained until December 1789. The school provided instruction in English, French, Italian, history, and even needlework. In addition to dancing classes and occasional theatrical events, it offered students access to a nearby lending library. This library offered a rich selection of books that captivated the imaginations of the young women, filled with romance, adventure, and tales of male greed and villainy (Butler 10).

The exposure to novels featuring daring women and treacherous male figures during Austen's formative years likely contributed to the development of Austen's later

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[10] Elinor and Marianne are the heroines in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811).

[11] Elizabeth and Jane are the heroines in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

narrative style. This aspect of her early education appears especially significant in understanding the foundations of her literary voice.

1.2. Austen's Reading Habits

The Austen family gave great importance to the education of the girls, and therefore Jane and Cassandra learned to develop their literary abilities and artistic qualities. The Austen's fostered reading, intellectual curiosity and open mindedness. This rare instruction for ladies at the time probably favoured Jane's talent (Giret and Saim 56). At this point, there is some evidence to suggest that such intellectual development within the domestic sphere contrasts with the limited educational opportunities afforded to most women of the period.

In addition to this emphasis on intellectual development, Butler observes that Austen, the novelist, was primarily shaped at home, under the guidance of her father and brothers, who played a crucial role in her writing formation. From an early age, Jane was exposed to the eighteenth-century essayists such as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson, as well as to novelists like Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burley. Butler suggests that it is likely that the sharpness and wit of Austen's writing were inspired by attentive readings of these stylists, a good ear for the balance of a sentence, and a strong appreciation for verbal economy (11). Nevertheless, this exposure alone did not define her literary education.

Austen's immersion in contemporary popular fiction began at school, at the Abbey House School, and there she enjoyed the adventures and trials of modern women portrayed in a handful of specialised magazines, such as George Robinson's monthly publication, the *Lady's Magazine* (established in 1770). In his first issue, Robinson assured that he provided stories to a wide range of tastes, statuses, and incomes, from a duchess to a housemaid. This publication devoted most of its space to fiction, much of it

sent by the readers, who often set their stories in either exotic worlds or the domestic life of the middle class of the time (Butler 12).

However, the conventional longer narrative, whether published in multi-volume book form or serialised in a magazine, was often centred on a courtship and love story between lovers from different social spheres and means. These narratives featured female characters involved in picaresque adventures and trials, culminating in a happy ending for the protagonists, whose economic and social differences jeopardised their happiness. In fact, Austen's first three novels follow these archetypal features of the fiction of the 1780s and 1790s (Butler 12-13).

It is particularly telling that Austen was exposed to such a broad range of literary representation of womanhood at an early age; this engagement with these specific narrative tropes, especially those centred on female characters, were subject to later serve as source of inspiration in her own writing.

Additionally, the Austens themselves were enthusiasts of the novel genre, and although at the time this genre was not considered appropriate (unlike poetry, for instance), they felt no shame about their reading inclinations. In the evenings, Mr Austen read books aloud to the family, and by 1801, he had accumulated a library of approximately five hundred books. The letters preserved by the author provide us with insights into her readings. For that reason, we know that in 1798, she was reading *The*

Midnight Bell[12] by Francis Lathom, that might remind us of *Northanger Abbey* (1817) (Giret and Saim 57).

The Austen's progressive attitude suggests that they fostered a judgement-free domestic environment, one that validated fiction, particularly novels, as a serious form of intellectual engagement, challenging the prevailing attitudes of the time.

Moreover, James Austen, often regarded as one of the literates in the family, influenced Jane's literary tastes. In a portrait he wrote about his sister for the publication of *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and *Persuasion* (1817), we learn that Jane's favourite poet was William Cowper, whom she regularly cited in her novels. Her favourite prose writer was Samuel Johnson. Jane also admired Frances Burney, even declaring her to be the best English novelist, and she was very entertained by Anne Radcliffe's novels as well. Similarly, she read authors such as Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, Charlotte Lennox, Regina-Maria Roche or Sarah Harriet Burney; the poems of Robert Burns, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and George Crabble; and the plays by Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Richard Cumberland, and William Shakespeare[13] (Giret and Saim 58).

Austen's reading habits, shaped by both family influence and personal taste, reveal a deep interest in contemporary literature. Her exposure to a variety of genres undoubtedly contributed to the development of her distinctive literary voice.

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[12] *The Midnight Bell* (1798), a Gothic novel by Francis Lathom, is explicitly referenced in *Northanger Abbey* (1817) as part of the reading material enjoyed by the heroine, Catherine Morland.

[13] It has been suggested that *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-1599), a play admired by the Austen family, may have served as inspiration for *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), particularly for the dynamics between Elizabeth and Darcy, which resembles the antagonism between Beatrice and Benedick (Giret and Saim 58).

1.3. Literary Evolution: From Early Fiction to Later Works

It is from the early 1787 to June 1793 when Jane wrote a good number of sketches, burlesque playlets (which could have been played by others or by herself), epistolary novellas, and short picaresque adventures. Often, these works were dedicated to a member of the household. The ones she truly appreciated and cherished were copied into three blank copy-books and were given to her father, which she titled "Volume the First", "Volume the Second", and "Volume the Third". The twenty-seven pieces preserved in these copy-books are examples of various exercises in different literary forms, and they served a purpose, since they were created either to read aloud or, more likely, to be performed for the family audience by the author herself, who was, according to her brother Henry, a confident speaker and a natural comic entertainer (Butler 17).

Moreover, most of these so-called *juvenilia* portray self-confident and errant young women in the characters of: Laura, Elfrida, Alice, the "beautiful Cassandra", and Charlotte Lutterell at Lesley Castle. It is suggested that a trace of Austen herself can be found in all the heroines of her mature novels and, undoubtedly, in the bold, spirited adventuresses of her *juvenilia* as well. At times, it may be her physical appearance that is reflected, or her composure and cynicism. Additionally, qualities such as rebelliousness and anti-social impatience are aspects of her character she confesses to her sister Cassandra, and we might recognise, for instance, in Marianne Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (Butler 18).

In addition to her narrative style, Jane Austen is often regarded as a precise writer. In her novels, she alludes to specifics, from real-life people and events, or taken from books in her household. Her early twentieth-century editor R.W. Chapman noted that she was surprisingly dependent on reality, family, and biographical truth, which served as the

basis of her imaginative works. The idea of Austen relying on family experience for her plots places her as a keen observer of sibling relationships and a critic of wealthier members of the larger Austen and Leigh families. It was easy for her close family circle to recognise, enjoy, or even correct these shared memories. Undoubtedly, her parents and older brothers contributed to the sharpness in her writing (Butler 19).

Furthermore, the three volumes of Austen's *juvenilia* preserve a rich variety of the conventions and clichés of late eighteenth-century fiction, drama, and stage farce. They feature characters, events, and scenes that belong to a largely picaresque tradition, whether serious or humorous, with stereotypical figures such as the fools or villain characters from different social strata, arrogant or cruel aristocrats and parents, conceited young males, or pleasure-seeking women. It is only in the story "Catharine, or the Bower" (1792) belonging to" Volume the Third" that Austen incorporates the central convention of the novel: a sympathetic protagonist. More frequently, it is the scenic aspect of eighteenth-century novels, the vibrant social landscape, that Austen brings to life through her secondary characters and their familiar venues: the visit, the day trip, the journey, the spa and the ball. She also incorporates dramatic events such as carriage or boat accidents, robberies, and murders. It can be said that Austen's tastes at this time were quite tomboyish, as reflected in the way she depicts the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Catherine Morland (Butler 21-22).

Having considered her *juvenilia*, it is now important to examine her novels, which have been widely praised for their literary merit, each contributing to the English literary canon in a distinct way. While the most widely recognised works, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Emma* (1815), or *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) tend to dominate the public's imagination, this is likely due more to their numerous cinematic adaptations than to a true appreciation of the depth and richness of Austen's literary work. Indeed, these

adaptations often favour romantic elements over Austen's sharp social critique, distorting the readers' understanding of her real intentions.

This divergence between popular perception and scholarly analysis invites closer examination of Austen's narrative style and thematic concerns. According to Tomalin, Austen's novels contain no digressions; each story is precise and unfolds within a relatively short timeframe. Among her characters, only Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Sir Walter Elliot seem particularly concerned with and proud of their lineage, a theme that does not appear in her other works. Austen deliberately opted to write about small families. In fact, the Bennets, with their five daughters, constitute the largest family she portrays. This contrasts with Austen's personal experience, as she had seven brothers and was pretty conscious of all her *cousinage* and extended family (23).

Austen's tendency to focus on a limited number of characters may have allowed for a more profound development of their personalities, an aspect evident throughout her novels, where the protagonists are often portrayed as round and complex individuals.

The Austen's social circle was formed by parish priest families, aristocrats, businessmen, doctors, lawyers, and members of Parliament, all living within a 24-kilometer radius. Despite its rural character, this society was far from static. Many of these families belonged to what has been termed as "pseudo-aristocracy", those without hereditary wealth or land ownership who nevertheless aspired to emulate aristocratic lifestyle. There were few Darcys, Bertrams, Rushworths or Elliots among Austen's acquaintances; in fact, the character who most closely resembles this "pseudo-aristocracy" is Bingley (Tomalin 95).

Much like the Bennets, the Austens had a liberal approach to socialising. Living in the countryside, their daughters learned to dance at an early age and they were very

well acquainted with the children of neighbouring families. It is very likely that by the age of fifteen, Jane owned a white muslin gown for special occasions. Dancing and music were central to these gatherings, activities that Jane enjoyed and excelled at (Tomalin 111-12).

It is impossible not to associate Austen's openness regarding social life with *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), particularly in the episode where Lady Catherine de Bourgh criticises the Bennet family for introducing all the daughters into society before the eldest is married. However, this aspect of the family's conduct is defended by the protagonist, Elizabeth, who argues that delaying the younger sister's social engagement until the eldest is married would do little to foster affection among them.

In one of these gatherings Jane meets Tom Lefroy, who is considered by many the love of her life. The letters suggest that they had a close relationship but, unlike her novels, this love story did not have a happy ending. However, their relationship and the way she described it to her sister Cassandra tell a lot about Jane's ideas about courtship and even her inner feelings. In one of her letters to her sister, Jane mentions about the only fault she sees in Lefroy, and that is the colour of his coat, which is very noteworthy because of its vivid colour. It seems that Lefroy was, similarly to Jane, an admirer of Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749), and she thinks this choice of colour has to do with Tom Jones's himself. The reference to *Tom Jones* (1749), is seen by Tomalin as a provocative remark, because Jane makes clear that she does not care about talking about a novel that overtly and comically talks about sexual attraction, sexual encounters, bastards and priest's hypocrisy. The fact that Jane read this novel and that was free enough to share it with Lefroy tells a lot about how rebel she could be as a reader, being as she was the daughter of a reverend (126).

Unfortunately, Jane's failed romance with Lefroy was a painful experience for her, from which she obtained more experience about love and its consequences. She learned what it meant to be sexually vulnerable, to feel nervous with your loved one and to contain that feeling. It is said that her writing was improved by this learning, and it is in this period when Jane started to write more frequently (Tomalin 131).

The Austen's correspondence was extensive, and it offers valuable insights into their lives and personalities. According to Tomalin, Jane inherited her mordant tone from her mother, who often spoke scornfully about their neighbours (113).

The letters also show a Jane totally unconcerned about fashion, as she illustrates in her novels. In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Mrs Allen obsession about gowns, is described with irony and also in the words of Henry Tilney (Tomalin 121). Similarly, in many of her letters, we find Jane's remarks about her mother's hypochondria. During one of their trips together, they visited Dr Lyford, the family doctor, and it is evident that Mrs Austen had to be practically dragged out of his office. She often invented dreadful symptoms that did not align with Lyford's diagnosis. When Mrs Austen felt well enough to join the family in the living room, she enjoyed their company but frequently spoke about her many illnesses. However, as Jane noted, this did not prevent Mrs Austen from maintaining a good humour (Tomalin 155-57). It is impossible not to relate these episodes with the character of Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), who was also highly hypochondriacal.

Thus, it can be concluded that Austen's work was heavily shaped by her unique education and her personal life experiences. This supports the view that her novels are, to some extent, biographical, as many characters can be linked both physically and psychologically to real-life individuals. This dimension of her writing reveals a narrative

deeply rooted in reality and reflective of the evolving concerns of society, continually adapting to quotidian issues of her time.

2. Lisa Kleypas's Popularity and Achievements

Lisa Kleypas is a highly acclaimed author of historical romance, with her name gracing the romantic fiction shelves of libraries, bookshops, and private collections dedicated to the genre. Her standalone novels and sagas are widely recognised by fans, and her love stories consistently rank among the favourites of dedicated romance enthusiasts. As a result, Lisa Kleypas achieved international recognition, with her novels translated into more than twenty languages, many of which have become bestsellers.

Kleypas's official website[14], which features her name and the iconic motto "A well-read woman is a dangerous creature", provides insights into her works, recent publications, personal updates, and professional milestones. It appears that Lisa Kleypas's popularity stems from the reality of her stories, many of which have been shaped by her own experiences. Across various interviews conducted throughout her career, it becomes evident that the uniqueness of her novels lies in their evolution alongside her own development as a writer. Above all, she demonstrates a strong commitment to her craft, taking joy in the creative process itself rather than focusing solely on commercial success.

Kleypas's website provides an overview of a career that spans several decades, showcasing her numerous awards and her unwavering dedication to a genre she has helped to define. According to her site, Kleypas is currently published by Avon and represented by literary agent Mel Berger and her impact on the romance genre is widely

[14] For more information, see Lisa Kleypas's official website: https://lisakleypas.com/.

acknowledged by both fans and critics. In addition to multiple literary achievements, she has earned several prestigious honours, including multiple RITA Awards from the Romance Writers of America (RWA).

Notably, in 1998, her novel *Stranger in My Arms* (1998) won the Waldenbooks Award for greatest sales growth. The following year, her novel *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1999) was a RITA finalist at the Romance Writers of America convention. In 2002, a particularly successful year, she received another RITA nomination for *Suddenly You* (2001), and ultimately won the RITA award for her novella *Wish List* (2001), featured in a Christmas anthology. That same year, *Lady Sophia's Lover* was awarded Best Sensuous Historical Romance by *Romantic Times* magazine and received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly*. Similarly, *When Strangers Marry* (2002) received a starred review from the same publication.

In subsequent years, Kleypas continued to build on her success. *Worth Any Price* (2003) won the RITA award for Best Short Historical, and a few months later, the first novel of *The Wallflowers* series, *Secrets of a Summer Night* (2004), also received a starred review from *Publisher's Weekly*. In 2005, It *Happened One Autumn*, the second book of *The Wallflowers* series, became finalist for the Short Historical RITA Award. In 2007, two more of her novels, *The Devil in Winter* (2006) and *Scandal in Spring* (2006), made the RITA finals. That same year, Kleypas was invited to be a keynote speaker at the Romance Writers of America conference, a sign of her respected status in the romance literary community.

In addition to her historical romances, Lisa delved into the contemporary romance, beginning with *Sugar Daddy* (2007), which was RITA finalist in the category of Best Novel with Strong Romantic Elements. Meanwhile, *Mine till Midnight* (2007) became a *New York Times* bestseller and also received a RITA nomination. Her second

contemporary novel, *Smooth Talking Stranger* (2009), also made the *New York Times* bestseller list, as did *Tempt Me at Twilight* (2009) and *Married by Morning* (2010), the latter reaching #3 on the list.

In 2011, re-releases of two of her earlier works also appeared on the *New York Times* bestseller list. This success was sustained with the 2012 release of *Rainshadow Road* (2012), which was nominated for the *Romantic Times Book Reviews* "Best Contemporary Romance" Award. Later that year, her novel *Christmas Eve at Friday Harbor* (2010) was adapted into the Hallmark of Fame movie *Christmas with Holly*. Kleypas's *Friday Harbor* continued to thrive, with *Dream Lake* (2012) and *Crystal Cove* (2013) both becoming *New York Times* bestsellers. In July 2015, Lisa hosted the Romance Writers of America Awards Show, underscoring her esteemed role within the genre.

After a period focused on contemporary romance, Kleypas returned to Historicals in 2016 with the launch of the *The Ravenels* series. Every book in the series debuted on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Moreover, fans particularly praised her ability to reintroduce beloved characters from previous novels through cameo appearances, allowing readers to revisit familiar figures and follow their journeys beyond the original narratives.

In sum, Lisa Kleypas's ability to create the world of romance continues to captivate the admiration of both readers and critics around the world. As a result, her name consistently appears on bestsellers lists and award nominations, solidifying her position as one of the most prominent figures in the genre today.

Despite this success, there is little academic work on her figure as a writer. In this sense, Pérez Casal's thesis on the contemporary romance novel and her study of Kleypas's contribution to the genre represents a pioneering approach to both an author and a genre

that remain marginalised in academic literary circles. In addition to this, the various interviews Kleypas has given over the years help us trace her evolution as a writer, an evolution that goes hand in hand with her personal growth.

2.1. Biography and Early Education

There is little information about Lisa Kleypas's biography beyond the brief comments available on her personal website. As previously stated, her status as one of the most celebrated writers of the genre does not guarantee her a prominent position in the so-called high-brow literary world. Consequently, there are not many academic publications that offer information about her as a writer. Fortunately, there exists a series of interviews that allow us to understand her better, both as a person and as a professional writer.

Born in Texas, Lisa Kleypas moved with her family to Massachusetts when she was just one year old. She spent much of her youth in the Concord/Lexington area, where she lived from the age of twelve to twenty-four. This area, known for its colonial architecture and rich history, was just down the street from Louisa May Alcott's house, a detail that is explicitly highlighted by Kleypas in her interviews. This proximity may suggest how literary classics influenced her development as a writer.

As for her education, Kleypas shares limited information on her website. Nevertheless, it is known that she graduated from Wellsley College with a degree in political science, and at the age of twenty-one, she published her first novel.

Regarding her literary career, in an interview given in 2015 to *Jezebel* magazine during the RT Booklovers Convention in Dallas, Kleypas recalls the clarity with which she felt she was born to write. She states, "I felt a click…that sense of everything falling into place", reflecting on her realisation that writing was what she wanted to pursue for the rest of her life. Significantly, her journey did not begin in a professional publishing

context but during a summer camp at Wellesley College, where she enrolled in academic courses. Instead of using the stationery she had bought to write letters to family and friends, she began to write a historical romance novel. This moment marked a decisive turning point in her career and the beginning of a long and successful trajectory in the romance publishing industry. At the same time, another important experience would contribute to her personal development, and that was her participation in the Miss USA competition where she represented Massachusetts.

Kleypas's participation in the Miss USA competition may appear at odds with her academic background and the feminist ideals she would later embrace. As a result, the interview she gave at the time does not portray her in a favourable light; rather; it presents a young woman overly concerned with her appearance, concluding with a remark about her single status and her desire to have a boyfriend (Pérez Casal 269).

This early portrayal can be contrasted with a later interview conducted in 1998 for *The Internet Writing Journal*, by which time Kleypas had become a prominent figure in the romance publishing industry. In that interview, Kleypas reflects on her life and career. The article opens with a striking description of her persona: "From shy bookworm to Miss America contestant and New York Times bestselling author", a phrase that underscores the uniqueness of her trajectory.

In this later interview, and in reference to the Miss America contest, she openly shared her true feelings about the whole experience and its impact on her creativity. While the young Kleypas initially felt joy in feeling sexy and slender, she later acknowledged how the pressure to conform to a specific beauty standard had made her extremely self-conscious about her appearance. She spoke about learning to accept and embrace changes in her weight and skin, recognising how former ideals had once compelled her to look perfect at all times (Pérez Casal 271).

As a result, she consciously decided to break stereotypes in her writing by creating realistic female heroines, women who might be short, plump, too thin, or too small breasted. Today, she seldom writes about physically flawless characters since, as she states, real women are not like that (Pérez Casal 271).

Ultimately, Kleypas's participation in the Miss USA competition allowed her to experience firsthand how canonical beauty standards were imposed on the contestants and, by extension, on women broadly. This experience significantly influenced her writing, and over the years, the portrayal of her female characters' bodies has become more diverse. It not surprising, then, that in recent interviews we encounter a more reflective Lisa Kleypas, one who addresses topics that may have been overlooked in earlier years. Thus, topics such as feminism and contemporary conservative politics are now addressed more openly by Kleypas, who engages with them from a more critical perspective.

2.2. Kleypas's Reading Habits

In previous sections, it was demonstrated that Austen had access to a wide variety of writers and genres, appreciating both the classics and contemporary authors. Regarding Lisa Kleypas, this study will show how she adopts a similar approach to reading, drawing on both canonical works and more recent historical romances.

In the 2015 interview for *Jezebel* magazine during the RT Booklovers Convention in Dallas, Kleypas disclosed that she has always been an avid reader. When asked about the authors and works that influenced and shaped her as a writer, Kleypas shyly responded, "without being pretentious", that the renowned novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) by Emily Brönte was a "bolt of lightning" for her. Interestingly, she notes that *Wuthering Heights* (1847) had been a compulsory reading in her high school, suggesting

that no one would voluntarily choose to read such a novel at young age unless compelled to do so. Kleypas acknowledged that it was very lucky that the book had been compulsory, as it was the driven, tormented, and powerful character of Heathcliff that made the greatest impact on her.

Although *Wuthering Heights* (1847) does not offer the happy ending Kleypas often seeks in her own work, and despite Heathcliff's flaws as a character, it was precisely the idea of this man who needed to be tamed and understood the one that fascinated her and left a lasting mark on her writing. Years later, Kleypas voluntarily read E.M. Forster and recalls that whenever *A Room with a View* and all the Merchant Ivory versions of E.M. Foster came out, she eagerly began reading them.

Kleypas's literary interests, however, extend beyond the Brönte or E.M. Forster. As seen through her activity on social media, Kleypas also displays a deep appreciation for Jane Austen's work and legacy. Lisa Kleypas, through her personal Facebook and Instagram pages, provides insights into her tastes and literary interests. In a 2016 post on her Facebook page, she mentions Mr Darcy, whom she describes as "the most sexually compelling Austen hero". Kleypas shares with her followers that she is reading *Jane Austen's Names* by Margaret Doody, a book that explores the historical significance behind Austen's choice of names for characters and places in her novels. She further elaborates on the name of Fitzwilliam Darcy, explaining how the prefix "Fitz" dates back to Norman history, referring to an aristocrat's son born out of wedlock.

In the comments section, Kleypas actively engages with fans of Jane Austen's classics, discussing Mr Darcy, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and its film adaptations. She confesses that Colin Firth's portrayal of Mr Darcy in the 1995 BBC series is her favourite, although she also appreciates Matthew Macfadyen's interpretation in the 2005 film.

This anecdotal information illustrates that Lisa Kleypas is not only a writer influenced by Jane Austen but also a genuine admirer of her work, demonstrating an involvement that goes beyond Austen's novels and delves into her entire literary universe.

Regarding contemporary writers, Kleypas revealed that she could easily give a dozen authors whose work she actively reads. She confessed that she reads as many romance novels as possible to see the different approaches writers take. Among these, she expresses particular admiration for the romantic novelist Laura Kinsale, as well as for Loretta Chase and Tom and Sharon Curtis. She especially highlights *The Windflower* (1994) for its lavish prose, noting that it contained up to ten adjectives in every sentence, a stylistic choice she loved. Kleypas admits that reading this book transformed her perspective on writing, encouraging her to embrace a more elaborate and descriptive style, in contrast to the minimalist prose of Ernest Hemingway.

To conclude, Kleypas's admiration for writers such as Jane Austen, Emily Brönte and E.M. Forster, along with her reflections on Ernest Hemingway, suggest a deep familiarity with the English literary canon. These authors have clearly influenced her writing style, narrative structure, and even the historical settings she selects for her romances.

2.3. Literary Evolution: From Early to Later Works

As discussed earlier, Lisa Kleypas's work is extensive, encompassing both historical and contemporary romance. However, it is fair to say that her contributions to the historical romance genre are considerably more prominent and have been more thoroughly explored than her ventures into contemporary storytelling.

In her previously mentioned 1998 interview with *The Internet Writing Journal,* the author was asked about her earliest experiences with the romance genre, and she

recalled reading *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) at the age of twelve. Although the novel captivated her, she admitted that some aspects of the love scenes were somewhat mystifying at that age. While she understood the basic facts of life, she still considered herself quite innocent and did not fully grasp the sensuality portrayed. Nevertheless, Kathleen Woodiwiss's book introduced her to a concept she found very appealing: the idea that a fierce and powerful man could be tamed by the love of a woman.

Kleypas's passion for writing began during her high school and college years, when she would write an entire romance novel each summer. Although these early attempts were not publishable, they served as valuable learning experiences, and she claimed to have learned "a great deal about characterisation and writing technique". Despite her enthusiasm for writing, she never enrolled in a creative writing class for fear of being criticised. Near the end of her time at Wellesley College, her father insisted that she could not spend her life writing in her parents' basement and encouraged her to seek a more conventional career. Thus, realising she had only three months until graduation, she decided to finish a historical romance novel in between exams and papers. The result was a novel heavily influenced by the conventions of 1980s romance fiction, featuring the characteristic flowery style and forced seduction scenes that were popular at the time. These elements, which appeared in her early novels, would later be abandoned as both her writing style and the romance genre evolved.

Despite her lack of experience, she sent the manuscript to a literary agent and shortly thereafter, the novel was sold to New American Library (NAL), thus launching her career as a published author.

In addition, Kleypas's website offers a detailed PDF listing her books in print. Among her works from the 1990s, novels such as *Only with Your Love* (1992), *Prince of Dreams* (1995) and *To Someone to Watch Over Me* (1999) represent the early stages of

her literary career. The early 2000s saw the publication of several novels that have become fan favourites. Notably, it was during this period that her well-known series *The Wallflowers* was launched, beginning *with Secrets of a Summer Night* (2005), followed by *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), *Devil in Winter* (2006), *Scandal in Spring* (2006), and a novella *A Wallflower Christmas* (2008). These years were particularly prolific for Kleypas, with series such as *The Wallflowers* playing a key role in building her active fanbase.

From 2010 onwards, Kleypas dedicated part of her efforts to publishing contemporary works, including *Christmas Eve at Friday Harbor* (2010), *Rainshadow Road* (2012) and *Crystal Cove* (2012), among others. This phase culminated in the release of another famous historical series in her later projects: *The Ravenels*. The series began with *Cold-Hearted Rake* (2015) and continued with *Marrying Winterbone* (2016), *Devil in Spring* (2017), *Hello Stranger* (2018), *Devil's Daughter* (2019), *Chasing Cassandra* (2020) and *Devil in Disguise* (2021).

Regarding her literary evolution, Kleypas acknowledges that her earlier works, which adhere to the literary conventions and tropes typical of 1970s and 1980s romance fiction, follow a narrative line that would no longer be considered morally acceptable today. In the 1998 interview, while discussing about the presence of "forced seduction" scenes in romance novels, particularly within the historical romance, Kleypas reflects to her personal experience with this controversial trope. She admits that her first novel included such a scene, but that it made her feel so uncomfortable that she had the hero apologise repeatedly throughout the rest of the book. Since then, she has consciously avoided incorporating such scenes into her writing.

According to Kleypas, a true hero must always respect a woman's boundaries and stop immediately if she refuses him. Although she personally refrains from writing forced

seduction scenes, she also emphasises that romance is a form of fantasy fiction. In her view, when a hero exhibits forceful, but never cruel, behaviour, it can still be presented in a way she finds acceptable. Furthermore, Kleypas is not at all concerned about such scenes influencing negatively the readers. On the contrary, she asserts that her readers are perfectly capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and would not internalise these fictional dynamics in their real-world relationships. This perspective stands in contrast to that of many critics, who challenge this genre precisely because of potentially problematic messages such romantic narratives may convey, undermining readers' common sense.

In her 2004 interview with *All About Romance* (AAR), Kleypas discussed her upcoming projects, revealing that *The Wallflowers* series was still in progress. At that time, she had completed two of the books. She explained that the inspiration for the series stemmed from her own high school experiences, particularly the struggles she and her friends faced when trying to get the popular boys to ask them to dance. While working on the series, she noted that its tone and pacing were lighter and more energetic compared to her previous novels, although the sensuality and emotional depth remained prominent. Writing about these women, who joke, scheme, and find themselves in complicated romantic situations was, according to Kleypas, a particularly enjoyable experience.

According to Pérez Casal, *The Wallflowers* series was conceived as a critique on traditional Victorian values, which prevented women from finding economic stability outside of marriage. The novels emphasise female bonding and sisterhood (272). While Kleypas initially cited her high school experiences as the inspiration for *The Wallflowers* series in a 2004 interview, she later offered a different version. In a 2015 interview with *Jezebel* magazine, she revealed that the series emerged during a time in her life when she was deeply focused on her family and had lost touch with many friends. During this

period, her life seemed to revolve around her husband and two very young children, and she was no longer active in the romance community.

It can be inferred, then, that she experienced a sense of isolation, and it was her friendship with a group of fellow female writers, one of whom was the well-known author Eloisa James, who became a significant source of support and inspiration. The contrast between these two different versions of the series' origins is striking. On the one hand, the 2004 explanation centres on a more conventional narrative of adolescent struggles; on the other hand, the 2015 version reflects on themes such as female loneliness within the domestic sphere. It can therefore be said that this evolution in her narrative suggests a growing willingness to publicly acknowledge her personal experiences and perhaps also points to a broader shift: a greater openness among women to speak about issues that have historically been overlooked or silenced.

Nonetheless, the true turning point in the development of the series occurred when Kleypas realised that, despite having read countless historical romances, she had rarely encountered narratives that focused on female friendships, when, historically, women often relied on and supported one another. As a result, the series became a celebration of female friendship bonds, prioritising them above almost anything else.

This emphasis on women's relationships and mutual support aligns closely with Kleypas's broader feminist perspective. In a 2017 interview with *Cosmopolitan*, when asked about the feministic dimension of her work, she was questioned on whether she saw a connection between the Victorian era and modern times, particularly with regard to the tradition of women adopting their husband's name and the career implications that such a choice may still entail today. In response, Kleypas affirmed: "I've always considered myself a feminist, which is such a tough word for people. Some people immediately assume that you're angry or you hate men, which is obviously not true".

During the same interview, Kleypas also discussed about her latest book at the time, which featured a heroine determined to pursue a career in the board game industry. The character's story was inspired by the real-life of Elizabeth Magie, the woman who invented the game now known as Monopoly. When asked about her decision to explore this story, Kleypas explained: "The more that time goes on, the more I feel really passionately about putting history into historical romance (…) so I started reading a lot more about the accomplishments of women in the Victorian time period".

Kleypas also referred to the reader's reaction to the new emphasis put on the heroine's career rather than solely on the romance plot, noting: "There's been an astonishing, explosive, positive reaction to it. I've gotten 10 times the number of comments and emails than I usually get (…) there's also Dr Garrett Gibson, who's the only female doctor in England". These statements reveal a significant evolution in Kleypas's approach to literature. While her historical romance novels continue to centre on romantic relationships, they increasingly incorporate modern ideals by providing female protagonists with greater depth, independence, agency, and professional ambition.

As Pérez Casal observes, a diachronic study of Kleypas's fiction reveals her growing commitment to feminist themes, particularly those concerning women's roles and experiences. A comparison between her early "Old School" romance, such as *Only with Your Love* (1992), and her more recent *The Ravenels* series clearly demonstrates how feminism has become a more prominent influence in her work (271).

Despite Kleypas's support of feminist ideals, her conventional romance tropes jeopardise her alliance with the feminist movement. Firstly, the heroines of her novels are matched with dominant, alpha males. It is not a surprise that these prototypical heroes are influenced by iconic characters such as Heathcliff or Brandon Birmingham. These male characters are typically older, emotionally tormented, powerful, self-confident, highly

intelligent, and sexually experienced and they may also be capable of physical violence. Moreover, Kleypas's heroes are characterised by being overly protective, possessive and dominant, traits that, while never exerted to harm or overpower the heroine, nonetheless reflect a traditional model of masculinity that can be at odds with feminist values (Pérez Casal 272-73).

It can be therefore said that, while Kleypas's heroines are portrayed as feminists, their male counterparts remain shaped by traditional masculine ideals. Kleypas herself describes her female protagonists as "placeholders" who "seem to be held to a higher standard of behaviour". (Wendell and Tan qtd. in Pérez Casal 272-73). In contrast, the romance hero is the one who provides the fantasy element, which, according to the author, is central to the genre's enduring popularity. According to Kleypas: "So you need just a little emotional break (…) when you sit down and read a romance novel (…) you're going to have a really wonderful emotional escape where you're going to feel something really positive and really good" (Kleypas, "Historical Romance Legend" par. 57 qtd in Pérez Casal, 274).

At this stage, after examining the lives and sources of inspiration behind Jane Austen and Lisa Kleypas, it is worth considering whether Austen has had a direct or indirect influence on Kleypas's narratives. Although Kleypas has not explicitly cited Austen as a source of inspiration, it is reasonable to assume that, having read other literary classics such as the Brönte s, she is likely to have read Jane Austen as well. Kleypas's attention to historical detail and atmosphere appears to stem primarily from rigorous research; in interviews, she conveys a clear interest in documenting historical contexts thoroughly and expresses enjoyment in the process. Furthermore, her inclusion of real-life figures, such as Elizabeth Magie, the inventor of Monopoly, suggests that her commitment to historical accuracy extends to incorporating authentic individuals into her

fictional narratives. Given this, it is not surprising that novels such as *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or, indeed, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) contributed to the ambience and tone she aims to recreate. Moreover, the majority of Kleypas's novels are set in England, a geographical and cultural setting that strongly aligns her work with the traditions of the English literary canon.

In terms of characterisation, Kleypas appears to be influenced by canonical figures such as Heathcliff, whose emotional complexity resonates with several of her own male protagonists. Other male characters in her novels may also invite comparisons with archetypal heroes of the literary canon, such as Mr Darcy, particularly in their initial positions of social or economic power over the heroine and in the presence of animosity between the lovers. These recurring tropes of economic disparity and romantic tension are prominent elements in many of Kleypas's narratives, echoing Austen's work.

As for the female characters, Kleypas consistently portrays strong, capable women, such as doctors or entrepreneurs, including the protagonist in *It Happened One Autumn* (2005), who is a perfumer. These women are characterised by their agency and independence, qualities that recall heroines like Elizabeth Bennet or Anne Elliot, who remain steadfast in their principles despite societal pressure. Kleypas's heroines, much like their literary predecessors, are depicted as pioneering figures who challenge and transcend the historical limitations imposed upon them.

Whether or not Kleypas is influenced by Austen will be examined in greater depth later in this project through a comparative analysis of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Kleypas's *It Happened One Autumn* (2005). This comparison will offer a broader critical perspective, helping us better understand whether and how Austen influenced Kleypas's work.

3. The Historical Romance Genre

The historical romance genre has undergone significant evolution, shaped by various shifts in society and its values. Over time, this genre has been progressively popularised and eventually transformed into a highly profitable cultural product. These changes have both benefited and, in some ways, compromised the genre. At the same time, historical romance has been continually updated, incorporating new ideas and values in order to respond to the expectations of readers in different historical moments.

Building on this context, this chapter explores the evolution of the historical romance genre from the end of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries until today by examining its influences, its key turning point in the 1970s and the factors that contributed to its rise as a popular and commercially successful genre in contemporary literature.

3.1. Foundations and Early Development of the Genre

The romance goes back in time as far as ancient Greek and Roman literature, where elements such as the quest or adventure, the delayed happy ending, and the theme of love were already present. In such texts the heroine is relegated to a passive role, serving as the hero's "prize". Take *The Odyssey*, for instance, in which Penelope is portrayed as a reward waiting at the end of Odysseus's journey. This stands in contrast with the idea of the heroine we see in more modern romance novels, where the heroine is the female equivalent of the hero as she embarks on a journey of her own, and her quest moves the story forward (Pérez Casal 117-18).

This shift in narrative plot and characterisation reflects a deeper cultural transformation, one that begins to acknowledge women's inner desires and aspirations as central and necessary to the story. Significantly, this change redefines not only the

heroine's role within the story but also the conventions of the romance genre as a whole, challenging long-standing conventions and patriarchal structures.

The evolution of the hero-protagonist to heroine-protagonist in romance was a gradual process to be completed in the eighteenth century. Until then, the genre was largely dominated by male perspectives: the stories revolved around male heroes, and men (having the access to education), were typically the authors of these works. The epitome of this tradition is exemplified by the popular medieval romances of the French court, the Matter of Britain or the Arthurian legends. So, "the man writes the man loves and the man decides" (Pérez Casal 120).

However, with the Elizabethan period came the winds of change. According to Pérez Casal's reading of Carol Lucas's *Writing for Women: The Example of Woman as Reader in Elizabethan Romance* (1989), the expansion of the female reading public during the Elizabethan period led to the production of texts aimed specifically at a female audience (121).

Additionally, Newcomb argues that the Renaissance marked a turning point in the gendering of prose romance, as it was during this period that the distinction between reading for profit and reading for pleasure emerged. Men, during this time, were expected to read for profit rather than enjoyment, which contributed to their disdain for romance novels and the women who read them. According to both Lucas and Newcomb, women readers possessed a certain degree of agency: for the women of the time, romance reading constituted an act of rebelliousness against patriarchal authority (qtd. in Pérez Casal 121-22).

Finally, the seventeenth century introduced a further distinction, as what Newcomb describes as "cheap printed romance" was increasingly "left to the

maidservant". Newcomb argues that this shift marked a division of what was considered good romance and bad romance, suggesting that shorter, mass-produced "printed" texts were viewed as inferior in quality and literary taste. Newcomb points out that the lower class enjoyed fast reading and that they were susceptible to the fantasies present in these romances (qtd. in Pérez Casal 122-23).

As Pérez Casal indicates, the seventeenth century marked a turning point in which romance was transformed into a female literary genre, becoming the favourite pastime of the lower, less educated classes (123).

This view, however, raises the question of whether the association of romance with women and the lower classes may have contributed to the genre's marginalisation in literary history. This marginalisation invites us to reconsider how literary value is defined and, more importantly, who holds the authority to define it. By examining the cultural and historical forces that have shaped the reception and perception of romance, we not only learn about the genre itself but also develop a critical perspective on the voices that have dismissed it from the outset, and the reasons behind this dismissal.

3.2. The Rise of the Novel: Female Authors and Readers in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

Scholars like Ian Watt and Terry Eagleton have argued that novels emerged as a response to romances, and eventually replaced them as the dominant literary form. In *The English Novel: An Introduction* (2005), Eagleton suggests that the novel's focus on everyday reality made it more accessible to a broader, less educated audience. He also connects the rise of the novel with female readership, giving the idea that women could particularly benefit from this new genre. Eagleton interprets the novel as a "product of modernity" that helped to spread middle-class values. However, as a new genre, the novel struggled

at the beginning to gain legitimacy, with many voices expressing their concern about the potential dangers of reading fiction for pleasure or as a form of escapism. While the novel helped to spread middle-class ideology in society, it still had to legitimise itself in the eyes of readers via prologues and author's notes (qtd. in Pérez Casal 123-25).

This perspective invites reflection on how the very qualities that made the novel accessible, its connection to everyday reality, may also have contributed to its dismissal as less "serious" or "intellectual". Similarly, it is striking to observe how a work tends to lose its perceived value once it is embraced by the majority. This prompts us to reconsider whether widespread success aligns with artistic value, which often seems to lie in the eyes of a select, discerning audience.

This phenomenon is not without precedent in literary history. During the Renaissance, romance became linked to idleness, and women became culturally associated with the genre. As a result, conduct books flourished during the eighteenth century, aimed at educating girls and women readers. Nancy Armstrong's concept of the "domestic woman", began to appear in literary and non-literary texts of the period as the ideal epitome of femininity, and writers like Samuel Richardson used this figure to represent bourgeois values. According to Jane Spenser, the origins of these didactic novels can be traced to the late seventeenth century, when women began to gain acceptance in the literary world. The number of women authors grew steadily during the eighteenth century (qtd. in Pérez Casal 125-26).

At the same time, it is important to highlight a key element that appears to be inherent to English Literature and closely tied to the appearance of the novel and consolidation of the urban bourgeoise: the sentimental element. As Manuel Delgado explains, it was in early eighteenth-century England, following the Puritan Revolution, that a particular form of sentimentality emerged, one that persists to this day. According

to this idea romantic love must precede marriage, and it is only within this institution that the sexual relationship between the lovers can be acceptable (qtd. in Sánchez-Palencia 56).

This new ethic regarding passion and love begins to shape the European mindset, thanks to the influence of a literature that is going to be focused on sentiments and female virtue, being the greatest example of it, *Pamela*. (Sánchez-Palencia 56*). Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) by Samuel Richardson, is considered by many the first-selling romance novel. Pamela is portrayed as a woman determined to maintain control over her life. She constantly refuses Mr B's attentions, as accepting them would go against her personal moral values. It is only after he undergoes a transformation that she agrees to be with him. By the end of the novel, Pamela's effort to commit to her principles is rewarded, and her marriage fulfils both her emotional and financial needs. As Regis states "In love with B, [Pamela] chose to return, and within the oppression of English property laws as they applied to women, he secured both her and her parents' future" (qtd in Pérez Casal 128).

While Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) offers a heroine who reflects the moral ideals and virtues of her era, such an idealised view of virtue and romantic love contributes to the reinforcement of the rigid gender roles historically embedded in the genre. Moreover, it also establishes love as the central narrative focus.

In this romantic utopia, readers are led to believe that it must be love (and not carnal desire or economic power) the foundation of heterosexual relationships. It is precisely through the "spiritualization of the household" that the domestic space, the private, and the emotional are sacralised, dimensions that will embody the new feminine ideal (Sánchez-Palencia 56).

In short, whether it is consumed, as in *Clarissa* and the sordid melodramas of the nineteenth century or not, what Anna Clark calls "the myth of seduction" will be manifested in the popular literature produced in between 1748 and 1848. This myth functions as a metaphor for class struggle, as it portrays a young woman from a middle or lower-class background as the victim of the aristocratic or bourgeois hero (Sánchez-Palencia 56-57).

As a consequence, the sexual inequality (understood as gender) inherent in the romance genre also implies a social inequality (understood as class). Therefore, the reconciliation represented by the marriage functions as a utopia on both levels: class, through the heroine's social mobility and the redemption of a corrupt aristocracy, and gender, though the union of the protagonists (Sánchez-Palencia 57).

It is no surprise *Pamela* (1740) is often regarded as the first romance novel, or that the tropes discussed above will be emulated in countless romantic novels that followed. The trope of the virtuous woman being paired with the so-called "rake", a man who has been associated with dissipation and reckless lifestyle, became a recurrent theme. In these stories, the rake will find himself "caught" and hopelessly in love with the very type of woman he once escaped: the innocent heroine. These stories of rakes being reformed are still the favourites among many readers[15] nowadays. On the other hand, women's struggle

[15] Lisa Kleypa's *Devil in Winter* (2006), part of *The Wallflowers* series, recreates this model successfully and it is the favourite of many of her readers.

with inheritance laws and their lack of rights will be a theme present in many novels, where this challenge becomes a central part of the heroine's journey toward happiness[16].

Nineteenth-century melodrama (whether in its theatrical version or the novelised form) incorporates this sentimental element, distorting it with highly sensationalist plots, such as: family scandals, sexual violence, secret marriages, illegitimate children or lost children. (Sánchez-Palencia 57).

It is interesting to note how these themes, although exaggerated in tone, laid the foundation for many of the tropes still present in contemporary romance narratives. Notably, the portrayal of female victimisation in narratives such as these resonated deeply with a large female readership. The recurring figure of the innocent, helpless heroine who struggles to find happiness follows a pattern that invites psychological interpretation and opens the door to a broader gender-based analysis.

This emphasis on female subjection and power dynamics is not limited to popular melodrama. Even what is considered "high" literature, the so-called Lady Novelists depicted this interaction between *"Social Contract-Sexual Contract"* in a type of narrative that Nancy Armstrong considers to hold an immense political value, despite being disregarded as "sentimental", "domestic" and "feminine" (qtd. in Sánchez-Palencia 57-58). Authors such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, for instance, present romance as a social and heterosexual conflict. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Jane Eyre* (1847),

[16] The challenges women face, particularly regarding gendered inheritance laws that exclude them, are also reflected in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

respectively, sexual power is closely linked to economic power, and it is only through the intersection of both that a happy ending becomes possible (Sánchez-Palencia 58).

The emergence of women as both authors and readers not only influenced the content of romance fiction but also redefined literary production itself, introducing new subjects, voices, and emotional perspectives. This shift allowed women's concerns to enter the public discourse.

That being the case, the emergence of women's press in the early eighteenth century contributed to the feminisation of the discourse, as values traditionally confined to the private sphere became public domain. In fact, periodicals with overtly feminine ideals as *The Athenaean Mercury*, *The Female Tatler*, *The Female Spectator*, *The Lady's Mercury*, *The Lady's Museum* or *The Lady's Magazine*, among others, helped to shape the concept of the female reader through the formula called: *utile et dulce*. According to Shevelow, these publications not only offered moral, social and cultural instruction, but also created a "community of female interests" (qtd. in Sánchez-Palencia 59).

Thus, the eighteenth century was marked by the emergence of the authorial figure, bringing the distinction between talented writers and mediocre ones. It is in this context that Jane Austen and the Brönte sisters (especially Charlotte), enter the literary canon as the high skilled female authors. Their works have fuelled the readers' romantic imaginations for centuries and they have been always regarded as examples of respectable, high-quality romance fiction, helping to demonstrate the genre's artistic value. As Pamela Regis affirms: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is "the best romance novel ever written" (qtd. in Pérez Casal 143). Similarly, Virginia Woolf states in her celebrated essay *A Room of One's Own* (1926) the following: "towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more

fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the War of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write".

At the time, the literary material available to woman came primarily from their own observation of human character and their emotional experiences.

However, the fact that canonical authors such as Austen or the Brontës became exponents of this genre stands in contrast with the common perception of their twentieth-century heirs, who are often classified in the category of mediocre literature (Pérez Casal 143).

The romance genre, along with its authors and readers, should be understood as part of a necessary literary evolution, one shaped over time by women themselves. This view leads us to the idea that romance fiction has its own history and legitimacy. Despite being dismissed by so many, it holds a meaningful place in literature tradition and, more importantly, it emerges from a specific moment in which women entered the literary scene to claim authorship and become protagonists of their own stories.

3.3. The Evolution of Historical Romance in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

The history of historical romance is very rich and extensive. Numerous narratives from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries paved the way to the specific genre that is going to be discussed in following chapters, as romance elements are present in many works in this period, inspiring generations of romance writers. However, it is important to focus on the rise of the historical romance fiction that took place in the 1970s, when it emerged as a rather cheap mass-market product. Since then, the genre has been evolving and adapting its features to the twenty-first-century feminist audience. We will also refer to one of the most important publishing companies specialised in romance novels during

the 1970s and 1980s, Harlequin, which remains significant in the romance publishing industry today.

3.3.1. From the Boom of Historical Romance in the 1970s to the Present

The historical romance boom of the 1970s marks a turning point in the literary and cultural history. Often sold alongside newspapers and snacks, the modern romance novel became one of the most accessible, and most criticised, forms of literature in the twentieth century. This commercial visibility, however, came at a cost.

As Sánchez-Palencia notes, contemporary women's romance became a very affordable "product", thanks to its low price and wide distribution. These novels were not only available in bookshops but also in supermarkets, stations, airports, and newsagents. The genre, established in the early 1960s, reached the height of its popularity in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s (62-63). Similarly, Pérez Casal argues that romance novel publications by Mills & Boon and Harlequin have contributed to the genre's degraded status in contemporary culture. These books were often labelled with terms such as "cheap", "formulaic", "lowbrow" or "unrealistic" (180).

In order to better understand the impact of these publishing houses, particularly Harlequin, it is helpful to consider the company's origins and market strategy.

Harlequin's official website offers us detailed information concerning its history and evolution. This company was founded in 1949 by the Canadian publisher Richard Bonnycastle, and it initially offered a variety of genres like mysteries, Westerns, and even cookbooks. In 1957, Harlequin bought the rights from Mills & Boon, a British publisher

of romance fiction. Noticing the enormous popularity of this genre, the company concentrated on it and by 1964 Harlequin was publishing romance fiction exclusively[17].

In her 1890 article "Soft-Porn Culture" for *The New Republic*, Ann Douglas discusses the growing popularity of Harlequin romances, cataloguing them as soft-porn literature. Her critique reinforces the perception of these cheap, easy to get books.

In this article, she discusses the rise in popularity of Harlequin romances. She writes: "Once addicted, you will be maintained in your habit; you can buy them at supermarkets and drugstores and airports and train stations; you can even become and Harlequin member and receive 12 Harlequins a month for wonderfully little money". Douglas highlights how the peak of Harlequin's success has coincided with the emergence and spread of the women's movement, suggesting a complex and even contradictory relationship between the genre's anti-feminist plots and its growing popularity among female readers (26).

According to Douglas, Harlequin romances focus on one aspect of woman's life: the courtship, but not courtship in the Jane Austen style, with "its intricate processes of choice", but rather "coupling in the wary primitive modes of animal mating". The typical Harlequin heroine is a young girl (rarely older than 25 or 26) who "has seldom enjoyed more than a few kisses from the opposite sex". Her vulnerability is heightened by a

[17] Additional information is available on Harlequin's official website: https://www.harlequin.com/shop/pages/harlequin-enterprises-limited-a-global-success-story.html?srsltid=AfmBOop3mqZqA1qtQAJRS_gv6mwIIIsVwrGHwhtSVWYJXIq_IJLGoXRR.

familiar loss, such as the death of a parent or the loss of a home, making her a figure to be easily dominated and in need for gratitude (26).

The male protagonist, in contrast, is always the heroine's superior: older, handsome "in a predatory way", and often wealthy. He frequently holds direct authority over the heroine, reinforcing the imbalance between them. Douglas argues that this dynamic contributes to the Harlequin plot, which centres on the female heroine's loss of control. She also refers the format of Harlequin novels, which is limited to the stipulated 180-odd pages "because the main protagonists" are "locked in a dual of sexual stupidity". Douglas describes the protagonists as "emotional illiterates", highlighting their traits: "He is usually too angry, she too scared, to say anything honest about how they feel. The hero is an arrogant, glamorous figure who travels alone". She suggests that in these stories the male protagonist has been necessarily hurt by some woman (whether a former love or his mother) and that his actions towards women are negatively marked by these experiences. Conversely, "the Harlequin girl must love how viciously he treats her", and Douglas sees a clear fantasy here: "women need men pitifully more than men need them". She even describes this universe as a "totally anti-feminist world", one in which "the Harlequin heroine is fighting for the status of an exception" (26).

We should not be surprised by so strong opinions such as Douglas's. It is true that the romance narratives of these years were deeply sexist, relying heavily on the trope of the heroine's virginal innocence, a quality that stood in stark contrast to the male protagonist's experience of the world. However, while many of these tropes have evolved for the best over time, it is evident that several elements persist today. These conventions often function as part of the heroine's character development, and it is precisely this transformation (from an innocent girl to a sexually liberated woman) that continues to captivate readers.

It is in this period that writers such as Kathleen E. Woodiwiss enter the scene, with a new approach to portraying romantic relationships by incorporating explicit sex scenes as central part of the plot. As Pérez Casal notes, Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) "was one of the first romance novels to depict the protagonists in the bedroom" (187).

Kathleen E. Woodiwiss is widely considered as a trailblazer in historical romance fiction. Authors such as Lisa Kleypas frequently cite her as a major source of inspiration. Her early novels, *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), considered by the Romance Writers of America (RWA) as the first modern romance[18], and *Shanna* (1977), are prime examples of the bestsellers that achieved great success during this period. Woodiwiss's original portrayals of young women who find love in unexpected ways continue to capture the hearts of many readers even today. However, her works do not align with contemporary standards of consent and gender representation. In particular, *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) includes a depiction of a rape that is justified in the narrative as part of the romantic storyline, this is a detail that would not be acceptable by modern feminist standards and remains a deeply problematic issue for many readers and fans of the book.

As Pérez Casal notes, Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) exemplifies the struggles between the individual creativeness of the author and the publisher's push for the homogeneity that secures profit. This novel is widely known as a transformative work in the twentieth-century romance fiction, with the introduction of

[18] Additional information can be found on RWA's *Romance Trailblazers* page: https://www.rwa.org/romance-trailblazers.

the "bodice-ripper"[19] type of romance (185-86). Carol Thurston, in her book *The Romance Revolution* (1987) states that the bodice-ripper was a strictly American phenomenon (8).

It is also worth noting that in *The Flame and the Flower* (1972), Woodiwiss employs a forced-marriage plotline in which the narrative is primarily concerned with the development of intimacy and love between the spouses. The obstacles they encounter as a couple serve to test and deepen their growing affection. Woodiwiss was not necessarily creating a new type of romance; rather, she drew upon a tradition established by *fin de siècle* novelists who similarly relied on such plotlines to explore ideals about what constituted a good marriage. Moreover, Woodiwiss relied on well-established archetypes, particularly the innocent heroine and the dominant, hypermasculine hero, and the narrative incorporates elements from earlier sentimental courtship stories, such as *Pamela*. (Pérez Casal 186).

This reliance on narrative conventions was not unique to Woodiwiss. The historical romance of the time, tied as it was to Harlequin and other companies that prioritised sales over anything else, can also be seen as a genre heavily reliant on formula. Thurston refers the work of John Cawelti, *Adventure, mystery, and romance: formula stories as art and popular culture* (1976), which has become a foundational text for scholars studying formulaic writing (33). Cawelti defines formula as "a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form

[19] According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, "bodice-ripper" is defined as "a romantic story, set in the past, in which there is a lot of sex": https://dictionary.cambridge.org/es/diccionario/ingles/bodice-ripper.

or archetype". With regard to romance writing specifically, Cawelti highlights the way formulaic patterns shape the structure of these narratives. He explains that:

> The crucial defining characteristic of the [modern] romance is not that it stars a female, but that its organising action is the development of a love relationship, usually between a man and a woman…the moral fantasy of the romance is that of love triumphant and permanent, overcoming all obstacles and difficulties. (41)

Thurston also highlights the impact of *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) by Woodiwiss, that was launched in 1972 as part of the Avon Spectacular[20]. The novel marked a significant shift in American publishing, as Woodiwiss's sensual narrative, blending romance with elements of adventure, became a mass entertainment phenomenon. While *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) could be classified as a domestic romance with features of Gothic fiction, including themes such as murder and blackmail, its central appeal lies in what Thurston describes as Woodiwiss's "veritable pall of sensuality that is both pervasive and constant, amounting 350 pages of sexual foreplay", as the story follows a young woman's journey of self-discovery and awakening to love. The novel received an overwhelming response from the readers and Avon reportedly received thousands of fan letters. In response, two years later Avon released new titles to satisfy the demand, including Woodiwiss's *The Wolf and the Dove* (1974) and two novels by Rosemary Rogers, *Sweet Savage Love* (1974) and *The Wildest Heart* (1974). Roger's *Dark Fires* sold two million copies within three months of the 1975 release. By the end

[20] The label *Avon Spectacular* (or lead title) referred to Avon's most prestigious and prominently promoted romance releases.

of that year, *Publishers Weekly* reported that over eight million copies of Avon's first six original romance paperbacks had been sold "so far" (48). As Editor Coffey put it: "the fans are insatiable for more". Coffey described this new genre in women's fiction as replete with "history, travel, romance, titillation, a passionate brooding male plus…a strong, female lead. The heroine may be hung up on a man but she is not dependent on him" (qtd. in Thurston 48). As Thurston affirmed "instead of simplistic stories and insipid heroines, the erotic historical romances mixed love with adventure, in plots and characters that were complex and well developed, especially the heroines, who experienced life firsthand" (50). By the late 1970s, the genre remained incredibly popular, but readers had evolved and they had gradually become not just fans but also critics, particularly regarding recurring themes involving rape and violence, long separations between the lovers "during their wide-ranging adventures", and to "passive-teenage-virgin heroines" (Thurston 52).

It can be said then, that Woodiwiss's *The Flame and Flower* (1972) meant a turning point in the romance genre, as it introduced explicit sexual content between the characters, something groundbreaking at the time. This new formula opened the minds of many readers around the world who embraced these novels as a form of escapism and sexual liberation. Also, the historical settings of these romantic stories, often placed in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, added to the stories with a sense of exoticism that became a defining characteristic of the genre for many years.

However, it is clear that the genre evolved alongside society, and the storylines that once captivated readers have not always aged well. As a result, historical romance has continually adapted to reflect the changing demands of the time. While many modern novels still follow the formula that defined the genre in the 1970s, today's female protagonists possess an individuality and charisma that were lacking in early examples.

This evolution is exemplified in the recent works of Lisa Kleypas, who masterfully captures the ideal of modern femininity, giving heroines their rightful place while still preserving the beloved tropes of romantic discovery and love triumphant that continue to define the genre for many readers.

The Romance Writers of America (RWA)[21] provides us with information regarding the romance genre in modern times. This association reduces the definition of romance fiction to two fundamental elements. The first is a *central love story*, in which the main plot revolves around two characters that fall in love and must overcome obstacles in order to make the relationship work. Subplots may be present, as long as the primary focus remains on the romantic relationship. The second defining element is *an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending*. After overcoming various challenges, the protagonists are rewarded with what the RWA terms *emotional justice* and *unconditional love*.

Despite this standard structure, romance novels can vary in tone, style, setting, and level of sensuality, ranging from sweet and subtle to explicit. Furthermore, the RWA categorises romance fiction into multiple subgenres, based on key thematic or stylistic features:

- **Contemporary Romance**: these novels are set from 1950 to the present, focusing mainly on the romantic relationship.

[21] The Romance Writers of America (RWA) defines itself as a "a nonprofit trade association whose mission is to advance the professional and common business interests of career-focused romance writers through networking and advocacy and by increasing public awareness of the romance genre". For more information visit the RWA's official website: https://www.rwa.org/

- **Erotic Romance**: in these works, the explicit, sexual content is essential for the love story, influencing character growth and relationship development. If these explicit scenes were removed from the plot, the storyline would be definitely damaged.

- **Historical Romance:** set before 1950, these stories explore love in past times.

- **Paranormal Romance**: in these stories fantasy worlds, paranormal or science fiction become integral elements of the plot.

- **Romance with Spiritual Elements**: romance novels in which spiritual beliefs are the core of the romance, and it shapes both the character growth and relationship dynamics. As in other subgenres, these spiritual beliefs cannot be removed from the storyline without damaging it.

- **Romantic Suspense:** these novels combine suspense, mystery, or thriller.

- **Young Adult Romance:** in these romance novels, the life of a young adult is the centre of the plot.

Despite the evolving portrayal of female heroines, the genre has continued to attract negative press from many feminist groups and, unsurprisingly, from literary critics as well.

3.3.2. Critical Perspectives: Lights and Shadows of the Genre

As Barlow and Krentz suitably put it, “it is difficult to explain the appeal of romance novels to people who don’t read them”. They suggest that the author of a romance novel and her audience enter into a kind of a mutual agreement in which the reader relies on the author to construct and repeatedly recreate a fictional world free from moral ambiguity. This is a larger-than-life domain where ideals such as courage, justice, honour, loyalty,

and love are tested and ultimately affirmed. Romance readers approach these stories with certain expectations; they know that the genre will adhere to particular patterns and that certain conventions will not be violated (15-16).

Moreover, the romance writer builds these fictional universes using figurative language and familiar symbols, images, metaphors, paradoxes, and reference that echo mythical traditions that reach from ancient Greece to Celtic Britain to the American West. Through this expressive language, the romance author creates the plots, characters, and settings that evoke the vision and transport the reader into the romantic world. However, it is precisely because of these features, so intrinsic to romance narratives, that the genre is criticised. The genre is frequently undermined for its perceived lack of originality, as it is considered both contrived and formulaic, and for using a writing style that is sometimes viewed as overly dramatic or simplistic. In other words, the very elements essential to the genre are often the same ones that critics dismiss. Barlow and Krentz, in fact, argue that "romance writers are writing in a code clearly understood by readers but opaque to others". These narrative codes carry deep and powerful meaning. They reflect a blend of myth, fantasy, reality, messages that have been passed down through generations of women. These voices emerge from what Barlow and Krentz describe as a "collective feminine psyche and consciousness", a space that they suspect most women can access, even if they have been taught to ignore it (16).

Many romance stories celebrate feminine strengths, such as wisdom, power, empathy, and the capacity of deep communication, as well as the importance of the harmony between the male and female, both within the psyche and in society. These narratives often highlight love's power to heal, transform, and create. Frequently, this emotional journey culminates in the symbolic act of marriage at the end of the novel. This resolution can be interpreted as a way to grounding the intense energies and emotions that

reached epic proportions earlier in the story, translating them into a more human, tangible reality (Barlow and Krentz 16-17).

The formulaic structure of the genre becomes evident when visiting Harlequin's official website, particularly the section titled "Finding New Voices for Romance Fiction"[22], where the publisher outlines exactly what they seek in new writers. For those interested in writing historical romance, Harlequin advises that historical accuracy is crucial, as it enhances the setting and helps create a believable atmosphere. However, the publisher also reminds writers that the story must remain appealing to contemporary readers. As such, it is important to reflect certain values and morals that have evolved over time and that are considered essential in today's context. Regarding language, particularly in stories set in Medieval or Elizabethan times, Harlequin reminds writers that it is not necessary for characters to speak in the language of the period. In this way, archaic expressions such as "thou" or "thus" are not required and may confuse readers. The publisher also emphasises that the romance between the hero and heroine is the core of the story and should remain the main focus. Readers are drawn to the evolution of the relationship, the chemistry between the protagonists, and their dialogue or the banter. Harlequin advises that overly complicated plots can distract readers, and thus recommends to keep the story simple. They also provide guidance on secondary characters, emphasising that in Harlequin Historical (70.000-75.000 words), the focus should remain firmly on the heroine and hero. Secondary characters are meant to add

[22] For practical guidance on writing for Harlequin Historical, see "Top Tips for Writing a Harlequin Historical Romance" on the *Write for Harlequin* website: https://www.writeforharlequin.com/top-tips-for-writing-a-harlequin-historical/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

richness and detail to the narrative, but they should never overshadow the central couple or divert attention from the main storyline.

Another important point concerns the significance of emotional conflicts, as Harlequin emphasises that character's personal struggles should always drive the story forward rather than external forces. Moreover, internal conflicts are considered essential to write a successful Harlequin Historical. The publisher also encourages all aspiring authors to submit their stories, particularly writers from underrepresented communities who can contribute to greater character diversity.

This level of accessibility suggests that, with a bit of imagination or reading experience, almost anyone could attempt to write one of these stories. Nevertheless, as previously discussed, this openness has also raised concern about a potential lack of professionalism within the genre.

This criticism, however, stands in stark contrast to Harlequin's dominance in the world of romance publishing, where the genre's success is undeniable, as reflected in its publishing figures[23]. As a publishing company Harlequin works with over 1.200 authors worldwide, and it releases more than 120 titles each month. This massive production is matched by high levels of consumer demand: 131 million books are sold globally in just one year, which is the same as saying to more than 4.1 books per second. These astronomical figures belong to a genre that remains easily accessible to both the writers who create these stories and the readers who enjoy them. Importantly, these narratives

[23] For background on Harlequin's global expansion and publishing success, see "Harlequin Enterprises Limited: A Global Success Story" on Harlequin's official website: https://www.harlequin.com/shop/pages/harlequin-enterprises-limited-a-global-success-story.html?srsltid=AfmBOoo83tFC4QpFMpN67ImTCxKfs3HgPQCmTHtqd1pRLwbx2JiYiKPs.

often stand for empathy, as well as female resistance and resilience in the face of obstacles that threaten their personal happiness.

Ultimately, romance tells the stories of women fighting for their rights, however modest or grand those rights may seem. This understanding of romance from a more meaningful and emotional perspective is supported by scholarly research. Dana Ménard approaches the romance genre from a psychological perspective, and, at the very beginning of her article "Note from the Field: Reflecting on Romance Novel Research: Past, Present and Future" she offers the following reflection:

> On a more personal level, I was raised in a home where romance novels sat on beside tables and bookshelves; I read many of them myself, including many by Nora Roberts. My mother, grandmother, and aunt all traded romance novels back and forth among themselves and their friends, a practice that continues to this day. (3)

This personal account reinforces the idea that reading novels often forms part of family-based reading traditions, particularly among women. The practice of exchanging and probably discussing books among mothers, grandmothers, and aunts highlights the genre's role in fostering intergenerational connections. This may be a key element in understanding the genre and its emotional weight.

Reconnecting with earlier criticism of the genre, it is also worth noting that romance novels often face criticism for relying on recurring plot elements. Typically, these include strong-willed young woman that is forced into marriage with mysterious earls, and heroes who invariably have dark or dangerous pasts. While it is entirely possible to write romances avoiding these elements, it is precisely these formulas that tend to dominate bestseller lists, stories in which a vulnerable young woman is at risk by

a powerful, enigmatic male. In such narratives, both the heroine's and the hero's happiness hinge on her ability to teach him how to love (Barlow and Krentz 17).

At this point, one might question the role of women in these stories, as they are often forced to be married with someone, they either hate or barely know. The depiction of women in these novels is rather simplistic and may challenge our feminist principles, as these heroines are typically portrayed as innocent and naïve, and the narrative often revolves around the notion that they inhabit a world dominated by men who know better and can exert control over them at will.

In her work "Guilty pleasures: Reading Romance Novels as Reworked Fairy Tales", Linda J. Lee explores the idea that, although romance novels have been harshly criticised by feminist scholars, many women who identify as feminists continue to read them. She asserts that "romance novels communicate multiple and often contradictory cultural messages" concerning the relationships between the heroine and hero, typically relationships in which an alpha male character takes control and seizes power. Janice Radway's study, one of the most well-known in the field, reinforces the notion that romance novels function as a form of escapism, rooted in fantasy (54).

Julie M. Dugger, in her article "'I'm a Feminist, But'…Popular Romance in the Women's Literature Classroom", examines the conflict between feminist literary theory and the popular inclination for romance novels. Her analysis is partly based on the experiences and responses of students in her feminist literary theory course, titled "Women in Literature". The study of these students' reactions is very interesting, as it reflects the anxieties and discomfort many readers face. Dugger finds that students often experience tension when approaching popular and critical readings, seeing them as mutually exclusive, as incompatible (4).

Dugger frequently refers to Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1983), a pioneering study in reader-response theory and the study of romance fiction scholarship. Radway examined the genre by a group of Midwestern romance readers, all women and many of whom were, significantly, housewives. Since its publication, Radway's work has had a lasting impact and remains a key reference in the study of romance novels. However, Dugger acknowledges the limitations of Radway's study, as it was written in a period when homemaking was often viewed as a gender-restricted default rather than a chosen profession, and Radway appears to hold this domestic role in low esteem (5).

For Radway, romance novels were a strategic tool used by housewives to cope and reconcile themselves with their roles in a patriarchal society, a role that, thanks to these romances, perpetuated their own oppression. Radway sees the romance's emphasis on relational identity (the heroine regains her identity only through union with the hero) as patriarchally restrictive. Because the romance emphasises identity secured through heterosexual union with a man, it necessarily reinforces the traditional female role of the dependant wife. As quoted in Dugger's text, Radway affirmed that "the whole idea that a woman 'finds herself' or discovers her true identity only after a man has validate her…is troubling to me". This view contrasts with Sara Webster Goodwin's "Romance and Change: Teaching the Romance to Undergraduates.", who in her 1997 article, described women students that did not feel restricted at all. Goodwin students did not agree with the idea that traditional female roles are inherently oppressive, an assumption that carries its own sexism (qtd. in Dugger 6-7).

While much attention has been historically given to the presence (or absence) of feminist ideals in romance fiction, there is another equally relevant concern in the genre, which is the lack of diversity. Going back to Dana Ménard's "Note from the Field: Reflecting on Romance Novel Research: Past, Present and Future", she notes that recent

winners of the RITA awards (she wrote the paper in 2013) in the contemporary romance category were typically attractive, Caucasian, heterosexual, single and young (4). Although this observation centres on contemporary romance, the same features apply to historical romance as well, where the leading characters are usually straight and Caucasian, young, often with only male characters permitted to be over 30. In response to an increasing demand of diversity, publishers like Harlequin have begun to ask for inclusivity.

This lack of diversity is underscored by the genre's persistent Western-centric focus. Rarely do we encounter main characters from different national or ethnic backgrounds. However, in recent years, romance novels have begun to include characters from marginalised communities. For example, Lisa Kleypas's *Seduce me at Sunrise* (2008)[24] features a protagonist of Romani heritage, described as a mysterious Gypsy man. This shift indicates a growing effort within the genre to centre alternative voices and introduce characters to whom a wider audience can relate.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the power of romance lies in the fact that it is a literary space shaped and controlled by women. As Pamela Regis points out: "for the most part, romances are stories written by women and read by women" (qtd in Hamilton 141).

Even though historical romance books are not set in our time period, the struggles its heroines endure are still relevant today.

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[24] Lisa Kleypas's *Seduce Me at Sunrise* (2008) is the fifth volume in *The Hathaways* series, a historical romance collection set in nineteenth-century England: https://lisakleypas.com/historicals/.

In Hamilton's words:

> By looking at the past through the lens of the present, we can see that these novels provoke a re-evaluation of society's expectations in three ways: one, by giving women an identity, two, by making women realise that they are unique and beautiful just as they are, and three, by encouraging the idea that women should view marriage as a choice - not just a societal expectation. (141-42)

Historical romance novels encourage readers to re-evaluate society's expectations and traditional roles for women by offering them strong, determined female identities. In the history of literature, women have always been under the "thumb" and "pen" of patriarchal authors. For centuries, women's roles in literature were shaped by male writers, who presented a biased way of how women were perceived and how they should behave in society. As Hamilton puts it: "one of the ways women can gain independence and establish a new place in society is to pick up the pen and write" (141-42).

All things considered, historical romance should be viewed not only as a form of entertainment but also as a literary space in which women felt accompanied and supported throughout history. The genre has continually redefined itself to reflect the evolving needs and ideals of its time. In addition, it has expanded in terms of racial and ethnic representation, striving to include diverse voices and ensure that no audience is left behind. As a result, historical romance emerges as a genre that does not remain static but adapts to cultural and societal shifts, demonstrating its continued relevance and cultural significance across generations.

4. A Comparative Analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *It Happened One Autumn* (2005)

It Happened One Autumn, set in 1843, narrates the love story between a headstrong American heiress, Lillian Bowman, and the arrogant Earl of Westcliff, a man Lillian initially despises more than anyone she has ever met. Marcus, Lord Westcliff, is renowned for his icy reserve and supreme self-control. From the outset, the novel establishes the animosity between the protagonists, thus setting the stage for a romantic story that evolves through conflict and eventual understanding.

Lillian and her sister Daisy, American heiresses from a wealthy business family, lack aristocratic lineage. Their nationality, along with their informal American manners, stands in sharp contrast to the refined and restrained behaviour expected of ladies at court. This cultural and social disparity labels them undesirable candidates for marriage within the rigid English aristocracy.

Consequently, their mother, Mercedes, relentlessly pursues a match with an English aristocrat, aiming to introduce the family into elite London society and avoid social exclusion. Her plan centres on securing advantageous marriages for her daughters, regardless of their personal desires or feelings. The novel, therefore, begins with two daughters who obediently follow the orders of a mother they do not fully respect, a situation that generates ongoing tension and internal conflict.

The dynamics within the Bowman family play a crucial role in shaping character development and driving the plot. The relationship between Lillian, Daisy, and Mercedes is especially tense. Mercedes is portrayed as emotionally distant and focused on social advancement. The omniscient narrator characterises her as “a rampantly ambitious woman with an abundance of nervous energy” whose “anxious, hard-edged chatter was

usually directed toward advancing her main objective in life: to see that both her daughters were brilliantly married" (Kleypas 23).

This characterisation bears a strong resemblance to that of Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, who is likewise depicted as a woman obsessed with marrying off her five daughters. Austen introduces her as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper (...). The business of her life was to get her daughters married" (Austen 9). While both mothers share these emotional traits of anxiety and obsession, they are framed differently. Mrs Bennet, though often an object of embarrassment to her daughters, is portrayed with a degree of humour, whereas Mercedes's character evokes rejection. Her insistence is perceived as a source of emotional pressure on her daughters that borders on coercion.

The emotional toll of this pressure becomes evident in a revealing exchange between Lillian and Daisy. When questioned about her determination to marry into the peerage despite the "huge crumbly old houses," "slimy English food," and the disrespect of their servants (Kleypas 33), Lillian bluntly responds, "Because it's what Mother wants," adding, "And because no one in New York will have either of us" (Kleypas 33). She acknowledges that their common bloodline excludes them from making desirable matches in New York, thus justifying why "husband hunting in Europe, where upper-class men needed rich wives, was the only solution" (Kleypas 34).

However, Mercedes's attempts to orchestrate a match with Westcliff often prove counterproductive. Her eagerness is evident through embarrassing behaviour, which is noted by everyone. Immediately after meeting Westcliff, she exclaims, "Oh, my lord, we are so *very* delighted to stay at your *magnificent* estate once again!", and continues to praise his importance and responsibilities (Kleypas 87). Her gestures are described as resembling those of a "praying mantis," and she loudly summons her daughters: "*Girls*!

Girls, look whom I've found. Come talk to Lord Westcliff" (Kleypas 87). In doing so, she blatantly objectifies her daughters as instruments of social mobility.

Lillian and Daisy are the main victims of their mother's overt matchmaking, placing them at the centre of unwanted attention. In fact, Daisy wonders why Westcliff tolerated their mother's incessant babble. Lillian dryly replies, "Clearly he has a high tolerance for pain" (Kleypas 142–43). This moment captures the daughters' awareness of their mother's social ineptitude, as well as their resistance expressed through sarcasm and mockery.

This social dynamic once again finds a clear echo in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mrs Bennet's lack of discretion and obsessive matchmaking often undermine her daughter's prospects. Her insistence that Mr Bennet visit Mr Bingley, and her excitement in every opportunity to promote her daughters, frequently results in awkward or inappropriate situations. Moreover, the behaviour of Lydia, Mary, and Kitty intensifies the perception that Jane and Elizabeth come from an unsuitable family. While both Mercedes and Mrs Bennet are driven by similar motivations, primarily securing social advancement through marriage, they differ in narrative function: as previously noted, Mercedes is constructed as an antagonist, whereas Mrs Bennet is portrayed more as a comic figure.

In both novels, the protagonists find themselves caught in parental schemes over which they have limited control. Although Lillian possesses a spirited and assertive nature, she nonetheless complies with her mother's expectations, believing she has few real alternatives. Mercedes advises her to be "modest, quiet, and demure at all times", and even instructs her to distance herself from her wallflower friends (Kleypas 24), whom she considers a poor influence. This disregard for Lillian's emotional well-being starkly

contrasts with the comfort and empowerment that Lillian receives from her female friendships.

Elizabeth Bennet, in contrast, actively resists her mother's manipulative tactics. She firmly rejects Mr Collins's proposal, despite Mrs Bennet's coercion: "She is a very headstrong foolish girl, and does not know her own interest; but I will *make* her know it" (Austen 103). The narrator details how Mrs Bennet "talked to Elizabeth again and again; coaxed and threatened her by turns" (Austen 105), yet ultimately fails to persuade her daughter. Both heroines, therefore, assert their autonomy, albeit through different strategies: Lillian through loyalty to her chosen friendships, and Elizabeth through her categorical rejection of a socially advantageous but unwanted marriage. In doing so, they demonstrate strength of character and independence of thought.

The bond between sisters also plays a significant role in both narratives. Lillian and Daisy, though different in personality and appearance, maintain a close and affectionate relationship. Daisy is cautious and delicate, with "rounder cheeks, and an old-fashioned china doll prettiness" (Kleypas 52), while Lillian is more confident, described as having a "longer and vaguely feline" face and a "sweetly carnal mouth" (Kleypas 52). Their solidarity is especially evident in their shared resistance to Mercedes's controlling behaviour, even when she goes as far as locking them in a room to prevent their alleged misbehaviour. The sister's resistance shows a cultural clash, where American ideals of independence collide with strict British social norms.

This cultural tension is further exemplified in how their American manners are repeatedly criticised. Lillian's openness, directness, and refusal to feign submission are considered inappropriate. Following an "accidental" kiss with Westcliff, she immediately seizes the moment to bargain with him: "I might be willing to forgive and forget (...) If you would do one small thing for me (...) Merely to ask your mother to sponsor my sister

and me for the coming season" (Kleypas 98). Westcliff's biting retort, "Queen Victoria herself could not drag a pair of savage brats like you along the path of respectability" (Kleypas 99), emphasises the deep cultural gap between them. Nevertheless, Lillian persists, boldly stating, "I daresay people will find no small amusement in the fact that the self-possessed Lord Westcliff cannot control his desire for a bumptious American girl with atrocious manners. And you won't be able to deny it, because you never lie" (Kleypas 99). Later, when Westcliff's mother reluctantly agrees to teach the girls in proper decorum, she remarks, "I watched you last evening, the both of you, and I witnessed a veritable catalogue of unseemly behaviour" (Kleypas 164), threatening to marry them off to "some sham continental aristocrat" if they do not improve (Kleypas 164). However, it is ironic that it is precisely Lillian's defiance and lack of conformity that ultimately attract Westcliff.

The devotion between sisters in *It Happened One Autumn* mirrors that of Elizabeth and Jane in *Pride and Prejudice*. Jane, considered the more conventionally beautiful of the two, is initially the focus of Mr Darcy's appreciation, while Elizabeth is dismissed by Darcy as "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me" (Austen 14). In this sense, Elizabeth's role resembles that of a wallflower, as Mr Darcy categorically refuses to dance with her, much like Lillian in *It Happened One Autumn.* However, just as Darcy is ultimately captivated by Elizabeth's intelligence and liveliness, Westcliff is drawn to Lillian's boldness and sensuality, which introduces an erotic layer absent from Austen's more restrained style.

Westcliff's background is also crucial in understanding his emotional development. Raised by a cold and authoritarian father who suppressed emotional expression and demanded perfection, Marcus is initially portrayed as emotionally reserved. The novel states, "Any recollection of the eighth Earl of Westcliff was not a

happy one", describing him as "an unloving and cruel man" (Kleypas 12). This upbringing has shaped Marcus into a man of discipline and reserve. However, after his father's death, he becomes more emotionally available, particularly towards his sisters, who now describe him as a compassionate and supportive brother (Kleypas 13).

Similarly, Mr Darcy acknowledges the limitations of his own upbringing. He confesses to Elizabeth that although his parents were kind, "they allowed, encouraged, almost taught me to be selfish and overbearing" (Austen 330). His relationship with his sister, Georgiana, evolves over time, especially under Elizabeth's influence. Georgiana's initial respect for her brother, which borders on fear, gradually transforms into affection as she observes his growing warmth: "He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry" (Austen 346). In both novels, then, the male protagonists undergo emotional growth through their relationships with female figures who challenge their inherited values and inspire a more human, emotionally open personality.

A key obstacle in *It Happened One Autumn* comes from Westcliff's mother, Lady Georgiana, whose opposition to her son's relationship with Lillian echoes the disapproval expressed by Lady Catherine de Bourgh in *Pride and Prejudice*. The countess, portrayed as cold and class-conscious, cannot accept the idea of her son marrying an American without noble lineage. Shortly after learning of the engagement, she summons Lillian and bitterly declares, "Had I imagined that a girl of your commonness would be capable of attracting the earl, I would have put a stop to this far earlier" (Kleypas 330). She adds, "If the earl marries you, it will be not only his failure, but mine, and the downfall of every man and woman related to the Marsden escutcheon" (Kleypas 331). Likewise, Lady Catherine attempts to dissuade Elizabeth from accepting Darcy's proposal, exclaiming, "The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune. Is

this to be endured?" (Austen 318), and famously protests, "Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (Austen 319). In both narratives, these women represent the final bastions of social prejudice, and act as antagonistic characters whose failed interventions ultimately strengthen the protagonists' unions.

In the end, both *It Happened One Autumn* and *Pride and Prejudice* reveal how family relations, whether in the form of maternal interference or close sibling bonds strongly influence the characters' emotional development and love lives. Just as influential are the friendships, particularly among women, which provide strength and resistance in the face of patriarchal or social constraints. In Kleypas's novel, the wallflowers, Lillian's circle of female friends, show the power of women supporting each other. Though diverse in background and personality, each woman finds empowerment through friendship. Lillian's bond with them remains a source of confidence and loyalty, helping her to overcome a society that constantly seeks to undermine her.

Among the wallflowers, Evie stands out as a particularly compelling figure. She is described as extremely shy, with a pronounced stammer, which makes it hard for her to get male attention, and some even see her as boring or embarrassing to talk to. Evie, mistreated by her own family, decides to marry a man she does not trust in order to secure her independence. She offers a "Faustian bargain" (Kleypas 378) to Lord St Vincent, Westcliff's friend, in which marriage grants her safety and wealth, while he gains access to her inheritance, something he desperately needs. Despite the initial unpromising nature of the arrangement and St Vincent's reputation as an incurable rake, they gradually fall in love and build a beautiful relationship that will be explored in the *Devil in Winter* (2006), the book that follows *It Happened One Autumn*.

Evie's storyline can be somewhat compared to that of Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice*, who also chooses security over romance. After Elizabeth refuses Mr

Collins, Charlotte accepts him, stating, “I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home” (Austen 117). When Elizabeth expresses surprise, Charlotte calmly acknowledges the practicality of her decision: “You must be surprised, very much surprised (…) But when you have had time to think it all over, I hope you will be satisfied with what I have done” (Austen 117). Both characters illustrate how social constraints force women into marriages of convenience, where affection was not guaranteed but some degree of independence could be attained.

While both narratives depict women resorting to marriage as a means of survival in a society that offers them few alternatives, the outcomes differ significantly. In *It Happened One Autumn*, the initial arrangement between Evie and Lord St Vincent, rooted in necessity, evolves into a passionate romance between a shy wallflower and a notorious rake. In contrast, Austen portrays a more restrained and pragmatic union between Charlotte Lucas and Mr Collins, a relationship devoid of romantic passion, where the couple merely learns to coexist.

Westcliff’s male friendships offer further insight into character development and social values. His relationship with Simon Hunt, for example, is one of mutual respect. However, Westcliff struggles to understand Hunt’s decision to marry Annabelle, a woman considered beneath his station. Reflecting on his earlier doubts, Hunt says, “I am compelled to point out, Westcliff, that had I heeded your counsel about marrying Annabelle, it would have been the greatest mistake of my life”, to which Westcliff replies, “At the time she was not a sensible choice (…) It was only later that she proved herself to be worthy of you” (Kleypas 222). This exchange reveals Westcliff’s growth, while also reinforcing the persistent class-based judgments that shape the novel.

A similar situation is found in Mr Darcy’s attempt to dissuade Mr Bingley from marrying Jane Bennet. Unlike Hunt, Bingley yields to external pressure, distancing

himself from Jane due to her family's lower social standing and alleged indifference. While Hunt's choice underscores the romantic ideal of pursuing love against all odds, Bingley's initial indecision highlights a more realistic, human vulnerability. Jane, recalling Bingley's explanation, tells Elizabeth, "He really loved me, and nothing but a persuasion of *my* being indifferent, would have prevented his coming down again". Elizabeth replies, "He made a little mistake to be sure; but it is to the credit of his modesty" (Austen 312). This moment illustrates that while Kleypas heroes express their love boldly, Austen's characters grow through self-reflection, highlighting her focus on character's development.

The presence of a rake character further connects the two narratives. Lord St Vincent in *It Happened One Autumn* is portrayed as a libertine who pursues women, married or not, without remorse. He is portrayed as an "unprincipled scoundrel and a prolific lover of women" (Kleypas 78), someone who "was always to be found at some fashionable party or gathering (…) staying only until the conversation became 'tedious' (…) then he would leave in search of new revelry" (Kleypas 78–79). Marcus, despite his disapproval of St Vincent's behaviour, maintains their friendship out of loyalty to their shared past: "Marcus himself would have had little to do with St. Vincent were it not for his memories of the days when they had attended the same school." (Kleypas 79). This complicated loyalty culminates in betrayal, as St Vincent conspires with the countess to kidnap Lillian in order to force a marriage in Gretna Green, driven by his financial desperation.

St Vincent's actions parallel those of George Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, who also plots an elopement, first with Georgiana Darcy and then with Lydia Bennet. Darcy later explains to Elizabeth: "Mr Wickham's chief object was unquestionably my sister's fortune, which is thirty thousand pounds" (Austen 184). Both rakes are motivated

by financial reasons and show little concern for the reputations or well-being of the women involved. However, while Wickham remains as a corrupt and untrustworthy character, St Vincent undergoes redemption in subsequent novels. His development into a romantic hero in *Devil in Winter* (2006) aligns with the historical romance genre's recurring trope of the rake who is reformed by love.

These characters also function as triggers for jealousy, which helps move the main love stories forward. Lillian's interaction with St Vincent serves to annoy Westcliff and reveal his real feelings. When St Vincent tells her, "It would undoubtedly displease Westcliff to see you in my company (…) He doesn't want you to be compromised or otherwise harmed by association with me". Lillian takes pleasure in Westcliff's discomfort: "Lillian had never known a purer sense of satisfaction than the moment Westcliff noticed that she was in St. Vincent's company" (Kleypas 184–85). This moment of playful provocation offers a comic relief in the narrative, underscoring the tension between Lillian and Westcliff.

Similarly, Elizabeth's good relationship with Wickham provokes jealousy in Darcy. During his proposal, when Elizabeth accuses him of mistreating Wickham, he responds with a "less tranquil tone" and "with heightened colour": "You take an eager interest in that gentleman's concerns" (Austen 174). Both St Vincent and Wickham are initially charming and skilled in conversation, presenting themselves as desirable romantic alternatives to the emotionally reserved heroes. Their function is not only to complicate the plot but also to reveal the heroes' real feelings. Ultimately, both Kleypas and Austen use the figure of the rake to explore themes of deception, class tension, and romantic rivalry.

These character dynamics, friendships, betrayals, rivalries, and redemptions, underscore the richness of both novels in exploring how love is shaped through personal

growth. In contrasting these narratives, one sees how Kleypas uses and intensifies many of Austen's themes, adapting them to the more sensual and erotic register of the historical romance genre of the twenty-first century.

Finally, the courtship between Lillian and Westcliff is portrayed as both an emotional and social process, marked by misunderstandings, involuntary attraction, and resistance to both desire and social norms. In contrast to Austen's narrative, Kleypas accentuates the sensual and erotic aspects, which are notably absent in Austen's classic.

Initially, there is a strong sense of mutual antipathy between the protagonists, rooted in pride, prejudice, and social expectations. Lillian perceives Westcliff as arrogant and condescending, particularly because of her status as an American and his alignment to rigid class distinctions. Several moments in the novel reveal Lillian's frustration with him: "The reason I dislike him so, Daisy, is that he so obviously dislikes *me*. He considers himself to be my superior in every possible way; morally and socially and intellectually" (Kleypas 29). Later, she exclaims, "Westcliff is not my true love! He's a pompous, superior ass with whom I've never managed to have a civil conversation. And any woman unlucky enough to marry him will end up rotting here in Hampshire, having to account to him for everything she does. No, thank you" (Kleypas 106). She even suggests, "I'm afraid it was a case of hatred at first sight (…) I think Westcliff is a judgmental boor, and he considers me an ill-natured brat" (Kleypas 125–26).

Austen presents a parallel dynamic in *Pride and Prejudice*, where the early relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is similarly strained by social biases and pride. When Darcy describes Elizabeth as tolerable, Elizabeth, deeply offended, tells her mother that she will never dance with him. Later, she adds, "I could easily forgive *his* pride, if he had not mortified *mine*" (Austen 21). Both novels thus begin with characters who dislike each other, mainly because of class differences and wounded egos. However, while

Austen handles this tension through wit, social commentary, and gentle feelings, Kleypas accentuates the dynamic through overt physical attraction and erotic tension.

Kleypas uses this sexual tension to show how attraction can overcome strong dislike. Lillian is forced to acknowledge her physical attraction to Westcliff despite her personal dislike: “Regardless of her dislike, Lillian had to acknowledge that Westcliff was an extremely attractive man” (Kleypas 41). The narrator often delves into Westcliff’s inner conflict: “He wanted her a thousand ways, over him, under him, any part of him inside any part of her” (Kleypas 54), and later he confesses to Lillian, “I’ve tried to leave you alone. But I can’t do it anymore (…) No matter how often I tell myself that you are the most inappropriate…” (Kleypas 120). These intense emotional and physical desires contrast with the more restrained passion in Austen. Yet, Darcy also admits his battle with his feelings: “In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how *ardently* I admire and I love you” (Austen 171). While lacking erotic detail, Austen’s language still conveys the emotional depth of Darcy’s inner turmoil, suggesting that his love for Elizabeth transcends reason and propriety.

In both novels, the motif of dancing plays an important role in their romantic tension. Dancing allows characters to be closer in a way that is socially accepted, creating a long-awaited moment of physical proximity. In *It Happened One Autumn*, Westcliff surprises Lillian by finally asking her to dance, which prompts Lillian’s reflection: “Westcliff had never asked to dance before, despite the multitude of occasions on which he should have asked out of gentlemanly politeness” (Kleypas 178). Shocked, Lillian responds, “I can’t see why you should want to dance with me now, when you never have before” (Kleypas 179). Her suspicion reflects the resentment she feels due to past offenses. Similarly, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy’s unexpected request to dance with Elizabeth is received with astonishment. The narrator writes: “She found herself suddenly

addressed by Mr Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without knowing what she did, she accepted him" (Austen 85). Elizabeth later sarcastically tells Charlotte, "Heaven forbid! *That* would be the greatest misfortune of all! To find a man agreeable whom one is determined to hate!" (Austen 85).

In both cases, the male protagonists had previously refused to dance with the heroines, actions which offended them and reinforced feelings of animosity between the two. Both men were accused of not behaving in a gentlemanly manner. Elizabeth tells Colonel Fitzwilliam how Darcy danced only four times at the first ball, despite the scarcity of gentlemen: "To my certain knowledge, more than one young lady was sitting down in want of a partner. Mr Darcy, you cannot deny the fact" (Austen 159).

Furthermore, Kleypas transforms the dance into a scene of sexual tension. Lillian, carried away by the moment, fantasises about what might follow: "Intensely aware of his body, the occasional touch of his warm breath on her cheek, Lillian drifted into a curious waking dream… a fantasy in which Marcus, Lord Westcliff, would take her upstairs after the waltz, and undress her, and lay her gently across his bed" (Kleypas 181). This scene highlights how historical romance reimagines Austen's delicate courtship rituals through an erotic lens.

Both novels culminate in powerful declarations of love from the male protagonists, who finally surrender to emotions they had long tried to suppress. Westcliff confesses: "I've tried to leave you alone. But I can't do it anymore. In the past two weeks I've had to stop myself a thousand times from coming to you" (Kleypas 240). Darcy, likewise, tells Elizabeth, "In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you" (Austen 171). In both confessions, love grows from the very differences that initially separated

them, as each hero learns to value the woman who challenged them, especially on an intellectual level.

The resolutions of both narratives are deeply satisfying, as each marks a transformation in both the hero and the heroine. After Westcliff and Lillian finally unite, he declares: “My dearest Lillian (…) If I had the gift of poetry, I would shower you with sonnets. But words have always been difficult for me when my feelings are strongest” (Kleypas 269). Similarly, Darcy, now more emotionally vulnerable, offers Elizabeth the chance to silence him forever if her feelings remain unchanged: “My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever” (Austen 327). These emotional renditions are full of vulnerability and honesty, serving as affirmations of genuine love.

In each work, the heroine is defined by her independence, strength, and resistance to societal expectations. The hero’s emotional journey, marked by initial pride and final surrender, is matched by the heroine’s growth as they learn to trust and understand the true nature of their male counterparts. As it was suggested, the core difference lies in tone: Austen maintains emotional restraint, while Kleypas allows for emotional intensity and eroticism. However, the plots, centred on the enemies-to-lovers trope with their eventual understanding and confession of true feelings, stay very similar.

Additionally, we should not overlook the literal use of the famous opening line from *Pride and Prejudice* in *It Happened One Autumn*: “Moreover, it was universally acknowledged that since both of Marcus’s sisters had married Americans, it was imperative that he preserve the family’s distinguished pedigree with an English bride” (Kleypas 168). Although this phrase does not originate with Austen, it is the very well opening line of her most celebrated novel, and its inclusion inevitably evokes *Pride and Prejudice*. Consequently, the phrase “it is universally acknowledged” has become a

hallmark closely associated with Austen. Furthermore, this line can be read ironically, as in *Pride and Prejudice*, since by the end of the book, it is clear that Marcus will not adhere to this prospect.

To conclude, it is evident that Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* served as an influential inspiration for Kleypas's *It Happened One Autumn*. Whether this influence is conscious or unconscious is open to interpretation, the parallelism between character development, plot structure, and key romantic moments suggest more than coincidence. Kleypas reimagines Austen's narrative through the lens of modern historical romance, intensifying emotion and eroticism, but preserving the emotional turmoil that characterises *Pride and Prejudice*. The result is a clear tribute that both respects and changes the original story.

5. Conclusions

The major aim of this project was to examine the historical romance genre and its connection with the English literary canon, particularly focusing on the legacy of Jane Austen. Each section of the project sought to shed light on the intersections between these two literary worlds. First, through an exploration of Austen's life and work, we aimed to understand her both as a woman and as a writer, and to assess the extent to which her family background and education influenced her literary production. Similarly, the analysis of Lisa Kleypas's life and career revealed how the English classics shaped her reading habits and inspired elements of her writing. Finally, the study of the evolution of the historical romance genre helped us better understand the relationship between the English literary canon and historical romance fiction.

The selected novels *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *It Happened One Autumn* (2005) proved to be valuable case studies, illustrating the deep connections between the

literary canon and the contemporary historical romance genre. These two works demonstrate how seemingly disparate literary traditions are, in fact, intricately linked through themes, tropes, and character construction.

The English literary canon, particularly the contributions of the so-called Lady Novelists, has been foundational in shaping the historical romance genre. Their narratives, often centred on complex love stories and unforgettable male and female characters, continue to resonate in the collective imagination. These authors, and Jane Austen in particular, are cherished not only within academic circles but also by popular audiences, which shows how lasting and meaningful their work continues to be. Austen remains one of the most iconic and beloved figures in English literature. Her life and works are recognised not only as significant literary contributions but also as early expressions of feminist thought. She addressed issues affecting women in her time with wit and insight, establishing her presence in a literary world largely dominated by men.

The evolution of the historical romance genre reflects a complex trajectory. Although the literary merit of many contemporary romance novels is often debated, their widespread popularity is indisputable. These works provide enjoyment and emotional engagement for readers, often offering a form of escapism or simple entertainment. Despite persistent criticism and cultural scorn, sometimes reduced to satire, the genre holds an important place within women's literary traditions. It has contributed to the literary and personal empowerment of women, particularly in terms of sexual expression and autonomy.

Kleypas's *It Happened One Autumn* (2005) is a striking example of Austen's influence on modern romance writing. The narrative structure, character arcs, and thematic elements clearly mirror those in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). However, Kleypas introduces a more explicit portrayal of sexuality, transforming the traditional "enemies to

lovers" trope into a more erotically charged storyline. While Austen subtly conveyed desire through language, glances, and social restraint, Kleypas embraces overt eroticism, reflecting the expectations and desires of modern readers. This interplay between restraint and eroticism both distinguishes and connects the two genres.

Furthermore, in a 2019 post, Lisa Kleypas explained to her followers that she has often been asked whether she has a particular actor in mind when writing her heroes. Although she admitted that this is not something that happens regularly, she confessed that occasionally an actor perfectly captures the appearance and emotional tone she is looking for. In this post, Kleypas mentioned Colin Firth, accompanied by an image of the actor cast as Mr Darcy in the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Therefore, it could be considered that it was Firth's interpretation of Mr Darcy the one that inspired the character of Marcus, Lord Westcliff, in *It Happened One Autumn* (2005). This detail is far from trivial; it serves as another clear examples of how Jane Austen's work, whether directly or indirectly, continues to influence contemporary authors and their creative processes.

The dialogue between the historical romance genre and the literary canon reveals a meaningful connection, particularly for female readers. This connection shows how the proximity and divergence between the two genres converge in the imagination of women, who find in both a source of inspiration that challenges conventional criticism and opens up new possibilities for understanding literary heritage. For many, the romance genre acts as a gateway to the classics, while others find themselves drawn to Austen after engaging with contemporary romantic fiction. In this way, contemporary romance literature facilitates access to so-called "higher" literary forms, encouraging critical thinking and an appreciation of a literature that proves to be both more profound and complex, while remaining centred on personal and emotional relationships.

Both Austen and Kleypas belong to a space in literature that is mainly addressed to women, a tradition that promotes individual agency, emotional awareness, and sexual liberation. This literature teaches readers to be independent, critical, and self-aware. In a historical context where women's reading habits have been controlled and often dismissed, it is no surprise that sentimental literature has often been marginalised. However, in escaping patriarchal control, these texts established a space where women could express their autonomy through reading.

This year marks the 250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth, and the global literary community continues to celebrate her timeless legacy. New adaptations of her novels and biographical portraits are being produced, while online platforms and broadcasters such as the BBC are commemorating her contributions through continuous programming. Austen's enduring relevance is reflected in the admiration her characters and stories continue to inspire, a legacy that transcends time, genre, and readership.

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