

ABSTRACT

ALEXANDRA A. DORIA. "Pictures of Perfection As You Know Make Me Sick and Wicked": How Ethics, Marxism, and Feminism Make an Austen Heroine. (Under the direction of Dr. John Morillo.)

Jane Austen's heroines have been the subjects of comparative literary analysis for more than two centuries. Some praise Elinor Dashwood for her prudence and then despair of Fanny Price's meek nature. Others will despise Catherine Morland's silly infatuation with Gothic literature while praising Elizabeth Bennet for her wit. What these perspectives lack is a consideration of the heroine within the bounds of her own novel and what freedoms the heroine does or does not have. In the following paper, I will analyze three of Austen's heroines and utilize a fusion of three key perspectives: ethics, Marxism, and feminism. These three critical perspectives are essential for Austen as she primarily focuses on how socioeconomic status and access to a good education determines how a heroine can then think and act on moral grounds. I will principally be examining Catherine Morland from *Northanger Abbey*, Elinor Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility*, and Fanny Price from *Mansfield Park*. Each of these heroines are beloved and criticized for various reasons, but I will argue that Austen's heroines are not meant to exemplify nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood, but that they are meant to be models of realistic women in Austen's time and as such, come from a variety of backgrounds, levels of education, and socioeconomic status. Each of these factors are what determines an Austen heroine's ability to act ethically and morally within her local sphere. Through an examination of each heroine through the proposed tri-focal lens, a new sequencing of the novels will be revealed. At the forefront is Austen's disfavored Gothic parody, *Northanger Abbey*, which offers the essential foundation of reading ethics in Austen. Next, *Sense and Sensibility* offers a critical view of Elinor Dashwood's prudence and virtuous action. Last is *Mansfield Park*, which is the ultimate ethical test for the reader with the unlikeable character of Fanny Price.