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**The Social Construction of Feeling: The Connection
between Class and Empathy in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*
and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary***

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You do not have to be good,
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the sweet animal of your body
Love what it loves.

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Introduction

Men build too many walls and not enough bridges.

— Joseph Fort Newton, *The One Great Church*

Empathy is often understood as one of the most fundamental human capacities, one that sustains and creates social life. It allows individuals to recognize and understand the experiences, emotions, and perspectives of others, forming the basis of interpersonal understanding and equal relations. While empathy has long been regarded as innate to humans, a kind of "sixth sense", contemporary scholarship increasingly views it as an emotion shaped by social and cultural conditions. As the ways individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to others are shaped by norms, social hierarchies, and systems of power that structure everyday life, empathy cannot be understood solely as a personal or psychological phenomenon. It must also be examined as a social and historical one. Literature offers a particularly valuable space for investigating this relationship between society and emotional understanding. Novels not only depict feelings and relationships but also reveal the social conditions that shape them. Through their representations of class, gender, status, and power, literary texts not only expose the ways in which broader social structures impact emotional life but also create the frameworks for understanding these within fiction. In doing so, they challenge the notion that emotions are purely private experiences and instead demonstrate how feelings are embedded within specific cultural and historical contexts.

This thesis specifically explores the relationship between class and empathy through an analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary*. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Erik Olin Wright, Pierre Bourdieu, Martin Buber, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Sara Ahmed, it argues that empathy is socially conditioned and that class structures significantly shape the ways individuals perceive themselves and others. While the two novels differ in historical setting and

literary tradition, both depict societies in which social position influences interpersonal relationships, self-understanding, and emotional engagement. By examining how class affects the capacity for empathy in these texts, this thesis seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the relationship between social structures and emotional life, ultimately aiming to provide research that shows how society and its broader structures permeate individuals even at their most private, emotional core, in turn influencing the structure of human relationships and society.

1. The Social and Literary Construction of Empathy and Relationships

In this opening chapter of the thesis, the theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis is established. It first examines how the conventions of literary realism and the emphasis on character construction shape the analytical lens of this study, allowing the worlds of *Madame Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice* to be approached as socially embedded, “real-world” configurations of experience, behavior, and perception. The second part of the chapter turns to the concept of class. It outlines how class operates as a social and economic structure more generally, before situating it within the specific context of nineteenth-century society. Here, particular attention is given to the political and economic conditions that shaped emerging class formations, as well as the ways in which these structures influenced behavior, social expectations, and forms of taste. The third part of the chapter addresses the idea of how empathy in earlier theory has been understood as a sixth sense of human nature. It traces its historical development within philosophy and psychology, before then examining how empathy can be shaped and constrained by social structures, particularly class. This discussion is then extended into a broader philosophical reflection on human relationships, examining how interactions between individuals are structured, mediated, and limited by the conditions in which they take place.

Ultimately, this chapter provides the theoretical foundation for the close readings that follow, in which these frameworks will be applied to the analysis of *Madame Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice* in relation to the central research question of

whether, in both novels, the characters' capacity for empathy and participation in empathic human relationships is constrained by class structures.

1.1 Theoretical Foundations: Literary Realism and Character Study

This chapter aims to structure the various aspects of literary theory used to compose and support this thesis, leading to how and on what basis the thesis question was formulated. Beginning with an exploration of the genre of realism and its portrayal of society, the chapter further examines the theory of literary characters and their importance to literary analysis. These assessments are the base for both a sociopolitical and psychological analysis of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary*.

1.1.1 Literary Realism and Its Representation of Society

Both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary* are commonly situated within the tradition of realism, a genre that has been widely studied in literary theory and has given rise to a range of approaches that seek to define its features and significance. In *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt claims that the realist novel attempts to portray all forms of the human experience and not just those which seem suitable for a literary discussion, meaning the beautiful, seamless, and romantic (11). He strongly underlines that “[...]: the novel’s realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it“ (11), emphasizing that the realist novel aims to present itself as an authentic account of the lived experience of individuals (27). Theorist Georg Lukács, then, focuses more on the aspect of society in realist literature: In *Studies in European realism*, he argues that “True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, [...]“ (6). He further describes how only realism can bear the responsibility of engaging and authentically depicting a period of life or a historical period that, to him, is always “a period of transition, a contradictory unity of crisis and renewal of destruction and rebirth; a new social order and a new type of man [...]“ (10). The realist novel, in his opinion,

consequently has the power to portray society as a whole and its people during a specific period of time.

Both Watt's and Lukács' exploration of realism coincides with what in literary theory is called *reflection theory*. Milton C. Albrecht, in his essay *The Relationship of Literature and Society*, explains that *reflection theory* claims that literature reflects society and works as a sort of "mirror of life" (426). Within this concept, literature has been seen as a reflection of many real-life aspects such as economics, family relationships, climate and landscapes, attitudes, morals, races, social classes, political events, wars, and religion (426). Albrecht then states that: "This diversity results, apparently, from the fact that literature embraces a wide variety of subject matter, representing settings, behavior patterns, and ideas in their complex interrelationships." (426).

Based on this inquiry into realism and its relationship with society, it can be argued that the worlds represented in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary* may be read as attempts to evoke a realistic, socially grounded setting. Analyzing societal aspects of said books is then also to analyze the society of that given time, which the thesis will be inclined to do in later chapters. But to construct a productive analysis of a society, it is vital to examine its subjects, as David R. Shumway suggests in *What is Realism?*: "No matter how precise the description or how fulsome the representation of society, a novel will not appear to successfully represent reality if its characters cannot be believed" (188).

1.1.2 On the Interpretation of the Literary Character

The attitude towards the idea of the literary character has changed substantially in the course of literary history. The beginnings of those theories date back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he states that: "By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents. Thought is required wherever a statement is proved, or, it may be, a general truth enunciated" (8). Aristotle furthermore stresses

that a character is secondary to its actions, claiming that a tragedy cannot exist without action, but may very well exist without character (9). He consequently argues that the central aim in a tragedy is not to depict human personalities but to represent human actions; the character enhances the plot, but it has almost no importance of its own.

One of the most influential works contemplating this action-focused approach, though, is Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*, in which they argue for a descriptive, not evaluative, conception of literature and its characters (16). They state: "A character in a novel differs from a historical figure or a figure in real life. He is made only of the sentences describing him or put into his mouth by the author. He has no past, no future, and sometimes no continuity of life" (15). This consideration is widely regarded as a turning point in literary theory, as it has led to the understanding of characters as textual constructs rather than mimetic products (Hartner 3). In *An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*, Roland Barthes also questions who exactly the subject of a narrative is (110). He states that characters, which he describes as units of the *actional level*¹, can only acquire meaning if they are properly integrated into the level of narration (110). He further goes on to suggest that "narrator and characters, however, at least from our perspective, are essentially 'paper beings'; the (material) author of a narrative is in no way to be confused with the narrator of that narrative" (111). Crystalizing from these approaches is that characters on this side of the literary tradition were only seen as a part of the narrative communication; they are units inside the narrative and have no life and meaning of their own.

In realist literature, though, the characters in themselves are essential. In *Studies in European Realism*, Lukács formulates the central problem of the realist novel as to grasp an "adequate presentation of the complete human personality" (6). While he

¹ The actional level is to be understood as the layer of the text concerned with the sequencing of plot events, actions, and behaviors that drive the story forward.

claims that the realist novel has a three-dimensionality, an all-roundedness that endows characters with relationships and life, he underlines that in realist novels one encounters types, not merely individuals, that take their real qualities from all their humanly and socially essential determinants (6). As David R. Shumway in his essay *What is Realism?* explains: “What the theory of the type does for Lukács is connect particular characters to the social totality that he argues the realist novel presents“ (188). But he further determines that Lukács’s approach partially disregards the notion of subjectivity, which he claims, using Catherine Belsey’s *Critical Practice*, is realism’s major theme (189).

The discussion of subjectivity can be further enhanced by the work of Uri Margolin, who in *Structuralist Approaches to Character in Narrative*, argues that a literary character’s notion “[...] is highly ambiguous and multifarious, and its varied senses, taken in conjunction, include incompatible features and irreconcilable presuppositions” (12). He underlines that no conceptual understanding of character can ever claim exclusivity, but they all coexist, providing theorists a choice of perspective to reveal their interests (7). In his essay *The What, the When, and the How of Being a Character in Literary Narrative* Margolin states that literary characters can be uncannily similar to specific actual individuals or a group of actual individuals while maintaining a relative autonomy, which in turn creates a sort of duality in their conception „[...] as text-embedded and as lifelike (Fishelov), as textual and referential (Mead), or, in my terminology, as semiotic and representational“ (453). He proceeds to define four theoretical forms of a literary character: “The four are (A) character as topic entity of a discourse, (B) character as artificial construct or device, (C) character as thematic element, and (D) character as nonactual individual in some fictional (possible) world“ (454). Considering this thesis, Margolin’s last theory becomes relevant for further exploration. He describes the literary character as a nonactual individual as follows:

a member of some nonactual, fictional state of affairs or world, within which it can be referred to, located in a space-time region, and possess human or humanlike properties and relations of the most diverse kinds: physical, behavioral, social, communicative, and mental (psychological) (455).

He further states that this specific individual can possess not only inner states, memories, and attitudes but also ethical belief systems, consciousness, and a general interiority of personhood (455). To bring this hypothetical person into existence, the literary narrative must be viewed as a semiotic mechanism for constructing an alternative universe (455). While he suggests that the individuals inhabiting these alternate worlds are not restricted to properties of the real world, “there is no reason why the property sets of such individuals, as well as the laws of the worlds they inhabit, should not, on some occasions at least, be very similar to those we believe exist in our own world” (455). Margolin clearly offers an alternative view of the literary character. He treats literary characters as potentially lifelike beings with human-like qualities — physical, behavioral, social, mental, and ethical—that can closely resemble those of real people.

Building on this exploration of literary character theory, this thesis primarily draws from the frameworks of Lukács and Margolin. Through Lukács, it has been discussed that literary characters are connected to the social totality that the realist novel is supposed to represent. Meanwhile, Margolin adds a layer of subjectivity, allowing one to interpret the characters not only as types but as nonactual individuals that can possess human-like characteristics. This approach allows for a dynamic analysis of characters' inner lives and motivations, giving them a degree of autonomy similar to real people while remaining grounded in their narrative contexts and sociopolitical meaning.²

² By treating literary characters as nonactual individuals inhabiting a possible world, this thesis prioritizes the analysis of the characters' experiences and social environments over questions of authorial intention. While the author remains the creator of the fictional world, the interpretive focus lies on the ways characters function within that world and respond to its social structures, rather than on reconstructing the author's personal views or motivations.

1.1.3 From Theory to Research Question

Building on these prior sub-chapters, one can suggest that the world and the lived reality in both *Madame Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice* mirror the real-life circumstances and the real societal structure of their current time period. Furthermore, it has been proposed that the characters of these narratives are not only representative of these societies but may also be approached as autonomous, human-like entities, or, as Margolin calls them, “nonactual individuals“. Approaching both novels from this perspective, it can be argued that their characters are subject to what Margolin describes as the laws and structures that one recognizes from the real world. Consequently, although fictional, these characters are shaped by the social conditions of their environments in much the same way as real individuals are influenced by the structures and norms of the societies in which they live. This lens enables an in-depth analysis of the time period depicted in both novels and of how its conditions shape the characters’ individual experiences. This thesis specifically focuses on nineteenth-century society, meaning its class structures, economic relations, and underlying mechanisms, and examines how these are portrayed in both *Madame Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice*. At the level of character interaction, it further analyzes how individuals from different social classes relate to one another and how these interactions are experienced emotionally. This approach finally allows the thesis to question whether, in both novels, the characters’ capacity for empathy and participation in empathic relationships is constrained by class structures, thereby demonstrating how the socioeconomic context shapes their emotional worlds and social interactions.

1.2 Nineteenth-Century Society: The Formation of Class throughout History

This chapter examines how class, as both a structural and cultural system, shaped society in nineteenth-century France and England. Building on theoretical approaches to class, particularly those of Marx, Wright, and Bourdieu, it explores how economic transformations, political developments, and social hierarchies interacted to produce complex and historically specific class formations. By

comparing the development of class structures and their manifestations in everyday life across France and England, the chapter ultimately seeks to demonstrate how class functioned as a pervasive force that structured opportunities, shaped identities, and constrained human relationships within the broader logic of nineteenth-century society and capitalism.

1.2.1 The Question of the (Middle-)Classes

The concept of class has been widely discussed throughout history; it can be traced back as far as Ancient Greece, where Aristotle, in his *Politics*, distinguishes between slaves and free men (Dos Santos 166). Class as a system has always been persistent in society, but it also remains ever-changing with economics and politics, which in turn renders it hard to define and capture appropriately. One of the most influential and systematic approaches to capturing class can be found in the works of German theorist Karl Marx, whose writings are largely devoted to the analysis of class and capitalism. In his and Friedrich Engels' *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, it is written: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (14). They state that the modern *bourgeois* society established "new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones" (14). In this new system, Marx and Engels noticed that the class antagonisms were simplified, and that society seemed to be split into two big camps, namely the *Bourgeoisie* and the *Proletariat* (15). In a footnote, the *Bourgeoisie* is defined as "the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour," (14) while the *Proletariat* is defined as "the class of modern wage labourers who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour power in order to live" (14). Their relationship, most importantly, is based on the state of struggle, fighting constantly about the appropriation of what is produced:

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master‡ and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each

time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (14).

What becomes evident throughout this theory is a concrete polarization of those two classes. This consequently raises the question of where, precisely, the middle class, or other subdivisions of classes, are situated within this structure. In the third volume of *The Capital*, Marx calls any middle or intermediate class immaterial and transitional (576). He strongly believed in the fact that the, to him, the inevitable polarization of the *Bourgeoisie* and the *Proletariat* would naturally eliminate any middle class over time, making them superfluous for his discussion of class (576).

In *Classes*, Erik Olin Wright, on the contrary, argues that his belief in and practice of radical polarization is incorrect (8). He assesses that professional hierarchies have expanded, as concrete societies are seldom characterized by a single mode of production, introducing more complex patterns of intersecting exploitation relations, meaning that some people can be positioned in more than one class (87). This concept he calls *contradictory locations within class relations* — a concept that implements a framework in which one can be exploited while exploiting others (43). Such a position often applies to what he calls professionals, such as managers, as “on the one hand, they are like workers in being excluded from ownership of the means of production; on the other, they have interests opposed to workers because of their effective control of organization and skill assets“ (43). This is what he establishes as the new middle class (43).

What Wright further argues is that the concept of *contradictory locations within class relations* creates a more complex consciousness of class by producing inconsistent class interests (52). With the prospect of class mobility, attitudes of middle-class individuals become more pro-capitalist (251). This consequently also creates inconsistent internal interests as their consciousness is less fixed, but is instead a matrix of potential class formations, making them side with either capital or labor, depending on their interests (57).

Crystalizing from this expansion on Marx's and Engels' theory is that the polarization of the *Bourgeoisie* and *Proletariat* is not substantial enough to capture the system of class. The concept of social class is, as presented, extremely complex, especially raising the question of the middle class. As defined by Wright, the middle class distinguishes itself as a sort of threshold between labour and capital, caught within the struggle of class mobility, and permeated by inconsistent and contradictory interests, leading them to potential success. It is a class that encompasses a wide range of structures affecting not only individuals within the system but also relationship dynamics and culture as a whole.

1.2.2 Aspects of Class: Human Relationships, Gender, and Culture

This progressively nested class system not only influences society within labour and capital, but it also impacts the relationship between people. As Wright further explores in *Classes*: "To say that class is a relational concept is to say that classes are always defined within social relations, in particular in relation to other classes (34). Every individual's position is determined by their relation to other individuals, through the bond that connects them in the grand scheme of the system, meaning, for example, employer-employee or exploiter-exploited relationships. Class structures, though, also have an impact on the individual and their personality, habits, and affective styles (245). The ideology that is produced through the complex class struggle and capitalist labour system instills in individuals the desire for competition as a way of life and as a way of human interaction (245). Consequently, interactions between two individuals in the system, even on a personal level, are heavily influenced by class competition, the struggle of class mobility, and the constant drive to self-optimize to achieve success under the strict structures of the system.

The desirability of competition, mobility, and conflicting class interests, explained in the previous chapter, impact all relationships and can be found in specific relationship dynamics. Wright, for example, explores this in the realm of families, as the mindset toward class mobility can likely impact the trajectory of the family as

well as their material interests and struggles (225). An inevitable question, looking at family structures in a class system, is that of gender. Generally, Wright observes that gender discrimination works in three primary ways: based on asset distribution, on the lack of credentials, and on exploitation (127-128). He first argues that the distribution of assets is unequal, as women are often systematically excluded from it in the process of their acquisition (127-128). Secondly, he explores how gender can function as a credit by restricting certain kinds of labor through “sex-segregation”(127-128). Lastly, he suggests that gender discrimination can be compared to a form of feudal exploitation, where women lack the rights to their own labor power (128). In connection with the relational system of the family, Wright further delineates the class location of the women outside of the labor force, the housewives. He argues that housewives share the same interests in the capitalist system as their husbands, as their family’s income is derived from the husband’s wages, while at the same time, however, the housewife is involved in a domestic relationship inside the household. The husband, dominating his wife within the household, occupies contradictory class locations, as he is exploited by the capital but is an exploiter at home (129). While a housewife’s class is relative to her husband, it is not irreversibly fixed but, after Wright, depends on the “real relations of control over assets, income, and labor time within the family“ (129).

Class structures and the capitalist labor system, as argued, influence human relationships, making class mobility an overwhelming force that dominates them as they live in constant competition with each other. Within these structures, women, if able to take part in labor, are often segregated or stripped of their power, deprived of their own agency. Even individuals not directly involved in the reality of capitalist labor, like housewives, are affected by it, as they depend on their husbands’ roles in the system. Furthermore, systemic labor structures often translate into the domestic sphere, redistributing exploitation dynamics and creating their own hierarchy in the household.

But class also impacts human relationships through cultural norms and influences culture as a whole. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Pierre Bourdieu argues that class directly influences culture in shaping the *habitus*, the internalized dispositions of individuals that lie at the base of all cultural practices and preferences (170). This *habitus* is defined by three dimensions: volume of capital, composition of capital, and change in these two properties over time (114). The volume of capital is to be understood as “the set of actually usable resources and powers — economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital” (114). Those different forms of capital are then distributed in different ways, creating individuals with specific compositions of capital (114). Members of the higher classes, such as the *Bourgeoisie*, are often well-endowed with economic, cultural, and social capital. In comparison, members of the lower classes and the working class are often deprived in all three forms of capital (114-116). Higher classes then, over time, impose their cultural capital, meaning taste, experiences, and lifestyle as a universal norm, while lower classes’ taste and lifestyle are seen as more common and naive (7). Through this, the cultural capital then serves specifically as an instrument of social distinction, justifying the higher classes’ positions as taste ultimately distinguishes classes from each other (7).

A specific phenomenon that involves the middle class in the desire for cultural capital is what Bourdieu names *allodoxia*, which he defines as a mistaken identification of objects of cultural legitimacy by the middle class (323). Individuals of the middle class possess cultural goodwill, a need to experience legitimate culture, but lack the cultural capital to decipher products of legitimate culture. Their relationship to high-brow legitimate culture, therefore, is rooted in anxiety, making them lean towards safe and certified cultural goods (323).

Overall, this demonstrates that class is not merely a structural backdrop, but a fundamentally relational system that constitutes individuals through their positions vis-à-vis others, and in doing so emerges as a decisive force shaping human

relationships, social dynamics, and cultural taste. As such, class organizes not only economic roles but also interpersonal relations, cultural practices, and subjective dispositions. Structured by both competition and distinction, the class system profoundly influences how individuals relate to one another: interactions are driven either by efforts to differentiate oneself from lower classes — through labor positions and cultivated tastes — or by attempts to achieve upward mobility through moving up the ladder of labor or cultural assimilation into higher classes. This competitive logic is not only externally imposed but also internalized, fostering a persistent drive toward self-optimization that permeates everyday social exchange and culminates in a strong individualistic mindset. The middle class, in particular, occupies an ambivalent position between spheres of work and domestic life, marked by a constant anxiety about upward mobility, which manifests in a continual effort to adopt what are perceived as the dominant norms and tastes of the upper classes. This insecurity, combined with a constant competitive drive for a better life, strongly influences the middle class's interactions with one another and with other classes.

1.2.3 Nineteenth-Century France and England: Politics and Economics

To apply these conclusions about class to *Madame Bovary* and *Pride and Prejudice*, it is important to first situate these findings in the political and economic background of nineteenth-century France and England, as this influenced their contemporary formation of class. This section, hence, aims to shortly outline these economic and political transformations of nineteenth-century France and England to then further explore how class formations and their associated ideals and cultural tastes are fundamentally shaped by said circumstances.

From the late eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, France saw dramatic political change, beginning with the abolition of the old order and solidified by the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, affirming equal rights for all (McPhee 36). In 1799, after years of civil war and uncertainty, Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in France and established a regime under an authoritarian

hierarchy (McPhee 108). This particular phase stands out as especially transformative in shaping the French nation, as Napoleon undertook extensive reforms across many aspects of society. While he implemented a hierarchical administrative system, he also established the *Napoleonic Code*, which, maintaining civil equality before the law, codified a patriarchal system. Women consequently lost the right to independently make legal decisions, like contracts or litigate, and were increasingly dependent on their husbands (McPhee 82). Furthermore, the *Napoleonic Code* also strongly regulated the workplace as it strengthened laws against workers' associations and heightened surveillance at the workplace (McPhee 82-83).

After Napoleon was sent to Elba, King Louis XVIII was restored as France's leader in 1814, but quickly again lost power to Napoleon, who fled exile and won the local elections by manhood suffrage (McPhee 88). Following Napoleon's 1815 defeat at Waterloo, the *Bourbon Restoration* began under King Louis XVIII, who stabilized France by governing through the *Charter of 1814*. This Charter preserved revolutionary principles of civil and labor equality while allowing Napoleonic nobles to retain their titles. It also established a representative parliament, the Chamber of Deputies, which was elected exclusively by France's wealthiest men (McPhee 89). This created a new ruling elite known as the *Grand Notables*, constituted of old nobility and upper *bourgeoisie*, who secured their position and political power through property and wealth (McPhee 108). In 1830, however, the *July Revolution* ended the *Bourbon Restoration* and established a *bourgeois* Monarchy under Louis-Philippe, who would shift even more political power towards the wealthy *bourgeoisie* (McPhee 114-115).

These political changes heavily impacted the French economy. The abolition of the feudal system liberated peasants and established a class of small-scale, independent landowners, transitioning France to a modern system of private property ownership (Kawano 38). During Napoleon's reign, he established the Bank of France and initiated a cadastral survey, mapping all land and assessing tax liability,

stabilizing the French economy (McPhee 87). To then combat Britain, Napoleon implemented the *Continental System*, boosting inland industrial growth as trade was decreasing (McPhee 101). France's proper Industrial Revolution, compared to its competitors like Britain, though, was visibly delayed, starting around the 1830s with the *July Monarchy* (Kawano 40). Due to a scarcity of cheap raw materials, France adopted a dual model of industrialization that favored skilled labor and luxury goods over heavy mass production, until the later expansion of railways catalyzed heavy industry growth (Crouzet 220-235). Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, France, consequently, transformed into a modern state through political instability, gradual industrialization, and the abolition of feudalism. However, these structural limitations led to a slower, more specialized development than its neighbors. Ultimately, this uneven modernization preserved a deeply unequal hierarchy that concentrated power within the wealthy *bourgeoisie*.

Similarly to France, England also went through significant political and economic changes in this period. During the nineteenth century, the British state stabilized its political legitimacy, initially shaken by the loss of the American colonies, through cultural reconstruction (Colley Preface). To do this, the ruling class integrated non-English elites into power, while King George III adopted a patriotic ruling style to strengthen national identity (Colley 370). The threat of the *Napoleonic Wars* triggered a mass mobilization across England, Scotland, and Wales by 1804, which forced the nations to overcome their internal differences (Colley 4-5). Their final victory at Waterloo in 1815 then became a celebrated symbol of a "new Britishness" (Colley 371). Following the war, a newfound sense of active citizenship drove popular demands for voting rights and political access (Colley 371). Parliament, which had previously excluded the working class and unrepresented industrial cities, compromised by passing the *Reform Act* of 1832 to include the middle classes (Colley Preface). Alongside the *Catholic Emancipation* of 1829, this reform integrated a diverse quota of Scots, Welshmen, and Anglo-Irish into power, forging a unified, hybrid nation by 1837 (Colley 7).

The British economy of the nineteenth century, though largely driven by the Industrial Revolution, still rested on a pre-industrial foundation, meaning the British colonies and the Empire's involvement in the slave trade (McCloskey 107-108). Between 1760 and 1780, another foundation of the Industrial Revolution was laid with the invention of new technologies, such as the steam engine, the water frame, and the Spinning Jenny, which set the stage for mass production (McCloskey 121-122). Throughout the nineteenth century, mechanized sectors grew rapidly while traditional sectors, like agriculture, remained large, creating a dual economy, which by the end of the nineteenth century led to the doubling of the British national income per head (McCloskey 101-103). Ultimately, England, in the nineteenth century, transformed into a modern, unified state by combining political reform, cultural integration, and economic expansion. While external threats fostered a shared national identity and expanded political participation, power remained concentrated within established and emerging elites. Ultimately, industrialization and imperial growth drove significant modernization, yet the persistence of pre-industrial structures created a stronger but still unequal society.

The exploration and comparison of the French and English political and economic development of the nineteenth century is the basis on which it will be demonstrated that those factors influenced the formation of class identities and social relations. Ultimately, this comparison gives rise to a central argument: that class formations and their associated ideals cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen as products of the specific circumstances from which they emerge, such as economic and political trajectories.

1.2.4 Nineteenth-Century France and England: Classes and Social Mobility

Class structures in both France and England were deeply embedded in society and played a crucial role in shaping social relations and opportunities. As the political and economic transformations of the nineteenth century unfolded, these structures

did not disappear; rather, they evolved and became increasingly complex. This chapter, therefore, examines the development of class systems in France and England during this period and analyzes their broader social impact.

As a consequence of the French Revolution, France's class system fundamentally shifted throughout the nineteenth century, from being sorted through an order based on birth and legal privileges to being sorted through class based on wealth and property rights (McPhee 263). Under new political structures and a capitalist framework, wealth emerged as the primary source of power; new social classes developed during this period, profoundly shaping French society, including the *Grands Notables*, the *bourgeoisie*, the *peasantry*, and the *proletariat*. The *Grands Notables* emerged as the ruling class, being constructed of *ancient régime* nobility and upper *bourgeoisie* (McPhee 263). While *ancient régime* nobility had declined over the years, society remained dominated by their wealth built on substantial landed property, which was underpinned by aristocratic values, again reinforcing their authority (McPhee 263). This elite, intended to ensure social and political stability in the post-revolutionary state, was established as the ruling class because it was considered the most capable, having the greatest stake in society (McPhee 110). Meanwhile, the *bourgeoisie* became the dominant social force, which was defined by non-labor force wealth (McPhee 102). This class was also internally divided into the *haute bourgeoisie* and the *petite bourgeoisie*. The *haute bourgeoisie* were seen as the "new men of substance" controlling large-scale industries, finances, and trade (McPhee 263). The *petite bourgeoisie* was more of an intermediate class of master artisans, professionals, or low-scale shop-owners, constantly threatened by large-scale capitalism (McPhee 144). The *peasantry* class was fundamentally changed by the revolution as it abolished dues, increased their ownership, and implemented new equal inheritance laws, shaping its relationship to the land. Still, this class in itself remained deeply divided into different classes, mainly the *proprietors*, the *rural bourgeoisie*, the *tenants*, and the *landless laborers*. Finally, the working class or the *proletariat* was the wage-earning workforce (McPhee 136). Furthermore, those

classes, after the *Napoleonic Code*, existed in a codified patriarchy that also separated society into public, male spheres and private, female spheres (McPhee 105). Women grew more and more dependent on their husbands in society as their rights were restricted (McPhee 82). Especially in *bourgeois* culture, women were increasingly confined to a culture of domesticity and respectability, while working-class women were underpaid and disrespected (McPhee 193). This eventually created a deeply hierarchical society, in the sense of class and gender, which, through this, maintained strict social control, while it simultaneously rewarded individual achievement and wealth, fulfilling *bourgeois* promises of equal economy and labor.

In this construction of society, social mobility was primarily based on wealth, land ownership, state service, and education. For much of the century, land remained the primary source of wealth and status, as urban *bourgeoisie* and wealthy *peasants* could expand their holdings after the Revolution (McPhee 98). In the later years of the nineteenth century, education had become a potent engine of mobility as professionals emerged through the state education system (McPhee 246). Despite the promise of equality, social mobility was, of course, restricted by economic reality. Noble family networks still controlled the civil service and the church, and education was restricted by expensive fees, meaning the poor remained excluded from most engines of mobility (McPhee 111).

Compared to France, nineteenth-century England was characterized by a more intricate class structure, one that remained deeply dependent on birth, lineage, and social status. The three main classes — upper class, middle class, and working class — had complex hierarchical and relational subdivisions, which were strongly defined by a network of kinship, privilege, and landownership. The highest-ranked caste of the upper class was called the *aristocracy proper*, which entailed first and foremost the so-called *Peerage*, the approximately five hundred peers sitting in the House of Lords (Hewitt 307). The peers in themselves were again hierarchically structured through different titles, such as Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, Baron, and Lord.

Beyond those five hundred peers, the *aristocracy proper* included about two thousand titled families. The broader group of the upper class is referred to as the *landed gentry*, composed of squires and regional gentry, without title, who owned extensive landed estates and derived their status and income from those (Hewitt 307). The *landed gentry* were heavily involved in local governance and national politics throughout the nineteenth century, as they dominated magistrates' benches and even reached higher-ranked political offices in the parliament and the cabinet (Hewitt 313). The middle class composed itself of three main subdivisions: the upper middle class, the professional middle class, and the lower middle class. The upper middle class included rich merchants and industrial manufacturers (Hewitt 308). A sort of adjacent class of the upper middle class was called the professional middle class, which consisted of men drawing income from fees; these were mostly lawyers, doctors, estate managers, agents, government administrative advisors, and other employees of the upper classes (Hewitt 309). The lower middle class was made up of clerks and retailers (Hewitt 309). The *proletariat*, or working class, was the largest group, occupying stable employment in factories or workshops (Hewitt 308).

Alongside this class structure, the clergy and the military did not form independent classes but were deeply embedded within the social hierarchy of nineteenth-century England. Both members of the clergy and the military were split along hierarchical lines, with the higher-ranking positions being integrated into the *landed gentry* and the lower ranks being part of the middle and working classes. The position of a clergyman was first dependent on his denomination. While nonconformist ministers generally occupied the middle class, Anglican clergymen, members of the *Church of England*, were firmly rooted in the upper class (Spiers 81). The Anglican clergy's position in the upper class was mostly established because of a principle called *primogeniture*, in which younger sons of the upper class did not inherit the family estate and were then traditionally placed into clergy positions to maintain their status (Smith 337). Through this, they could effectively make a living through the right of patronage. The system of patronage was a cornerstone of the

Church of England and involved an upper-class member, such as a peer, to nominate a minister to a parish (Smith 337). As such, the rights to patronage were strongly dictated by influential families and upper-class members, providing primarily for their kin, the members of their own circle, or their political allies. (Smith 337). With a patronage came a so-called parsonage, a country residence, which was appointed to the clergyman as well as a permanent income. This made the position of a clergyman very attractive (Spiers 81). The same system applied to the establishment of the military, which was strictly divided by rank, mirroring the broader class structure of society (Spiers 81). Until 1871, the practice of purchasing commissions ensured access to high-ranking positions only to wealthy members of society, as their acquisition would involve high costs (Spiers 82). Even after its abolition, the army maintained exclusivity while also recruiting from elite schools (Spiers 82). Common soldiers, though, were mostly drawn from the working class, as many were driven to enlist in the army to maintain themselves in times of hunger or homelessness (Spiers 83). For those in high-ranking positions, the army provided access to a gentlemanly lifestyle, sharing similar status and authority with the *landed gentry*. This again ensured an acceptable position for younger sons of upper-class families.

Within this rigid system of class, social mobility was extremely restricted. Mobility within the upper class was limited, as most *peerages* were granted to established families. While it was occasionally possible for newly wealthy men to acquire substantial landed estates, enabling upward mobility from the upper middle class into the *landed gentry* (Hewitt 310). The most difficult form of mobility was any ascension from the working class to the middle class, as the rising capital requirements narrowed down the chances of mobility through work (Hewitt 310). The institution of marriage was an important tool in nineteenth-century England to maintain social status within the classes (Hewitt 316). Effectively, though, most mobility through marriage occurred in short social distances, where shared values made the union acceptable (Hewitt 316). This becomes a general theme, as most

mobility was happening in adjacent classes, underlining how constricted England's class dynamics really were.

In conclusion, while both France and England in the nineteenth century maintained deeply hierarchical societies in which class strongly shaped social relations and opportunities, their systems developed along markedly different lines. In France, the legacy of the Revolution fundamentally reconfigured social structures, replacing a legally defined order of estates with a class system increasingly based on wealth, property, and, in principle, merit. Although elements of the old elite persisted within the *Grands Notables*, power became more closely tied to economic influence and participation in state institutions, which also offered limited avenues for social mobility. In contrast, England's class structure evolved more gradually and retained a stronger foundation in birth, landownership, and inherited status. The dominance of the *aristocracy proper* and *landed gentry*, reinforced through institutions such as the Church and military, ensured the continuity of a highly stratified and socially intricate hierarchy. While both societies exhibited internal divisions and constraints on mobility, France projected an ideal of meritocratic advancement that was only partially realized in practice, whereas England maintained a more rigid and socially regulated system in which movement between classes was limited and typically confined to adjacent ranks.

Finally, building on the theoretical considerations of Chapter 1.2.1, the class structures of nineteenth-century France and England can be understood not as fixed or purely polarized systems, but as historically specific configurations that both reflect and complicate these models. While Marx's framework of *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat* provides a useful lens — particularly in identifying the growing importance of capital, wage labor, and class conflict in both societies — it proves insufficient to fully capture their internal complexity. As the preceding analysis has shown, both France and England were characterized by layered hierarchies and significant intermediate groups, whose positions align more closely with Erik Olin

Wright's concept of *contradictory class locations*. In France, the differentiation within the *bourgeoisie* and *peasantry*, as well as the role of state institutions in enabling mobility, illustrates a society in transition toward capitalist class relations, yet still marked by internal divisions and uneven access to power. Similarly, in England, the persistence of the upper classes alongside a highly stratified middle and working class reveals a system in which economic, social, and cultural forms of capital intersect, complicating any simple binary division. In both cases, the subdivisions of classes emerge not as an immaterial residue, as suggested by Marx, but as a central and dynamic component of the social structure, mediating between capital and labor while embodying the tensions and contradictions of a changing society. Thus, the comparison demonstrates that while class struggle remains a fundamental organizing principle, the lived reality of class in the nineteenth century was far more intricate, shaped by national histories, institutional frameworks, and the uneven development of capitalism.

1.2.5 Nineteenth-Century France and England: Tastes and Etiquette

Another fundamental organizing principle of class lies in its capacity to shape and regulate taste and etiquette, which in turn function as markers of social distinction, as previously discussed in relation to Bourdieu. In both France and England during the nineteenth century, notions of taste were highly codified and deeply embedded within class structures, ultimately informing the norms of social behavior and defining standards of conduct and propriety.

In nineteenth-century France, the *Grands Notables* and the *haute bourgeoisie* occupied a dominant position not only economically and politically, but also culturally, as they effectively established their own tastes as the social norm. Rooted in landed wealth and administrative authority, their cultural preferences functioned as markers of distinction and legitimacy (McPhee 121). This was evident in multiple aspects of their cultural taste, such as the realm of fashion, which represented wealth and social standing (McPhee 102), as well as in the arts and literature, where taste

conveyed intellectual refinement (McPhee 230-240). A defining feature, though, of upper-class *bourgeois* culture was its strong orientation toward consumerism, which became increasingly institutionalized with the rise of department stores in the late nineteenth century (McPhee 24-25). These spaces did not merely provide goods, but actively constructed and disseminated ideals of desirable lifestyles (McPhee 258-259). Consumption extended deeply into the domestic sphere, where art, furnishings, and design objects became essential markers of respectability and the proper moral order (McPhee 27).

Within this cultural framework, the *petite bourgeoisie* then sought to emulate the practices of the dominant classes, adopting similar patterns of consumption and decorum in an effort to assert their own social legitimacy. Like the upper classes, they viewed material possessions as expressions of status and adhered to strict codes of propriety (Felski 40). However, this process of imitation also reveals important distinctions. As Bourdieu argues, the *petite bourgeoisie* invested heavily in education as a means of social mobility, yet their relationship to cultural taste remained marked by uncertainty (Felski 40). Their understanding of culture and taste emphasized the morally uplifting and the educational, avoiding representations that were unpleasant or controversial. This orientation was often criticized by contemporary artists as conservative and inauthentic (Felski 40). This then reflects what Bourdieu conceptualizes as *allodoxia*. While the *Grands Notables*, *haute bourgeoisie*, and *petite bourgeoisie* may outwardly share similar tastes, the latter's lack of sufficient cultural capital limits their ability to fully appropriate their normative taste within the sphere of "high" culture. Consequently, their engagement with legitimate culture is shaped by a degree of anxiety, leading them to favor established, socially sanctioned forms of cultural consumption.

From these patterns of taste and consumption, specific norms of behavior emerged, further reinforcing and stabilizing class distinctions. The upper classes of *Grands Notables* and the *haute bourgeoisie* shifted toward privacy in public and had

a strong focus on decorum (McPhee 121-122). Furthermore, it was seen as proper etiquette to divide society into gendered spheres, where the public one was dominated by men and the domestic one was occupied by women, representing the impacts of the *Napoleonic Code* (McPhee 105). Their overall behavioral norms were dictated by hyper-specific rules of interaction, relying on an unwritten manual of manners, eventually distinguishing themselves even more from other classes (McPhee 121-122). The *petite bourgeoisie*, on the other hand, sought after social respectability, emphasizing order and discipline, with the intention of social mobility (McPhee 144). Their idea of proper etiquette was mostly concerned with discipline, hard work, and the maintenance of appearances (Felski 40). This further underlines the extreme pattern of emulation directed towards the upper classes, a defining feature of *petite bourgeois* life.

Taken together, these patterns of taste and etiquette illustrate how culture functioned as a central mechanism in the reproduction of class distinctions in nineteenth century France. While dominant groups such as the *Grands Notables* and the *haute bourgeoisie* established normative standards of refinement and legitimacy, other classes, specifically the *petite bourgeoisie*, often positioned themselves in relation to these ideals. In this way, cultural practices not only reflected existing social hierarchies but actively reinforced and reproduced them across everyday life.

Similarly, in nineteenth-century England, taste and etiquette functioned as intricate indicators of class distinction. As Martin Hewitt observes in his chapter “Class and the Classes” in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*: “class was a pervasive part of contemporaries’ world-view, and class distinctions were deeply embedded in the social fabric” (305). Among the upper classes, taste was closely tied to ideals of *connoisseurship*, which were themselves grounded in a classical education. Possessing knowledge of the “right” cultural forms, particularly classical languages, as well as canonical literature, served as an important marker of refinement (Pulham 450). This extended to the visual arts, where the ability to

discern aesthetic quality and historical authenticity distinguished the cultivated elite from the rest of society (Pulham 452). Within the *landed gentry*, specifically, rural pursuits further reinforced elite identity, linking taste to tradition, exclusivity, and inherited status (Croll 404). The middle classes, while similarly invested in the cultivation of taste, oriented their cultural practices more toward self-improvement and respectability. Leisure was expected to be purposeful, contributing to moral and intellectual development (Croll 403). In this way, patterns of taste across English society not only reflected differing material conditions but also reinforced the boundaries of class through distinct cultural norms.

These class-specific inclinations of taste were closely tied to distinct patterns of behavior and etiquette observable across the social hierarchy. As each class was expected to cultivate forms of leisure that reflected their particular taste, they were equally required to sustain their status through corresponding modes of conduct. For the upper class, whose identity was deeply rooted in tradition and exclusivity, this meant adhering to established codes of honour that defined what it meant to be “gentlemanly” (Williams 546). Taste alone was insufficient; taste had to be visibly enacted through practices such as conspicuous consumption and the cultivation of hospitality (D’Cruz 262). In this way, the display of refinement became a crucial means of reinforcing social rank. The middle classes, by contrast, oriented themselves more toward ideals of utility and self-improvement, grounding their respectability in civic responsibility and moral conduct (D’Cruz 264). At the same time, the middle classes were engaged in an ongoing process of social negotiation with the upper class, often aspiring toward assimilation (Hewitt 314). Members of the higher middle classes increasingly adopted the behavioral codes of the *landed elite*, aligning themselves with notions of gentility and moral authority (Hewitt 314-315).

Taken together, in nineteenth-century England, distinct patterns of taste and etiquette functioned as critical mechanisms for enforcing social boundaries, dividing

the upper-class focus on classical refinement and exclusivity from the middle-class emphasis on moral respectability. By constantly negotiating these cultural norms, both groups ensured that everyday behavior and leisure activities did not merely reflect material wealth, but actively reproduced and legitimized the existing class hierarchy.

Ultimately, the dynamics of taste and etiquette in both France and England can be more fully understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* and cultural capital. As Bourdieu suggests, class not only structures material conditions but also shapes the internalized dispositions that guide cultural preferences, social interactions, and everyday practices. In both national contexts, dominant groups, whether the *Grands Notables* and *haute bourgeoisie* in France or the *aristocracy proper* and *landed gentry* in England, possessed a high volume and advantageous composition of economic, social, and cultural capital, enabling them to impose their tastes and lifestyles as the standard of legitimacy. These norms, in turn, defined the boundaries of acceptable culture and reinforced social hierarchies. At the same time, the middle classes in both societies exemplify the tensions inherent in this system. Their aspiration toward cultural legitimacy, coupled with limited access to the full range of cultural capital, reflects Bourdieu's concept of *allodoxia*: a condition of cultural misrecognition marked by imitation, uncertainty, and a reliance on socially sanctioned forms of taste. Ultimately, the comparison demonstrates that culture in the nineteenth century functioned not merely as a reflection of class, but as an active and pervasive mechanism through which class distinctions were produced, negotiated, and maintained.

1.2.6 The Full Scope of Class and What It Means for Human Relationships

In conclusion, nineteenth-century class was not a fixed, rigid structure but a dynamic and relational system shaped by the unique political and economic developments of France and England. While the binary framework of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels remains essential for highlighting class struggle as a central

organizing force, it falls short of capturing the complexity of actual social formations. Instead, the persistence of numerous intermediate and subdivided groups aligns more closely with Erik Olin Wright's concept of *contradictory class locations*. This model reveals class as a system of overlapping positions, tensions, and constant negotiation, exemplified by the structural instability of the English middle class and the French *petite bourgeoisie* as they navigated their proximity to both capital and labor. At the same time, class operated far beyond mere material conditions; it was deeply embedded in culture, behavior, and everyday life. As Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* suggests, class distinctions were internalized and reproduced through taste, norms, and social practices, allowing dominant groups to legitimize their hierarchy as entirely natural. In both nations, these cultural mechanisms served to stabilize social structures, particularly through *allodoxia*, where the mistaken pursuit of status by lower classes paradoxically reinforced existing boundaries rather than creating actual mobility.

Ultimately, this reveals that human relationships in the nineteenth century could not be formed freely, but were deeply constrained by class structures, capitalist logics, and socially enforced norms of taste and behavioral etiquette. Interactions between individuals — whether in the workplace, the family, or throughout broader social life — were mediated by competition, aspirations for mobility, and the constant need to secure one's position within the hierarchy. In this sense, class did not merely organize society externally, but penetrated the very fabric of social relations, limiting relational autonomy and, in consequence, shaping how individuals understood themselves and others within a system defined by inequality and distinction.

1.3 Empathy, Its Limits, and a Philosophy of Human Relationships

On the basis of this research on class dynamics as a defining factor in the constellation of human relationships, the consideration of empathy emerges as an important topic. In an aim to explore the question of whether class dynamics and

social structures restrict the capacity for empathy, this chapter tries to first investigate a definition of empathy, its specific application, its sociological aspects and limitations, and finally arrives at the broader implications of human relationships.

1.3.1 A History of Empathy — The Question of the "Sixth Sense"

In order to clarify the understanding of empathy employed in this thesis, it is necessary to consider its historical development. The concept has long occupied philosophers and scholars, who have approached and defined it in a variety of ways. This chapter, therefore, seeks to examine whether empathy should be understood as an innate and automatic human capacity, a "sixth sense", or rather as an active process, involving a conscious choice to engage with and understand the experiences of others.

One of the earliest explorations of this topic can be found in Francis Hutcheson's *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*, where he writes about what he calls a moral sense found in all humans. He describes:

It remains then, "That as the Author of Nature has determin'd us to receive, by our external Senses, pleasant or disagreeable Ideas of Objects, according as they are useful or hurtful to our Bodys; and to receive from uniform Objects the Pleasures of Beauty and Harmony, to excite us to the Pursuit of Knowledge, and to reward us for it; or to be an Argument to us of his Goodness, as the Uniformity it self proves his Existence, whether we had a Sense of Beauty in Uniformity or not: in the same manner he has given us a Moral Sense, to direct our Actions and to give us still nobler Pleasures; so that while we are only intending the Good of others, we undesignedly promote our own greatest private Good" (99-100).

Consequently, Hutcheson assumes that all humans possess an innate sense of morality that allows them to perceive and value the actions of themselves and others. He also claims that this moral sense acts as a secret chain that connects each individual to the rest of mankind, in fact allowing us to feel a deep interest in the character and fortune of others. Furthermore, this moral sense is then tied to a feeling

of compassion, an instinct that makes one feel uneasy perceiving the misfortune of others, as it is one of the social affections the moral sense approves of (159). This sense of compassion, he argues, aims at relieving the sufferer from their pain, which they desire without any private good for themselves (160). Compassion to him is often expressed physically, in a tone he calls the voice of nature, entailing shrieks and groans, technically emitted from the body (160). Most importantly, he argues that this sense of compassion, the immediate physical reaction, is completely independent of education or customs; it is something of human nature (161). So, the important takeaway from Hutcheson as a starting point is that he assumes that there are innate, natural feelings of sensibility and compassion in each human being, connecting each individual, detached from education or norms.

Philosopher David Hume shares a similar viewpoint, as he, in his *Treatise of Human Nature Book II: The Passions*, proposes that humans have an innate sense of feeling towards one another (171). Instead of calling this compassion, he calls it sympathy. He argues that all humans are “prone to sympathize with others, to have their inclinations and sentiments passed on to us, even if they are quite different from or even contrary to our own“ (171). Sympathy, similar to Hutcheson’s theory, is to Hume a source of great uniformity, something that connects people more than any other aspect (171). He defines a very specific process for how sympathy is caused:

When a person x has a feeling that is passed on through sympathy to another person y, what y first knows about it are its effects, the external signs in x’s face and speech that convey to y an idea of the feeling (171).

This, in effect, creates an emotion so strong in person y that it becomes the very emotion of person y itself. It is an instant switch from the impression of another person’s misfortune into a feeling created in the observer of that said misfortune, which has a considerable influence on the observer (171). The phenomenon of sympathy is rooted in the fact that all human beings are alike in many qualities, such as our bodily expression, meaning one can recognize someone’s emotions physically.

Not only similar physicality but also the structure of each individual's mind creates a unique parallel in all humans (172). Hume also argues, though, that the sensation of sympathy is not only created through that strong resemblance every human has with one another, but can be influenced more so by vicinity, family bonds, or friendships (173). He concludes: "When all these relations are combined, they produce in our consciousness the strongest and liveliest conception of the sentiments or passions of others" (173).

Adam Smith, on the other hand, adds another layer to the phenomenon of sympathy. In his work *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he argues for the importance of imagination. As one has no immediate experience of what others feel, one has to feel oneself into the situation of the other person. Imaginatively, one becomes the other person, feeling their emotions, allowing one to understand the other person (4). The importance, though, as Smith points out, derives not from the visible emotion of the other person, but from the perception of the situation, which creates the emotion (5). So to say, one imagines rather what oneself would feel like in another person's situation, than trying to imagine the exact feeling of that person (7).

During the late 19th century, German theorist Robert Vischer introduced the term *Einfühlung*, literally meaning feeling into, which he describes as "a displacement of oneself into another body or environment, which is aimed at understanding how it feels to be in that other body or environment" (Ganczarek 141). To feel into someone, this person does not have to be physically present, but can also be imagined. Consequently, *Einfühlung* involves imaginary bodily perspective taking (Ganczarek 141). With this, Vischer distinguishes *Einfühlung* from *Mitgefühl* (sympathy), distinguishing feeling into and feeling with from each other. In 1909, Edward Titchener would eventually translate *Einfühlung* into the English word *empathy*, coining the term internationally (Ganczarek 141). Titchener's primary definition of empathy derived from what he called the experience of kinesthetic

activation towards a visual image or a concept (Asiain 25). Furthermore, he believed the mind to behave similarly to a muscle, reacting to various emotions:

Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness, but I feel or act them in the mind's muscles. This is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*; there is nothing curious or idiosyncratic about it, but it is a fact that must be mentioned (Asiain 28).

What emerges from this survey is that, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sympathy was largely understood as an innate human faculty, a kind of “sixth sense” that guided individuals toward moral judgment. In Hutcheson’s and Hume’s perception, sympathy operates almost instinctively, independent of social structures, education, or cultural norms, suggesting a universal basis for human connection. Adam Smith introduces terminology that does imply a process of action; it is the imagination of a situation, and not just an immediate feeling. With the later distinction between sympathy and empathy, however, the question arises whether empathy can likewise be considered an inherent human quality, or whether it is better understood as an active process.

Scholar Heidi Maibom argues for both. In her book *Empathy*, she argues that the capacity for empathy can be found in all human beings, grounded in both biological and evolutionary processes. Phenomena such as mimicry and emotional contagion, alongside empathy itself, can be traced back to fundamental survival mechanisms that enabled coordinated group responses to danger (64). Maibom further shows that emotional sensitivity to others emerges very early in human development, already observable in infancy (53). From a neuroscientific perspective, she explains that the human brain contains a specialized network for empathy, creating a form of shared coding that allows individuals to map the emotions of others onto their own neural systems in a largely automatic way (136). This would suggest an understanding of empathy as an innate capacity, situating it within the broader tradition of thought already outlined.

Maibom, though, complicates the notion of empathy by introducing a crucial distinction between its automatic and its reflective forms. On the one hand, she identifies a basic, instinctive level of response, what she terms emotional contagion, where an individual unconsciously mirrors the feelings of another (8). Building on this, she defines affective empathy as a more developed form of this process, one that involves not only emotional mirroring but also an awareness of the distinction between self and other (171). In this sense, affective empathy is characterized by genuine emotional resonance: one does not merely observe another's feelings but comes to share them in an immediate and embodied way. On the other hand, Maibom outlines a second dimension of empathy that is less about feeling and more about understanding: cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy centers on the intellectual capacity to grasp another person's emotional state (172). Rather than arising automatically, it requires an active, imaginative effort to reconstruct another's situation and to comprehend why they feel as they do. In contrast to affective empathy's emotional immediacy, cognitive empathy operates as a reflective and interpretive process, grounded in reasoning rather than shared feeling.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a gradual shift in the understanding of empathy. Whereas Hutcheson and Hume conceive of sympathy as an innate and largely automatic human faculty grounded in shared sensibility, Smith introduces a more active dimension by emphasizing imagination and the effort of placing oneself within another's situation. Vischer's concept of *Einfühlung* further develops this movement from feeling *with* another toward feeling *into* another, foregrounding perspective-taking as a means of understanding experiences beyond one's own. Maibom ultimately synthesizes these traditions by demonstrating that empathy encompasses both an affective and a cognitive dimension: it is rooted in an innate capacity for emotional responsiveness, yet also requires reflective interpretation and conscious engagement. What can be concluded is that empathy may be innate to humans, but it is neither purely automatic nor purely voluntary. Instead, it operates along a spectrum. As such, empathy becomes variable and context-dependent, shaped by knowledge, attention, and the willingness to understand another person's situation

rather than merely their emotional state. This introduces an important limitation to the concept: while the capacity for empathy may be innate, its realization depends upon conscious participation and interpretive effort. Through this, it can be assumed that the practice of empathy can be destabilized or influenced by various external forces. Investigating these influences and the limitations they impose provides the critical framework needed to establish the working definition of empathy for this thesis.

1.3.2 The Limits of Empathy — How Society Can Affect Empathic Capacity

The realization that empathy can depend on conscious participation and the effort of taking another's perspective raises the question whether said participation and effort can be influenced or restricted by external factors, such as societal structures. Many philosophers and scholars have talked about the impact of society on the individual. One of them has been Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality among Men*, Rousseau states:

Just like the statue of Glaucus, which time, the sea, and tempests have so disfigured that it looks less like a god than a ferocious animal, the human soul, altered in the bosom of society by a thousand causes constantly renewed, by the acquisition of a multitude of knowledge and mistakes, by the changes which have taken place in the constitution of the body, and by the constant shock of the passions, has, so to speak, changed its appearance to the point where it is almost impossible to recognize (Rousseau).

A driving force in his argumentation on why the human is altered through society is his differentiation of *amour propre* and *amour de soi*. He argues that *amour de soi*, the love of oneself, is a natural feeling that can be found in every animal, seeking the preservation of the self, which eventually produces humanity and virtue through being modified by pity. He states:

It is pity which inclines us to help those we see suffering, without reflecting about it, and which, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, morals, and virtue, with this advantage no one is tempted to disobey its soft voice. It is pity which will make

every robust savage turn away from robbing a weak child or an infirm old man of the sustenance he has acquired with difficulty, if he himself has hopes of being able to find his own somewhere else. It is pity which, in the place of this sublime maxim of rational justice. *Do to others what you wish others to do to you* inspires in all men this other maxim of natural goodness, much less perfect than the preceding one, but perhaps more useful: *Do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others* (Rousseau).

Eventually, this concept of pity contributes to the mutual preservation of humanity, ultimately closely resembling the previously established idea of empathy. *Amour propre*, or self-love, on the other hand, he describes as an artificial feeling, which is born in society, influencing individuals to think of themselves as more important than others, eventually inspiring the evil in men (Rousseau). Society and the inherent inequality it produces become the permeating structures, differentiating the love for ourselves from self-love.

One central aspect of the decisive turning point in human social development, he explains, is the emergence of property. Property has marked the transition from relatively equal natural existence to structured inequality. Once land becomes divided, notions of ownership arise, followed by early forms of justice that depend on recognizing each person's "own" share. However, this also introduces foresight, competition, and fear of loss: individuals begin to compare themselves, anticipate harm from others, and protect what they possess (Rousseau). From this point, inequality no longer remains purely natural but becomes socially produced and increasingly entrenched. Differences in skill, strength, and intelligence begin to translate into material disparities, which then solidify into lasting hierarchies of wealth and power (Rousseau). As these inequalities deepen, human relations become increasingly mediated by comparison and competition rather than direct need or natural pity (Rousseau). Crucially, Rousseau argues that this new social order also transforms human psychology: individuals begin to care not only about being, but about appearing, leading to the rise of self-love over the love of oneself (Rousseau).

This creates a world structured around performance, status, and appearance, in which authenticity is gradually displaced by the demands of social display. Within such a framework, the capacity or inclination to feel pity, or more so, empathize with others seems to diminish.

Similarly, contemporary scholar Sara Ahmed argues for the important role of society in influencing an individual's emotions, or, more precisely, for how the individual and society are mutual components of an emotional movement. In *The Social Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed argues that emotions are neither an internal, subjective feeling expressed outwardly nor an imposed entity produced by a pre-existing social body. Instead, she suggests something more radical: emotions actually create the boundaries between inside and outside, between self and others, in the first place. She states that emotions emerge in the interactions between bodies, objects, and social contexts, letting individuals form a sense of "I" and "We" (10). This argumentation also strongly impacts the way she sees empathy. She argues that individuals live with and beside each other, but they are never one with each other (39). Because of this, she calls empathy a "wish-feeling"; it is wanting to feel something that is shrouded in mystery, something unlivable for another person (30). In effect, empathy sustains the difference it tries to overcome: "empathy remains a 'wish feeling', in which subjects 'feel' something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels" (30). This limitation arises from the fact that empathy, after Ahmed, is always conditioned by the subject's prior opinion toward the other's experience (41). In other words, empathy is never immediate or unmediated, but is shaped by one's own perceptions, assumptions, and affective responses. This insight is closely tied to Ahmed's notion of different "bodily worlds," which are produced through histories of power and inequality. These worlds structure how individuals experience and interpret emotions, creating divisions that cannot simply be bridged through acts of imagination or identification (37). As a result, the capacity to truly feel what another person feels is inherently restricted, since one cannot fully inhabit the conditions that give rise to the other's experience.

Furthermore, this works in coherence with Ahmed's theory of *stickiness*. She argues that *stickiness* is a result of history, the way that bodies, objects, and signs have been related to certain affects and emotions (90). If a body, she states, has been touched over time by a specific affect like hate or disgust, it makes it appear as an inherent quality to that body, something that sticks to it (91). The concept of *stickiness* can specifically be seen in class, in the way emotions often stick to bodies to secure social hierarchies. With this, class positions are transformed into seemingly inherent traits of one body. What she essentially argues is that the way upper-class people feel about lower-class people creates an emotion that eventually, over time, will stick to lower-class bodies. This creates distance and seals class positions through a refusal of emotional contact (88-89). A specific example of Ahmed's is the figure of the ordinary worker. She states that the label of ordinary sticks to specific class figures like the worker, the housewife, or the farmer (42). This reinforces their position and also creates whole groups of people who have the same label or emotion stuck to them. Inversely, the upper class has the emotion of happiness stuck to them, which then reinforces their positions in society, while simultaneously taking away the class antagonisms they represent (228). What Ahmed, in summary, argues is that *stickiness* allows class to be felt as a bodily reality, reinforcing the notion that empathy can only be limited in a system that pre-describes labels and emotions to people. Empathy, then, marks not the overcoming of distance, but its persistence: it gestures toward connection while simultaneously exposing the gap between subjects. In this sense, empathy cannot function as a universal bridge to mutual understanding, but must be understood as a socially conditioned and ultimately partial form of relation, shaped and limited by the structures in which it takes place.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that empathy is neither purely innate nor entirely reliable as a mode of human connection. Rather, it is historically contingent, socially conditioned, and structurally limited. While it may create moments of perceived closeness, it cannot fully overcome the divisions produced by

inequality, power, and differing lived experiences. Ultimately, this points to a broader conclusion central to the thesis: human relationships, and even the capacity to feel for one another, are not always free or genuine, but are deeply embedded in and constrained by the social and economic systems in which they are formed.

1.3.3 A Philosophy of Human Relationships

A central dimension of empathy lies in its grounding in human relationships; however, this relation is not one-directional. Just as empathy shapes how individuals engage with others, the structure and conditions of human relationships themselves fundamentally influence the possibility and form of empathy. How subjects relate to one another is not neutral, but is shaped by the social structures examined throughout this thesis. This subsection, therefore, turns to philosophical conceptions of human relationships to examine how they are constituted, complicated, and constrained by said factors. Furthermore, it aims to investigate how individual behavior within them is shaped by broader societal conditions, ultimately revealing how these conditions also delimit the scope of empathy itself.

One important theory to consider when analyzing problems in human relationships is Martin Buber's *I-Thou theory*. Buber offers a useful framework for thinking about how individuals actually encounter one another. Within this theory, he distinguishes between *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships. Focusing on the ethical dimension of his thought, rather than its theological implications, Buber is concerned with a distinctly modern condition: the increasing tendency to relate to others not as subjects, but as objects (Charmé 162). The *I-Thou* relationship describes an encounter in which the other is recognized as a full, irreducible subject (162). It is characterized by openness, reciprocity, and a form of attentiveness that closely resembles what can be understood as empathy (168). Central to this relation is what Buber calls "imagining the real", which he defines as: "to imagine what another person is wishing, feeling, perceiving and thinking, not as an abstraction but as the other person lives it" (170). In this sense, the *I-Thou* relation aligns with forms of

cognitive empathy, requiring an active, imaginative engagement with the other. In contrast, the *I-It* relationship reduces the other to an object of use, knowledge, or control. Here, individuals are approached in terms of their function, value, or utility, rather than their subjectivity (170). This mode of relation reflects the broader social structures outlined earlier: systems shaped by competition, property, and instrumental rationality, in which individuals come to view both themselves and others through the lens of performance and exchange (170). The *I-It* relation thus mirrors a social world in which empathy is not fully absent, but subordinated and used selfishly, limited by the very frameworks that prioritize efficiency, hierarchy, and self-interest.

This shift resonates strongly with the dynamics described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, where social inequality, comparison, and the rise of *amour propre* transform authentic human connection into performance and self-interest. Within such a world, relationships are no longer grounded in immediate, affective responsiveness, but are filtered through utility, status, and appearance. Buber conceptualizes this tension through these two fundamental modes of relation. Read together, Buber's distinction reinforces the argument that the quality of human relationships, and with it, the possibility of empathy, is not simply a matter of individual disposition, but is deeply conditioned by social structures. Thus, Ahmed's concept of "different bodily worlds" can be applied to Buber, as it suggests that subjects do not encounter each other from neutral positions, but from historically and socially produced locations that shape what can be perceived, felt, and understood. From this perspective, even Buber's idea of "imagining the real" remains constrained, since the capacity to imagine another's experience is already mediated by one's own affective and social positioning. Empathy thus becomes less a transparent bridge between selves and more a negotiated and limited movement within structurally unequal and emotionally differentiated worlds. The prevalence of *I-It* relations suggests that empathic encounters are increasingly constrained. Empathy, in this sense, remains possible, but is complicated in the prevailing systems of society.

Within these constrained relational frameworks, attention must also be given to how individuals act within them. One key dynamic that complicates human relationships, particularly in terms of how subjects position themselves in relation to others, is what Jean-Paul Sartre describes as *bad faith*. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir argue that *bad faith* reflects a broader inauthenticity embedded in social life, where individuals define themselves through external expectations rather than genuine self-understanding. It is not merely a private illusion, but a mode of being shaped by social norms that prioritize performance, utility, and self-interest (“bad faith”). In this sense, *bad faith* also affects human relationships: rather than engaging with others as equally free subjects, individuals become preoccupied with maintaining their own position, treating both themselves and others as fixed roles or functions.

Building on Rousseau’s account of the transformation of the self through society, Sartre’s concept of *bad faith* can be understood as an expression of a loss of authenticity. Where Rousseau locates the origin of inauthenticity in the rise of *amour propre*, a socially mediated engagement with the self grounded in comparison, status, and appearance, Sartre similarly describes a condition in which individuals fail to confront the truth of their own existence. Rather than acknowledging their freedom and responsibility, they retreat into socially prescribed roles and identities (“bad faith”). Within such a framework, human relationships become constrained, as

interactions are no longer grounded in genuine mutual recognition, but in socially conditioned roles, expectations, and self-serving performances.³

Taken together, this chapter shows that empathy thus emerges not as a fixed “sixth sense,” but as a process that is both embodied and reflective, and therefore inherently variable. This variability becomes more pronounced once social structures are taken into account. Rousseau demonstrates how the rise of inequality and *amour propre* transforms natural pity into socially mediated self-interest, displacing immediate responsiveness with comparison, performance, and competition. Ahmed extends this insight by arguing that emotions themselves produce the boundaries between self and other, such that empathy does not simply overcome distance but is responsible for maintaining it. Her notion of “bodily worlds” makes clear that individuals encounter one another from unequal, historically shaped positions, thereby limiting what can be felt and understood. These constraints are reflected in the structure of human relationships. Buber’s distinction between *I–Thou* and *I–It* reveals that genuine, empathic encounters depend on a form of recognition that is increasingly difficult to sustain within a social world governed by hierarchy. Sartre’s concept of *bad faith* further shows how individuals internalize these conditions, retreating into socially prescribed roles that undermine authentic relations. Empathy, therefore, appears a fragile and mediated practice, one that gestures toward connection while remaining bound by the social and structural conditions that limit it. Human relationships, and the capacity to feel for others within them, are thus neither genuine nor free, but fundamentally shaped by the inequalities and frameworks in which they unfold.

³ When referring to genuine mutual recognition, this thesis does not suggest that individuals within a class system are incapable of recognizing one another altogether. Rather, it argues that social roles can restrict the ability to recognize the person beyond those roles. Within class-based societies, individuals are often acknowledged and valued according to their position, function, and contribution to the social order. As established throughout this thesis, people derive meaning and identity through their relationships to others within systems of class and labor. However, when individuals become primarily defined by socially prescribed roles, they risk losing a connection to aspects of the self that exist beyond those roles. If a person is unable to relate authentically to themselves outside the identities imposed by society, their capacity to relate authentically to others is similarly constrained. Consequently, relationships become mediated by social expectations, status, and function rather than by genuine recognition of another person’s individuality. It is under these conditions that empathy becomes restricted, as individuals engage less with one another as unique subjects and more as occupants of socially defined positions.

For the purposes of this thesis, empathy is consequently understood as an embodied and interpretive process through which individuals emotionally resonate with and imaginatively reconstruct the experiences of others. This thesis assumes that, while rooted in an innate capacity for affective responsiveness, empathy requires conscious engagement, making it inherently vulnerable to, and shaped by, the individual's social context. Consequently, it is bound by history, inequality, and social relations. Furthermore, it is argued that empathy depends on how individuals encounter one another. Through mutual objectification and inauthentic self-understanding, empathy is severely limited, as the ability to see and respond to others as full subjects is not given.

2. Between Worlds: Class and Empathy in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*

Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* centers on the lives and relationships of the Bennet family within the rural English gentry at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The narrative focuses in particular on Elizabeth Bennet, one of five sisters of the Bennet family, as she navigates the social expectations placed upon women, especially the pressure to secure a financially and socially advantageous marriage. The story develops through a sequence of social encounters, misunderstandings, and shifting relationships among a small circle of characters connected by courtship and family ties. Because of the novel's strong emphasis on class and social relationships, it is an ideal text through which to examine the thesis of this master's dissertation via close reading.

Consequently, this second chapter aims to apply the previously explored theory to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to argue why and how certain characters' capacity for empathy is constrained by the social construction of class in the lived reality of nineteenth-century England. To conduct this analysis, the central characters and families in the novel will first be situated within their broader class context, with particular attention to their social standing, tastes, and manners. The chapter will then

focus on selected characters and examine how each of them engages with these aspects of class and etiquette, and how, in turn, they form human connections and self-perception under these conditions. Through a close reading of key scenes, it will ultimately be demonstrated how these characters fail to display empathy toward others within the narrative, as well as the underlying reasons for this limitation, finally arguing for a social conditioning of empathy.

2.1 Austen's Social World: The Influences of Class and Taste

This subchapter will establish the analytical background by reconstructing the novel's social world in terms of class structure. It will first situate the central families and characters within their respective class positions, with particular attention to their social standing, cultural tastes, and codes of etiquette. Building on this foundation, the subchapter will then narrow its focus to three key figures: Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Caroline Bingley, and Lydia Bennet. Furthermore, it will then be examined how each of them embodies, negotiates, or reflects these class-related categories within the narrative, as "Society has claims on us all; [...]" (Austen 8).

2.1.1 Mapping Class in *Pride and Prejudice*

The social world of *Pride and Prejudice* is structured by a complex, highly stratified system of class relations, in which landownership, wealth, profession, and lineage determine both social standing and individual lives. While class can be broadly understood as a system of hierarchy and opposition, the society represented in the novel resists any simple polarization into dominant and subordinate groups. Instead, it reveals a layered structure permeated by intermediate positions, with a particular focus on those of the *landed gentry* and the professional middle class. These positions are not fixed but often marked by internal tensions, as individuals may simultaneously depend on existing hierarchies while striving to improve their place within them. Class thus emerges not only as a structural condition but as a relational and dynamic process, shaping interactions, ambitions, and perceptions. To

further showcase this, it is important to situate the most important families and individuals of the narrative within the class structure of nineteenth-century England.

The Bennet family occupies a relatively modest position within the *landed gentry*. As the owner of the Longbourn estate and his descent from a landowning family, Mr. Bennet and his family derive their status from generational landownership, which continues to function as the primary marker of legitimacy despite the growing importance of commercial wealth in nineteenth-century Britain. Mr. Bennet's income of £2,000 a year secures social recognition but does not allow for significant economic flexibility, placing the family near the lower end of the gentry (Sönderström 8). Originating from a family of attorneys from the professional middle-class, Mrs. Bennet attains the status of the *landed gentry* through her marriage to Mr. Bennet. Their marriage, though, also links the family to the sphere of the lower classes, as they maintain social ties to her middle-class relatives, the Philips and the Gardiners.

A more secure and elevated position within the same social class is occupied by Mr. Darcy. As a wealthy landowner with an income of approximately £10,000 per year (Sönderström 8) and the proprietor of Pemberley, in which he seasonally resides with his sister Georgina, he represents the upper tier of the *landed gentry*. His status is further reinforced by his familial connection to the aristocracy through Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who is his aunt on his mother's side and the daughter of a Lord, embedding him within a network of inherited privilege and social authority.

The Bingley family, by contrast, exemplifies a form of upward mobility made possible through the expansion of commercial wealth. Their fortune, derived from Mr. Bingley's father's success in trade, which reflects the broader economic transformations of the period, in which industrialization and imperial markets created new opportunities for accumulation. After his father's death, Mr. Bingley inherited a large sum of around £100,000. However, the Bingleys' position remains transitional.

Without land, their status lacks the cultural legitimacy associated with the gentry, prompting the need to convert economic capital into landed property. Charles Bingley's residence at Netherfield, therefore, was rooted in his intention to purchase an estate (Austen 15). This further illustrates his family's process of social ascension. Charles Bingley, at the beginning of the novel, is unattached and in search of a wife, which he eventually finds in Jane Bennet. While Mr. Bingley's sister, Louisa, is already married to a fashionable Londoner called Mr. Hurst, Caroline Bingley, throughout the novel, tries to attach herself to Mr. Darcy to further secure her new positioning within the *landed gentry*.

The Lucas family occupies a similarly intermediate position, though with more limited prospects for advancement. Sir William Lucas also earned money through trade, but it was his knighthood, acquired through civic service, that elevated the family's status (Austen 18). This, though, without fully integrating them into the established elite, as his title is not hereditary and does not secure the family's generational status, as he has no male heirs. Their daughter Charlotte Lucas's being unmarried at an advanced age further creates tension in their standing.

Individual figures such as Mr. Collins and Mr. Wickham further deepen the social landscape. Mr. Collins, as both the only male heir to the Bennets' Longbourn estate and a clergyman under the patronage of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, occupies a position that combines dependence and authority. His role as the only male heir to Longbourn places him in a position of power. His position within the Church of England makes him dependent on Lady Catherine de Bourgh through the system of patronage. Both these connections, though, place him within a structure closely aligned with the *landed elite*, as he is promised land through the fixed inheritance and receives a guaranteed income and parsonage through the patronage. This renders him an eligible man. Still, his lack of independent generational wealth and status makes him socially subordinate to other men of the *landed gentry*. This dual positioning reflects the broader phenomenon of *contradictory class locations*, in which individuals may simultaneously exercise power and remain dependent on

higher authorities. Mr. Wickham, the son of the steward at Pemberley, is the godson of the late Mr. Darcy, who had intended to provide for his education and establish him as a clergyman at the Pemberley parish. However, after receiving financial support from the new Mr. Darcy, Wickham failed to invest the money in his promised education and instead spent it on a lavish lifestyle. Following the collapse of his attempt to elope with Georgiana Darcy, he eventually joined the military. Lacking generational wealth, he struggled to sustain the expenses associated with army life. His lack of land and financial security undermines his social standing. His ability to perform the manners of a gentleman allows him temporary mobility, but this status remains fragile and ultimately unsustainable.

Taken together, these character constellations showcase a social order defined not by rigid divisions alone, but by gradations, dependencies, and ongoing negotiations of status. Class in *Pride and Prejudice* thus operates as a dynamic and relational system, in which social position is fixed, changed, or contradictory through the continuous interplay of inheritance, wealth, and connections. As Wright has argued before, though, class is not only bound by these factors; it is also bound by gender, which in the case of *Pride and Prejudice* is an important factor.

2.1.2 The Economy of Marriage

The position of the female characters in the novel has to be understood within a broader framework of gendered class relations, in which women outside the labor force occupy an extremely dependent position. As previously established, the position of the women, excluded from the labor force, is aligned with the class position of their husbands, since their material conditions are derived from their husbands' income. Within the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, this applies to all female characters as their class position derives first from their fathers' heritage, status, and wealth, and then from their husbands. This is further intensified through the women's exclusion from inheritance and their lack of independent economic means. Their social and economic futures are thus fundamentally relational. Within this

framework, marriage emerges not only as a social expectation but as a necessary mechanism for securing stability and status. As Austen states:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering the neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters (3).

Personal relationships are consequently transformed into sites of negotiation, where considerations of class, security, and mobility take precedence. This condition fosters a pervasive sense of competition, as both individuals and families seek to improve or at least maintain their position within the social hierarchy. Courtship, therefore, becomes a strategic process shaped by economic and social calculation rather than purely emotional attachment.

This becomes evident in several moments throughout the novel, one of the clearest being Mr. Collins's proposal to Elizabeth. As a newly appointed clergyman, Mr. Collins is encouraged by Lady Catherine de Bourgh to marry, as doing so is considered proper and expected for a man in his position (106-107). Since he is also the future heir to the Bennet estate, he decides that marrying one of the Bennet daughters would be an appropriate and practical arrangement. However, when he proposes to Elizabeth, and she repeatedly refuses him in a polite but firm manner, he dismisses her objections and continues to argue insistently in favor of the marriage, stating:

[...] — It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy of your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable. My situation in life, my connections with the family De Bourgh, and my relationship to your own, are circumstances highly in my favour; and you should take it into farther consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is not by means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made to you. Your portion is unhappily so

small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to usual practice of elegant females (109).

What becomes visible here is the strong emphasis placed by Mister Collins on property, social connections, and status in relation to marriage. Marriage is not primarily understood as an emotional union, but rather as a social and economic arrangement through which individuals secure or improve their position within society. As a result, it takes on the character of a negotiation, deeply shaped by class anxiety — specifically related to propriety — and the constant desire for stability and social security.

Not only is marriage in the novel about negotiation between individuals who aim to marry, but the aspect of marriage and security also produces competition between different families and individuals who seek security through marriage. This, most prominently, is seen through the character of Mrs. Bennet, who is constantly anxious about the future marriages of her daughters. She states: “If I can but see one of my daughters happily settled at Netherfield, [...], and all the others equally well married, I shall have nothing to wish for“ (9). As the mother of five daughters, with the pressure of losing the estate after Mr. Bennet’s death, Mrs. Bennet is constantly preoccupied with marrying off her daughters. This constant pressure fosters a sense of competition in her, especially regarding Mrs. Lucas, who is in a similar position. When Elizabeth declines Mr. Collins’ proposal, Charlotte, Mrs. Lucas’ daughter, accepts Mr. Collins hand in marriage out of practical reasoning, as she thinks “[...] my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state“ (126). This triggers what has always been an underlying pattern of competition between Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Lucas, as she managed to marry off her daughter to a respectable man, while Mrs. Bennet is still struggling to ensure her daughters’ status and future. It is described: “Lady Lucas could not be insensible of triumph on being able to retort on Mrs Bennet the comfort of having a daughter well

married; and she called at Longbourn rather oftener than usual to say how happy she was, [...]“ (128). This was met by sour looks and ill-natured remarks on Mrs. Bennet’s end (128). This example makes it visible that the issue of marriage, or more so the underlying pressure of securing a stable future and respectable status, creates competition between the characters of the novel.

This anxiety surrounding marriage is something that permeates every character of the novel and is one of the strongest indicators of how class and the anxiety to remain within a certain respectable status are represented in this novel. It is the foundation of constant competition as it represents the struggle of class mobility, fostering a need to self-optimize and leading to an individualist, selfish mindset, which impacts all human relationships and the character’s behavior. This, therefore, correlates with Buber’s I-It relationship model. As previously explained, in an I-It relationship, one reduces another individual to an object of use rather than seeing them as a fully recognized human being. The anxiety about marriage, and therefore the one about standing, propriety, and social mobility, fosters strong I-It relationships between the characters, as they approach one another in terms of function, value, and utility, without concern for their subjective, personal values. Within this system, one can notice a general decline of I-Thou relationships, as the concern for personal compatibility and character is fundamentally diminished to succeed in the establishment of class. With this framework in mind, it becomes evident that human relationships in *Pride and Prejudice*, at their core, are inherently emotionally constrained as they are deeply permeated by anxiety, practicality, and negotiation of class and status, disregarding personal truths and emotional dispositions.

The dynamics surrounding marriage, status, and social mobility, though, not only shape the economic life-realities of the characters but also deeply influence their everyday behavior and interactions. Because social status in *Pride and Prejudice* is constantly negotiated through these explored conditions, meaning marriage, inheritance, and family connections, class becomes embedded in the characters’ manners, judgments, and ways of relating to others. It is therefore necessary to look

more closely at how the idea of class manifests in everyday interactions and etiquette throughout the novel, which will be explored in the following chapter.

2.1.3 Another Kind of Class Struggle — Behavior in the Pursuit of Status

In *Pride and Prejudice*, class, inheritance, and social status fundamentally shape not only individual life realities and futures but also cultural etiquette and how characters interact with one another. To maintain status within the system, the characters follow a very strict sense of ideas about behavioral etiquette and cultural norms, the so-called *habitus*, formed by their class system. Further, social position is closely tied to land, wealth, and lineage, and because it can mostly be maintained or improved through strategic marriage, relationships become structured by calculation, competition, and self-interest. The constant need to secure or preserve status transforms social behavior into a form of negotiation, where individuals assess others in terms of their behavior as well as their potential advantage. As a result, personal interactions are deeply influenced by the pressures of class mobility and the fear of social decline. This fosters particular forms of behavior that are especially visible in characters associated with the upper ranks of the *landed gentry* and aristocracy, most notably Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Caroline Bingley, but also within the Bennet family itself, particularly in the character of Lydia Bennet, all of whom this chapter seeks to examine.

As the highest-ranking character in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine de Bourgh embodies the values of an aristocratic social order grounded in tradition, propriety, and rigid codes of etiquette. Her elevated status not only shapes her own conduct but also influences the manner in which she engages with individuals she considers socially inferior. Her attitudes toward those beneath her are consistently articulated through a language of social distinction and authority. This can be seen on multiple occasions, but most specifically in the second part of the novel, when Elizabeth is invited to join her for tea and dinner at Rosings while visiting Charlotte in her new household after her marriage to Mr. Collins. In preparation for the visit, Mr. Collins consoles Elizabeth on her dress choices, as he says, “Lady Catherine will

not think the worse of you for being dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved“ (163). Furthermore, it is described how the first encounters are defined by propriety and performance, demanding a certain etiquette from her visitors (163-165). Elizabeth notes: “[...] that nothing was beneath this great Lady’s attention, which could furnish her with an occasion of dictating others“ (165). In direct conversation with Elizabeth, Lady Catherine de Bourgh emerges as a representative of the prevailing cultural *habitus*, particularly in how she expresses judgments about the Bennets’ education and upbringing. It becomes visible how Lady Catherine de Bourgh’s understanding of social difference is closely tied to expectations of cultivated taste and culturally recognized forms of distinction. She begins by asking about Elizabeth’s abilities in music and drawing, then moves on to questions about her education and whether she had a governess. When Elizabeth denies having received such training, Lady Catherine de Bourgh is visibly shocked and immediately assumes that this must indicate neglect in her upbringing (166-167).

Taking into account Bourdieu’s perspective, this moment shows how cultural capital works. Skills such as music, drawing, and formal education are not treated as neutral abilities, but as markers of class position that signal whether someone has been properly socialized into elite norms. What Lady Catherine de Bourgh takes for granted is a form of embodied cultural capital that, as in nineteenth-century England more broadly, is strongly linked to ideas of refinement, classical education, and appropriate leisure practices. Lady Cathrine de Bourgh is not only assessing Elizabeth’s skills, but also whether her background aligns with the cultivated standards of the elite. Elizabeth’s lack of these markers is therefore not read as a neutral difference in experience, but as a deviation from what the *habitus*, constructed by the aristocracy, defines as proper formation. This is furthermore seen in her reaction to Elizabeth’s remark that all the Bennet sisters are simultaneously “out” in society (167). While Elizabeth defends this practice as a form of equality among the sisters, Lady Catherine de Bourgh responds with shock and disapproval,

interpreting it as a clear breach of proper social etiquette and an inappropriate disregard for established norms of conduct (167-168).

What conversations like these show is how human interactions between classes can function as sites where taste, education, and etiquette are evaluated and hierarchically compared, allowing upper-class authority to assert itself as culturally superior. Through questioning and correcting Elizabeth, Lady Catherine de Bourgh reaffirms distinctions between social groups by framing differences in upbringing and conduct as signs of refinement or deficiency. In this way, conversation becomes a subtle form of class competition, where judgments of behavior and cultural capital are used to maintain boundaries and reinforce the perceived legitimacy of aristocratic status.

This way of interaction is further enhanced and questioned by the narrative techniques used in this scene. The incorporation of satirical language exposes the absurdity of Lady Catherine's confidence in her own judgment, particularly when she presents socially constructed norms of education, accomplishment, and etiquette as universal standards. While the free indirect discourse further highlights Elizabeth's skeptical perspective, the narrative maintains a conscious distance from Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself by limiting access to her inner thoughts, which strengthens the inherently critical representation of her character. Consequently, Austen not only depicts the operation of *habitus* but also formally challenges the legitimacy of the aristocratic values that Lady Catherine seeks to uphold.

Similar behavior can be found in the way Caroline Bingley interacts with Elizabeth Bennet. When Elizabeth visits Netherfield to care for her sister Jane, she remains there for several days in the company of the Bingleys, the Hursts, and Mr. Darcy. During her stay, she spends time with them in the drawing room, where she becomes an observer of a conversation between the Bingleys, Hursts, and Mr. Darcy concerning the accomplishments expected of young women. Mr. Bingley is rather

impressed by the fact that all women seem to be accomplished in so many disciplines. Mr. Darcy strongly disagrees; he notes that he rarely meets a truly accomplished woman (39). Caroline Bingley strongly agrees with him, arguing that:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides this she must possess a certain something in the air and manners of walking, the tone of her voice, her dress and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved (39).

Elizabeth, therefore, states that she cannot imagine there being a woman as accomplished as this, implying that her own capacities do not live up to these standards. The use of free indirect speech in this specific situation subtly aligns readers with Elizabeth's skepticism toward these standards, while maintaining a degree of narrative distance from Caroline's perspective. Mrs. Hurst and Caroline Bingley then strongly disagreed with her, taking offense at the statement, as they consider themselves to be part of these extremely accomplished women. When Elizabeth briefly withdraws to attend to Jane, Caroline interprets her actions as a calculated display of modesty, suggesting that, by appearing to undervalue herself, Elizabeth is in fact attempting to make herself more attractive to the men present (40). This moment once again highlights the influence of culture and *habitus* in shaping everyday conversations and life realities. But more importantly, this scene also reveals an additional layer in the conversation. Caroline's behavior is paradoxical: in accusing Elizabeth of strategic self-presentation, she is herself engaged in precisely such behavior, carefully performing refinement in an effort to appeal to Mr. Darcy. Her behavior reflects a heightened awareness of status distinctions and a competitive drive to position herself within the upper echelons of society. In agreeing with Mr. Darcy and in outcasting Elizabeth, she presents herself as an accomplished woman in Mr. Darcy's presence and society's eyes. As Wright suggests, this kind of interaction is not individually singular but shaped by a broader social logic, in which competition becomes part of everyday life, and individuals are driven to constantly compare, adjust, and present themselves in relation to others.

Furthermore, in trying to appeal to Mr. Darcy, with the intention of marriage, she seeks to fully accomplish the transition to the *landed gentry*, consolidating her family's social ascent. Competition as a social logic here becomes necessary in attaining respectability and status; it represents a culturally embedded anxiety about social decline. Through this continuously ironic and paradoxical representation, Caroline Bingley emerges as a mildly satirical figure whose obsession with accomplishment and social recognition reveals the competitive pressures embedded within upper-class society.

It becomes visible how competition, in this case especially between women, is not only personal but structurally embedded, permeating even casual conversations and shaping how individuals evaluate and behave toward one another. The aspect of gender, specifically, cannot be disregarded, as women in this system inherently lack autonomy. Where there is a lack of autonomy and one can only act within certain constraints, the aspect of competition is even more heightened. Furthermore, it shows how Caroline Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh demonstrate a highly reflexive and strategic engagement with the codes of aristocratic and upper-class behavior, consciously performing distinction and refinement as a means of social positioning.

Finally, it is also important to consider how these structures are internalized from an early age, shaping the way individuals come to embody and reproduce the values embedded in their social environment. This is particularly visible in the character of Lydia Bennet, the youngest of the Bennet sisters, whose behavior throughout the novel is consistently marked by self-centeredness and a strong orientation toward status and social display. One illustrative moment occurs when Lydia and Kitty meet Jane and Elizabeth after their travels. Although they had planned to have lunch together, Lydia admits that she has already spent the money intended for the meal on a bonnet she does not even like (221). Later, when they sit down to eat, she behaves dismissively toward the waiter, openly commenting on his appearance in a derogatory manner (222). First, this reflects Lydia's attempt to emulate the detached

manners and patterns of consumption associated with the upper classes, adopting a sense of superiority toward those she perceives as socially beneath her. At the same time, this behavior also correlates with Bourdieu's concept of *allodoxia*, as Lydia imitates elite forms of consumption without fully understanding the cultural distinctions that give them value. She is purchasing fashionable items such as bonnets less out of cultivated taste than out of a desire to reproduce the appearance of refinement. However, the following scene also reveals her idea of social propriety and etiquette. While on the way home in the carriage, Lydia starts questioning Elizabeth and Jane on the interaction with men during their travels. She rambles on:

I was in great hopes that one of you would have got a husband before you came back. Jane will be quite an old maid soon, I declare. She is almost three and twenty! Lord, how ashamed I should be of not being married before three and twenty! [...] Lord! How I should like to be married before any of you; and then I would chaperone you about all the balls (223).

Evidently, Lydia internalized the social codes and dispositions associated with her class from an early age. Much of her sense of self-worth is shaped by the belief that marrying young constitutes the most desirable and socially appropriate outcome for a woman, and she treats this expectation as a given rather than a question. Like Caroline Bingley, she also adopts a competitive orientation toward the communication of marriage, viewing it as a kind of social achievement or final goal to be attained as early as possible, ideally even before her older sisters. This serves as a clear example of how the *habitus* constructed by the upper classes comes to be perceived as the norm, thereby shaping and structuring even the most intimate human relationships, including those between sisters. It further aligns with Wright's argument regarding the pervasive presence of competitive dynamics within social interaction, where even seemingly private or familial relations are influenced by underlying pressures of comparison and rivalry. In contrast to Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Caroline Bingley, Lydia Bennet exemplifies a more unreflective form of

engaging with the *habitus*, in which socially produced expectations are not strategically performed but immediately absorbed as authentic desire.

The implemented narrative techniques further highlight Lydia's unreflective internalization of social expectations. Through irony and mild satire, the novel exposes the limitations of a worldview in which consumption, marriage, and social status become primary measures of personal value. Moreover, the novel maintains a certain narrative distance from Lydia by presenting her largely through her speech and behavior rather than granting sustained access to her inner thoughts. This distance encourages a critical observation of her actions, consequently exposing the social forces that shape them. In this way, the novel not only depicts the reproduction of class and gender norms but also encourages questioning their embodiment as self-evident and entirely natural.

These differing modes of engaging with *habitus* suggest that class not only structures social behavior externally, but also shapes the degree to which individuals recognize themselves as socially produced subjects. It becomes evident that Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Caroline Bingley, and Lydia Bennet define themselves solely through external expectations put on them by the prevailing class system they are inevitably part of. This, interestingly, correlates with Sartre's concept of *bad faith*. Similar to Sartre's famous example of the waiter, the characters strongly play into the roles given to them by a system, here the system of class. All three characters are immensely concerned with their own role in said system, so much so that neither of them can understand the inauthenticity of their interactions and behavior, basically living in a lie produced by the society. Concerned with appearances and social propriety, neither of them manages to look beyond the surface-level rules and the underlying *habitus* that structures society. All of them inevitably act under the social constraints of performativity, utility, and self-interest, devaluing authentic self-understanding and human connection. But there is an inherent difference between the way *bad faith* is realized within the characters. Lady Catherine de Bourgh and

Caroline Bingley capture Sartre's idea of *bad faith* in the way they relate it to identity and performance. Both are almost hyper-aware of the social rules and perform them very meticulously to maintain their social positioning, so much so that they become permeated by them. Lydia Bennet, on the other hand, exemplifies it differently, as her representation of *bad faith* is expressed through an uncritical absorption of societal ideals. To her, the prevailing, institutionalized norms of the upper classes are not a social expectation, but a deep-rooted desire and a personal truth. She does not perform; her performance is her reality. What therefore emerges is a tension between social positioning and self-relation: Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Caroline Bingley actively perform and manage their roles within the logic of class distinction, while Lydia Bennet internalizes these expectations in a more unreflective way.

Taken together, the analysis of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Caroline Bingley, and Lydia Bennet demonstrates that class in *Pride and Prejudice* is a structure that is continuously reproduced through everyday practices, perception, and interaction. Across all three cases, judgments about propriety, accomplishment, and marriageability operate as mechanisms through which social difference is both maintained and actively negotiated. What initially appears as an individual attitude or personal preference is, in fact, shaped by an ongoing awareness of rank and the pressure to secure or improve one's position within a competitive social order. In this sense, *habitus* does not simply mirror existing class divisions, but actively sustains them by shaping how individuals internalize and enact the expectations of their social world. At the same time, and in line with Wright's argument, these interactions reveal a broader logic of competition, in which even seemingly intimate or familial relations are structured by comparison, rivalry, and the pursuit of distinction. Within this framework, the analysis has also raised questions concerning authenticity, performativity, and the characters' relationship to their own self-perception, ultimately differentiating how these dynamics manifest across the individual characters. In all cases, however, the characters are shaped by the roles and expectations imposed by the social structure, which leads to a form of self-relation

that can be understood through Sartre's concept of *bad faith*. What unites these different modes is that neither allows for a fully reflective relation to the social structures that produce them, resulting in forms of self-understanding that remain bound to appearance, function, and social legibility.

As a result, class becomes visible not only in the hierarchical roles that society hands to them, but in the everyday ways characters speak, judge, desire, and position themselves in relation to others. If social interaction is shaped by *habitus*, competition, and self-positioning, then it becomes necessary to ask to what extent these conditions also shape the capacity for emotionality, specifically empathy. In a social world where individuals primarily interpret one another through rank, advantage, and propriety, empathy can no longer be assumed to operate independently of these frameworks. Instead, empathy itself appears as something that is potentially filtered through the same logic of distinction and self-positioning that governs class relations more broadly.

2.2 Empathy as Socially Mediated Experience

Building on the previous chapters, this section explores the concept of empathy and the ways in which it is shaped, limited, and redirected by structures of class and social hierarchy. While the previous analysis focused on class, marriage, and social etiquette, this chapter shifts the focus toward the emotional consequences of these structures and the way they influence the characters' ability to empathize with one another. To examine this, the chapter analyzes three specific scenes from *Pride and Prejudice* involving the same three characters, Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Lydia Bennet, applying the theoretical framework that has been developed throughout the thesis.

As previously established, Caroline Bingley's interactions are heavily influenced by class anxiety and the desire for social advancement. Deeply concerned with refinement, etiquette, and appearances, she constantly performs the values of the

upper class to strengthen her own position within the social hierarchy. Her interactions with others are marked by comparison, competition, and calculation, reflecting the idea that class systems turn social interaction into a constant negotiation of status. This is also visible in the way she relates to herself, as she adopts a socially constructed role that gradually strips her of personal authenticity. This, in turn, heavily affects her capacity for empathy, which is visible in multiple scenes. One specific example can again be found in Chapter 8 of the novel, where Elizabeth visits the Bingleys in order to look after her sick sister Jane. After walking many miles through the countryside, Elizabeth arrived at the Bingleys, visibly frazzled by the bad weather. When she is received at the Bingleys and, after dinner, returns to Jane's room, the Bingley sisters begin to speak dismissively about her appearance and question the circumstances of her arrival at Netherfield: "Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed, a mixture of pride and impertinence; she had no conversation, no stile, no taste, no beauty" (35). Mrs. Hurst begins to comment on her appearance, stating she found her to look wild (35). Agreeing with her sister, Caroline Bingley states: "[...] I could hardly keep my countenance. Very nonsensical to come at all! Why must she be scampering about the country, because her sister had a cold? Her hair so untidy, so blowsy!" (36). Mrs. Hurst agrees and further discusses the state of Elizabeth's petticoat, which was inches deep in mud. When Mr. Bingley argued for Elizabeth's case, stating he had not noticed her appearance, Caroline Bingley addressed Mr. Darcy: "You observed it, Mr. Darcy, I am sure!" (36). Further, she adds:

To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ancles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! What could she mean by it? It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum (36).

What becomes visible in this interaction is strongly related to Rousseau's idea of *amour propre* replacing *amour de soi* in a divided and hierarchical society. He states that in the natural state of *amour de soi*, pity, which, as previously argued, closely

resembles the idea of empathy, takes the place of laws, morals, and virtues. It is essential to human connection. In this interaction, one can see that virtue and morality prevail over empathy, representing what Rousseau calls *amour propre*. Instead of empathizing with Elizabeth, who, in distress, undertook a long walk to care for her ill sister, Caroline Bingley and Mrs. Hurst focus solely on her appearance and what they perceive as the impropriety of the situation. This reaction, drawing on Rousseau's ideas, can be understood as a product of the socially shaped sentiment that leads individuals to prioritize their own status and self-importance over genuine consideration of others. While Rousseau argues that a primary factor in the creation of *amour propre* is the emergence of property and its division, which, as he argues, produced structured inequality, this inequality can also be produced through the emergence of class. Similar to the anxiety about property, class anxiety, as established, also introduces notions of competition, comparison, and a fear of loss. As previously argued, class creates a society mediated by competition, performance, and security. Genuine displays of emotions are gradually disappearing in the demands of social display, which is also exactly what Rousseau argued. Within this system, of which both Mrs. Hurst and, more prominently, Caroline Bingley are a part, it can be argued that their empathy is displaced by self-importance and concerns of status.

Additionally, applying Sara Ahmed's lens, this argument can be deepened when looking at the fact that, in her opinion, empathy is always mediated by the subject's prior opinion towards the other's experience. Empathy, after Ahmed, is never neutral but shaped by presumptions and subjective perceptions, explaining why she calls empathy a "wish-feeling". In this context, Caroline's empathy can be understood as being mediated by her own anxiety about being in a situation similar to Elizabeth's, which she perceives as socially improper, therefore creating a lack of empathy. This anxiety is rooted in concerns about status, marriage, and the successful consolidation of her social position. This redirects her attention toward issues of propriety and self-preservation. As a result, Caroline projects her own anxieties onto Elizabeth,

interpreting an act of care for a family member in a negative light and framing it as socially inappropriate and therefore not empathizing with Elizabeth's situation. This dynamic is further complicated by an underlying form of gendered competition that is itself structured by class and social mobility. In addressing Mr. Darcy and seeking his agreement, Caroline attempts to present herself as more refined and socially appropriate than Elizabeth, thereby enhancing her own position in relation to both Elizabeth and potential marriage prospects, again showing how empathy here is redirected to self-interested behavior. In this scene, empathy is shown to be significantly inhibited by the demands of class perception and self-presentation. Caroline's empathy in response to Elizabeth's situation is filtered through concerns of propriety and status. As a result, empathy is not only limited but actively redirected by social anxieties, demonstrating how class structures constrain the possibility of empathetic engagement.

This representation of empathy is also structurally reinforced by Austen's narrative form. The scene is largely focalized through Elizabeth, whose embodied experience of exhaustion provides an implicit standard against which the Bingley sisters' judgments are measured. Through this focalization, Caroline's and Mrs. Hurst's remarks are recontextualized, producing a strong ironic contrast between moral evaluation and lived experience. The scene therefore operates satirically, revealing how aristocratic sensibilities distort perception and suppress empathetic engagement. In this way, the narration does not merely depict a failure of empathy, but formally stages how class-coded perception structures what can be recognized as legitimate feeling.

Another scene that reveals a striking absence of empathy occurs near the end of the novel, when Lady Catherine de Bourgh visits Elizabeth at Longbourn after hearing rumors that her nephew Mr. Darcy intends to marry her. Determined to prevent the match, Lady Catherine de Bourgh confronts Elizabeth directly, insisting that Darcy is destined for her own daughter and attempting to pressure Elizabeth into

refusing him (357). When Elizabeth refuses to submit to her demands, Lady Catherine de Bourgh turns to attacking the Bennets' social position, presenting Elizabeth as an unsuitable marriage partner because of her family's perceived improprieties, most notably Lydia's elopement with Mr. Wickham. She argues:

To all the objections I have already urged, I have still another to add. I am no stranger to the particulars of your youngest sister's infamous elopement. I know it all; that the young man's marrying her, was a patched up business, at the expense of your father and uncles. And is such a girl to be my nephew's sister? Is her husband, is the son of his late father's steward, to be his brother? Heaven and earth! — of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted? (358).

Similar to Caroline Bingley, one can notice the success of *amour propre* over *amour de soi*. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, as previously established, strongly represents norms and ideas of the aristocracy, taking on a strictly socially conditioned role. Again, Rousseau's argument on the creation of *amour propre* can be reinterpreted through the framework of class, as Lady Catherine de Bourgh's empathy is inhibited by her extreme fear of loss. She is seemingly scared to lose status and recognition through the marriage of Mr. Darcy to Elizabeth. In anticipating this harm, she creates distance and does not manage to empathize, with the greater goal of protecting what she possesses, which is status, recognition, and propriety. This further deepens hierarchies of wealth and power, a system that has served Lady Catherine de Bourgh and is something she strongly identifies with. Ultimately, a traumatic and deeply distressing situation involving a young girl eloping with a significantly older man is transformed into a tool of social judgement, used to assert claims of status, superiority, and authority over the Bennet family.

This lack of empathy, though, is not only driven by the anxiety of losing status, but is also driven by a lack of ability to imagine the Bennet family's situation. This can be argued through Sara Ahmed's concept of bodily worlds. As previously explained, bodily worlds are worlds, or more specifically conditions, constructed

through historical inequality, that structure the individual's experience of emotions. When two individuals do not inhabit the same bodily world, empathy is inherently restricted, as one cannot imagine the conditions that produced the other's experience. In this case, Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Elizabeth inhabit different bodily worlds that are structured and conditioned through class and *habitus*. As part of the aristocratic elite, Lady Catherine's bodily world is centered around the dichotomy of propriety and social disgrace, constructing status. Because of this, she is unable to understand Elizabeth's situation in a nuanced way.⁴ What she fails to recognize is that Lydia's elopement not only threatens the Bennets' reputation but also constitutes a deeply personal and emotional crisis for the family. Elizabeth's distress is rooted not only in the social consequences of the event, but in sisterly affection and familial attachment, as someone she loved disappeared and became vulnerable to a man whose eventual marriage to Lydia was motivated less by care than by financial security and necessity. The bodily world constructed by the aristocracy, a class mostly concerned with propriety and status, does not correlate with the bodily world of Elizabeth; that is, though shaped by the strong social etiquette of the *landed gentry*, mostly created through her strong familial bonds. Lady Catherine de Bourgh's response to Lydia's elopement is governed less by empathy than by fears surrounding status, propriety, and social contamination, preventing her from recognizing the emotional reality of the Bennet family's situation. Through the combined lens of Rousseau and Ahmed, empathy in this case thus appears as deeply conditioned by class-based anxieties, social roles, and unequal worlds of perception as well as life realities.

This representation of empathy is also reinforced by the narrative. The scene is again focalized through Elizabeth, positioning Lady Catherine's intervention as intrusive. Moreover, the narrative maintains a distance from Lady Catherine's perspective, preventing her judgments from achieving interpretive authority. Through

⁴ Though it is important to note that they share one bodily world, which is the one shared by gender. Both characters are women in spite of class, though the aspect of gender is being overshadowed by the aspect of class.

this subtle irony, it is even more exposed how aristocratic values can transform a personal family crisis into a matter of social status and classification.

The limitations of empathy in *Pride and Prejudice*, though, are not only visible in interactions between individuals of different classes and different backgrounds, but also within the same class and even inside the family structure. These specific situations are extremely intricate, as exemplified by Lydia's own behavior after she had eloped with Mr. Wickham. When Lydia and Mr. Wickham return to Longbourn to officially get married, Lydia's behavior is void of any empathy towards the distress and anxiety her disappearance caused her family, but is driven by a strong sense of pride and self-importance. As soon as Lydia arrives, she pridefully demands her sisters' congratulations. Then, when sitting down for dinner, she seems not to be aware of the situation she has caused, and talks about the past months of her having run off with ease and happiness (316-317). This causes grave reactions among the family members: "Her father lifted up his eyes. Jane was distressed. Elizabeth looked expressively at Lydia; but she, who never heard nor saw any thing of which she chose to be insensible, gaily continued, [...]" (317). Lydia proceeds to speak in a highly self-involved manner, recounting stories about displaying her wedding ring, excitedly wondering whether the neighbors are aware that she is to be married that very day, or demanding Jane's place next to their mother, as she is the only married daughter of the family. She even goes so far as to assume that her sisters must be jealous of her marriage, smugly expressing the hope that they may one day be as fortunate as she considers herself to be, while recommending Brighton to them as the place to find a good husband (318). Overall, Lydia's behavior is visibly characterized by emotional immaturity, self-involvement, and a striking inability to recognize the emotional consequences of her actions for her family. Rather than responding with shame, reflection, or actual empathy for her family's distress, she treats the situation as an exciting social achievement centered on her own marriage and new status.

Through Rousseau's lens, Lydia can be understood as a strong representation of *amour propre*. The development toward *amour propre* in her is supported by broader structural dynamics operating in the background, particularly the gendered competition surrounding marriage within the family itself. As previously argued, marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* functions not only as a personal relationship but as a means of securing status, stability, and social recognition. This creates an atmosphere of constant comparison and competition, in which women are encouraged to measure both themselves and one another according to their marital prospects and social advancement. Particularly under the constant influence of Mrs. Bennet's anxieties surrounding marriage and social status, Lydia internalizes the idea that marriage is the central measure of female success and security. As a result, she approaches relationships superficially and impulsively, with little regard for the emotional consequences her actions may have for others. At the same time, she lacks the emotional maturity to distinguish between genuine affection and the social convenience or validation that marriage provides. Lydia's behavior can therefore also be understood as the product of a system that rewards social success and visibility over emotional reflection and genuine human connection.

What becomes significant under these conditions is that Lydia's prevailing sense of *amour propre* appears to fully solidify only after her marriage to Wickham, once she is formally integrated into the social structures that previously excluded her. What before was immature, anxious, and impulsive behavior has now developed into self-involved, self-important, and overall non-empathic behavior. In line with Rousseau's argument, society here produces an artificial form of self-love rooted in comparison, recognition, and status within Lydia. Marriage gives Lydia a new social identity, and with it a heightened sense of self-importance that leads her to view herself as superior to her sisters and to center her own happiness above the distress of her family. Her lack of empathy, therefore, represents the culmination of values and behaviors that have been shaped by the social world around her.

Another influence for Lydia's lack of empathy can be found in Sara Ahmed's theory of stickiness. As explained, Ahmed argues that certain bodies that over time have been touched by a specific affect make them appear as that inherent quality. Specifically, she argues that, for example, the upper class has the emotion of happiness stuck to them, which then reinforces their positions in society, while simultaneously taking away the class antagonisms they represent. In Lydia's case, stickiness has a double fold, or more so, two sides of one coin. On one end, she perceives the military with a certain emotion and idea stuck to them, mainly excitement and fortune. The sense of financial freedom that Lydia associates with the officers can also be understood within the broader context of how the military functioned during this period. Since securing and maintaining a position within the military often required considerable financial means, Lydia likely associates officers with wealth, leisure, and social mobility. This becomes visible in the way she repeatedly speaks about the balls, events, and forms of entertainment she expects the officers to organize, implying an assumption that they possess the financial capacity to provide such a lifestyle (45). More than anything, though, she associates the military officers with excitement and pleasure. This is visible many times throughout the novel as her obsession with going to Meryton and engaging with military officers is depicted often. One specific passage that describes Lydia's feelings towards the military men can be seen when she plans to go to Brighton. It is described:

In Lydia's imagination, a visit to Brighton comprised every possibility of earthly happiness. She saw with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing place covered with officers. She saw herself the object of attention, to tens and to scores of them at present unknown. She saw all of the glories of the camp; its tents stretched forth in beauteous uniformity of lines, crowded with the young and the gay, and dazzling with scarlet; and to complete the view, she saw herself seated beneath a tent, tenderly flirting with at least six officers at once (234).

To Lydia, officers become "sticky" with happiness, excitement, and desirability very early on in the novel. Through repeated exposure in Meryton and later Brighton, they

come to embody fun, attention, and the promise of upward mobility, so her orientation toward them is already affectively pre-shaped before any personal experience or reflection. At the same time, her family's home in Longbourn becomes sticky with emotions of boredom and restriction. This can be seen through Lydia's constant pursuit of the city and her continuous efforts to persuade her sisters to join her in going to Meryton (28). It seems she is always in need of an escape from the boring family life. These affects then ultimately "stick," meaning that when she returns or thinks about her family context, she does not encounter it neutrally, but already through a lens of dissatisfaction and disengagement. As Ahmed argues, such sticking emotions guide one's perception: we move toward what has happiness attached to it and away from what is coded as dull or constraining. Because Lydia's perception of officers is already saturated with excitement and her perception of her family with boredom or limitation, she is unable to read their emotional realities on the same level. Instead, she interprets people through these pre-existing affective labels, which limit her capacity to recognize distress, responsibility, or relational depth, leading to a lack of empathy on her part. So it becomes visible that empathy in this case, again, is socially conditioned and ultimately shaped by Lydia's socialization as well as her own perception of society and her engagement with it.

Lydia's lack of empathy is then also visibly structured by the narrative. Through the continuous focalization of Elizabeth, Lydia's behavior is framed as emotionally and socially disruptive. Lydia's self-centred speech is rendered through irony, as her excitement about marriage and social attention starkly contrasts with the family's distress. At the same time, the narrative maintains distance from Lydia's perspective, offering little access to her thoughts and thereby limiting any sense of moral complexity in her view. This narrative positioning produces a subtly satirical effect, presenting Lydia as absorbed by socially conditioned desires. In this way, Austen formally reinforces how class- and gender-shaped expectations structure what Lydia is able to perceive and feel.

All in all, this chapter has shown that empathy is often shaped and constrained by the social environments in which the characters are embedded. Across different contexts, emotional understanding is consistently influenced by class, expectations, and patterns of social interaction. As a result, empathy emerges as a complex, severely mediated entity, as something that is continuously influenced by the structures of society.

2.3 Class and the Conditions of Empathy: A Concluding Synthesis on Austen

Ultimately, the case study demonstrates that empathy in *Pride and Prejudice* is fundamentally shaped and constrained by class structures. Austen's novel presents a world in which class influences not only economic realities and social opportunities, but also the ways individuals perceive, evaluate, and emotionally respond to one another. This becomes first visible through the institution of marriage, where anxieties surrounding social standing foster self-interested forms of human connection or, in Buber's terms, *I-It* relationships, which in turn generate competition between individuals. Read through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, it is revealed how class becomes internalized and embodied through everyday behavior, shaping not only outward conduct but also perception itself. Wright's emphasis on competition and mobility further clarifies how social relations in the novel are structured by comparison and rivalry, even within intimate or familial settings. At the same time, Sartre's concept of *bad faith* highlights the extent to which characters come to identify with socially prescribed roles and expectations, performing identities that increasingly appear natural and authentic to them.

Building on this exploration, the chapter has demonstrated through three case studies that empathy is conditioned by systems of distinction, competition, and self-positioning that shape both interpersonal relations and self-understanding. Across the three case studies of Caroline Bingley, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, and Lydia Bennet, it was demonstrated that empathic understanding is filtered through class positions, gender expectations, and internalized social hierarchies. Whether through the desire

for upward mobility, the protection of status, or the pursuit of recognition, each character is inherently concerned with class and social values such as propriety, advantage, or excitement over genuine engagement with others' feelings. Rousseau's distinction between *amour de soi* and *amour propre* reveals how class society redirects empathy away from genuine human concern toward self-interest, recognition, and status anxiety. Ahmed's concepts further demonstrate that empathy is not neutral, but mediated through socially conditioned orientations, histories, and perceptions.

What appears as an inherent lack of empathy is, in fact, not inherent to the characters themselves but a product of broader affective and structural conditions. Societal structures determine what can be felt, recognized, or dismissed. What has eventually become visible is that empathy is constrained, redirected, conditioned, and filtered through systems of distinction, competition, and self-positioning- the very systems that organize social life, the system of class. This again, ultimately, realigns with the operating definition of empathy stated in this thesis.

Finally, these dynamics are also reinforced through Austen's narrative form. The novel's reliance on selective focalization, ironic framing, and variable narrative distance shapes the reader's access to characters' interiority and thereby guides evaluative judgment. Irony and social language further expose the gap between self-perception and social reality, encouraging critical distance from characters' class-based judgments. In this sense, the narrative does not merely reflect the social logic of class and empathy but actively organizes how these relations are perceived and interpreted. The form of the novel thus becomes an additional layer through which class-conditioned perception and constrained empathy are both represented and subtly critiqued.

3. Emotion and Performance: Losing Empathy in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*

Madame Bovary, published by Gustave Flaubert in 1857, centers on the life of Emma Bovary, a young woman who, after marrying the provincial doctor Charles

Bovary, becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the monotony and emotional emptiness of *bourgeois* domestic life in the French countryside. Having been strongly influenced by the romantic ideals and fantasies she encountered in novels during her convent education, Emma longs for passion, luxury, social refinement, and emotional intensity that her everyday reality cannot provide. In an attempt to escape her growing sense of boredom and disappointment, she immerses herself in excessive consumption, fashionable leisure culture, and a series of extramarital affairs. As Emma continuously pursues an idealized vision of happiness and status that remains unattainable, she accumulates severe financial debt and becomes increasingly emotionally isolated. Ultimately, overwhelmed by disillusionment, social pressure, and economic ruin, Emma takes her own life, leaving behind a devastated family and exposing the emotional emptiness and artificiality underlying *bourgeois* society. As the novel vividly depicts class society and its underlying structures of performativity, it provides a particularly suitable text for applying the previously developed theoretical framework.

This chapter aims to examine how empathy is shaped by the social performance, human connections, and self-perceptions fostered by the *bourgeois* social structures in nineteenth-century provincial France. To conduct this analysis, central characters will first be situated within their broader social and cultural context, with particular attention to class aspiration, consumption, and forms of respectability. The chapter will then focus on selected scenes and examine how specific characters construct and perform their identity through patterns of desire, status-seeking, and self-presentation, and how, in turn, these processes shape their interpersonal relations and self-perception. Through a close reading of key passages, it will ultimately be demonstrated how authenticity and empathy are restricted by social performance and self-centrism, thereby further supporting the argument that empathy is systematically conditioned and mediated by structures of class and social aspiration.

3.1 Class, Consumption, and Status in *Madame Bovary*

This subchapter will establish the analytical foundation for the following discussion by exploring the role and influence of class in *Madame Bovary*. To construct the social background of the novel, the central characters will first be situated within the broader class structure of nineteenth-century French society. Building on this framework, the analysis will examine how questions of taste, etiquette, and social aspiration shape the characters' behavior, relationships, and self-understanding, focusing in particular on three central figures: Monsieur Homais, Rodolphe Boulanger, and Emma Bovary. Ultimately, the subchapter aims to demonstrate how class, *habitus*, and cultural expectations permeate everyday life and structure even the most intimate forms of interaction and perception.

3.1.1 Mapping Class in *Madame Bovary*

Class in nineteenth-century France was shaped by profound political and economic transformations following the French Revolution. Although the Revolution abolished the rigid estate system of the *ancien régime*, French society remained deeply hierarchical, now increasingly structured through wealth, property, education, and professional status rather than birth alone. At the same time, these class positions were often unstable and internally contradictory, particularly within the expanding middle classes, where individuals constantly negotiated questions of mobility, status, and social recognition. *Madame Bovary* reflects this complex social landscape by presenting characters who occupy different and often insecure positions within France's evolving class system.

The novel maps the Bovary family's shifting social status through a series of financial and professional failures. Monsieur Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, Charles's father, had once worked as an assistant-surgeon-major, a profession associated with prestige and social mobility in post-revolutionary France, particularly after Napoleon's military reforms elevated the status of army officers and state service. However, after being forced into retirement following a conscription scandal, he lost both financial security and social standing. In an attempt to stabilize his position, he married the daughter of a *bourgeois* merchant family for her

substantial dowry of sixty thousand francs. Yet despite this financial opportunity, he squandered much of his wife's fortune and received little from her father's inheritance, leaving the family in continued economic difficulty. Hoping to recover financially, he eventually relocated to the countryside and attempted to make a living through farming, despite lacking both the discipline and the talent for the agricultural sector (Flaubert 6-7). The narrative then shifts to Charles's own youth, demonstrating how these domestic financial struggles became severe enough that his education had to be postponed until he was twelve years old. Despite these limitations, Charles was eventually sent to school in Rouen, reflecting the growing importance of education and professional training as potential means of social advancement in nineteenth-century France. After four years, however, he was withdrawn from school to study medicine. Although he failed his *baccalauréat* examination and therefore could not become a fully qualified doctor, he continued his medical studies to qualify as a health officer, a more modest but still respectable profession within the *petite bourgeoisie*. During his years of study, Charles became increasingly distracted by tavern culture and provincial nightlife, habits that contributed to his failure on his first medical officer's examination. After eventually passing on his second attempt, he was sent to Tostes to practice under the supervision of an elderly country doctor. At his mother's insistence, he later married Héloïse Dubuc, the widow of a *petite-bourgeois bailiff* from Dieppe. By the time Charles meets Emma, he has secured a relatively stable place within the *petite bourgeoisie*, yet he still lacks the refinement, wealth, ambition, and cultural sophistication associated with the higher *bourgeoisie* (8-13).

Emma Rouault originates from a relatively prosperous rural background. Her father, Père Rouault, owns the successful farm Les Bertaux and belongs to the wealthier peasantry, possessing servants, land, and local respectability (13-15). Nevertheless, despite this, the Rouault family remains socially categorized as peasants because their income derives from agriculture and land cultivation. Emma's marriage to Charles, therefore, represents a form of social advancement into the

petite bourgeoisie, granting her access to greater social respectability and refinement than rural life could offer.

Monsieur Homais, the pharmacist of Yonville, belongs to the *petite bourgeoisie*. As a pharmacist, he occupies a respected middle-class profession that provides him with financial stability, public visibility, and influence within the town. His pharmacy, located prominently in the center of Yonville, functions both as a source of income and as a visible marker of his social position (78). Unlike laborers or peasants, Monsieur Homais benefits from education, property, and professional authority, though he remains socially below elite professions such as physicians or lawyers. His ability to employ domestic and professional help, particularly his apprentice Justin, further reflects his comparatively secure economic position within provincial society.

Finally, Rodolphe Boulanger occupies the highest social position within the novel. As the wealthy owner of the estate La Huchette, he belongs to the class of the *Grands Notables*, the elite landowning class that continued to dominate French society after the Revolution. Unlike the *bourgeois* professionals of Yonville, Rodolphe lives entirely from inherited wealth and the passive income generated by his estates, allowing him a life of leisure, luxury, respectability, and social power (137-138).

Through these different characters, Flaubert presents a society deeply structured by class distinctions, despite the revolutionary promises of equality and social progress. The characters' social positions reveal a society deeply structured by hierarchy, instability, and the constant pursuit of mobility, leaving them constrained by class distinctions that continue to shape their opportunities, relationships, and self-perception. Figures such as Charles Bovary, Emma Bovary, Léon Dupuis, Monsieur Homais, and Rodolphe Boulanger demonstrate that class in *Madame Bovary* extends far beyond a purely economic position; it fundamentally shapes the characters'

perceptions of the world, their relationships with others, and their understanding of themselves. Consequently, the following chapter will examine how class identity in the novel is performed through etiquette, behavioral norms, and acts of refinement, revealing the extent to which *bourgeois* society transforms social interaction into a form of performance.

3.1.2 Manners and Masks: The Performativity of *Bourgeois* Identity

In nineteenth-century France, etiquette and taste referred to the socially regulated codes of behavior and preferences that governed how individuals were expected to act, speak, dress, and consume within different social settings. These codes were not simply informal habits, but structured systems of distinction that varied according to class and were closely linked to education, wealth, and social background. What counted as proper manners or refined taste, so to speak, the *habitus*, was largely defined by the dominant groups, particularly the *Grands Notables* and the *haute bourgeoisie*, whose practices set the standard for respectability. These codes not only reflected class differences but also actively reinforced them by making the social hierarchy visible and reproducible in everyday life, operating as a form of social language through which class positions were communicated, recognized, and maintained. This is also visible in the characters in *Madame Bovary*. But what crystallizes itself as a driving force within the engagement with the prevailing *habitus* is performance. This chapter, therefore, turns to questions of taste, etiquette, and especially its social performance, examining how class identity is produced through performative engagement with others and how this, in turn, impacts the characters' self-perception. This will specifically be explored through the characters of Monsieur Homais and Rodolphe Boulanger.

Monsieur Homais is the most prominent representation of *petty-bourgeois* etiquette and taste, which is visible in many scenes of the novel. One very telling scene can be found in the first moments Monsieur Homais is introduced to the narrative, namely during dinner at Lady Lefrançois' Inn. Monsieur Homais is first

introduced in a manner that immediately conveys self-satisfaction and a slightly inflated sense of importance, reflected in both his posture and his manner of speaking. He quickly shifts the conversation to a complaint about the billiard table, which he criticizes as outdated and poorly constructed, contrasting it with what he presents as more modern standards: tables with narrow pockets and heavier cues, thereby positioning himself as knowledgeable about contemporary trends (80). The scene then moves into an interaction at the Inn's table, where the priest, Monsieur le Curé, arrives to collect an umbrella he had left behind. When the innkeeper offers him a drink, he declines, a gesture that Monsieur Homais interprets as hypocrisy, insisting that all priests would secretly drink, furthermore accusing the clergy of nostalgia for the old tithe system (83). This remark escalates the situation into a confrontation between the two, quickly broadening into a dispute about religion, atheism, and moral authority. At one point, Monsieur Homais goes so far as to suggest that priests should be bled monthly for the sake of public order and morality, prompting the priest to retort: "You're an infidel! You have no faith!" (83). In response, Monsieur Homais launches into a lengthy defense of his own beliefs. He declares:

I have faith, my faith, and I've even more of it than all of them, with their mummary and their hocus-pocus. On the contrary, I adore God. I believe in a Supreme Being, in a Maker whatever he his, to me it's immaterial, who has set us down here to fulfill our duties as citizen and father of a family; [...] My God, as far as I'm concerned, is the God of Socrates, of Franklin, of Voltaire, and of Béranger! I stand for *the Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar* and the immortal values of 89! (83-84)

First, it is important to note how Monsieur Homais interprets the god-given meaning of life as fulfilling one's duties as a citizen and family man. The French Revolution made a point of underlining the political centrality of the French family, also introducing the values of *Liberté*, *Égalité*, and *Fraternité*, which highlight equality and the importance of being a good citizen. He mentions that his gods are the gods of Socrates, Franklin, and Voltaire. While Socrates is a famous ancient Greek

philosopher, he is also the main character of the play *Socrates* by Voltaire, a famous philosopher of the French Revolution.⁵ Benjamin Franklin, who served on a commission to France from 1776 to 1778, was seen by the French as the personification of the New World Enlightenment (“Benjamin Franklin”). He then also mentions poet and songwriter Pierre-Jean de Béranger, who wrote political ballads, such as *Le Roi d’Yvetot* and *Le Dieu des pauvres gens*, in which he glorified the Napoleonic era and ridiculed the French monarchy (“Pierre-Jean de Béranger”). He furthermore asserts that he stands for the *Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Vicar*, a book by Jean-Jacques Rousseau that explores themes of religion and morality. Finishing his statement, he additionally enunciates that he stands behind the immortal values of 89’, obviously referencing the principles of the French Revolution. By combining figures such as Socrates, Voltaire, Franklin, Rousseau, and Béranger into a single, undifferentiated intellectual framework, Monsieur Homais constructs a belief system that appears internally incoherent. In particular, the inclusion of Béranger, whose status inside the upper-class circles is markedly lower than that of the other thinkers, destabilizes the hierarchy of references he attempts to invoke. As a result, the comparison weakens his argument and makes it clear that he is relying more on the performativity of names than on real understanding, which comes across as both pretentious and self-important.

This speech then can be read through Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*. Monsieur Homais’ understanding of religion as civic duty and familial responsibility reflects a specifically *petite bourgeois* mindset, in which moral legitimacy is grounded in order, respectability, and social usefulness. His belief system is therefore not theological but social, structured around the values of citizenship and domestic responsibility that were central to *petty-bourgeois* ideology after the Revolution. From Bourdieu’s perspective, Monsieur Homais’ speech can be seen as an attempt to accumulate cultural capital through reference to highly legitimized figures of

⁵ This raises the question of the context in which Monsieur Homais knew of Socrates. If he knew of him only through Voltaire’s play, it could be seen as the foolishness of the *petty bourgeoisie*, which does not know Socrates in writing but only in the theatre.

philosophy, science, and revolutionary thought. His invocation of Socrates, Franklin, Voltaire, Rousseau, and the French Revolution functions as a way of aligning himself with dominant forms of cultural authority, where intellectual legitimacy is derived from association with canonized names and ideas. However, this accumulation then also reveals what Bourdieu terms *allodoxia*. Monsieur Homais demonstrates clear cultural goodwill and a desire to position himself within the sphere of intellectual legitimacy and the prevailing *habitus*, but his references are presented in an overly compressed and interchangeable manner, without attention to their historical, philosophical, or hierarchical differences. This produces a form of discourse in which cultural signs of authority are recognized and reproduced, but not fully mastered or structured. In this context specifically, it is visible how, first, *habitus* can also be performed in order to assimilate oneself into higher classes, and second, how this can fail through a lack of cultural capital.

This, in effect, also represents Wright's idea of competition. Monsieur Homais' acting in cultural goodwill can be traced back to a competitive drive for social mobility. As Wright explained, the class system produces communication that is highly influenced by competition, the struggle of class mobility, and the constant drive to self-optimize. This is also visible in Monsieur Homais' drive to distinguish himself as a rational and educated member of society, adopting the manners and ideologies of the upper classes in pursuit of recognition and differentiation.

The narrative form of the novel intensifies this representation of Monsieur Homais through irony, focalization, and narrative distance. His language is structured by a repertoire of ideological clichés drawn from Enlightenment and revolutionary discourse, which he assembles as markers of legitimacy rather than as coherent philosophical positions. Through this accumulation of names and references, the narrative exposes how *petite-bourgeois* knowledge often operates as social performance. At the same time, the text maintains a satirical distance from Homais, subtly undermining his claims of superiority without explicitly contradicting them. In

this way, Flaubert's narration does not simply depict the *petite-bourgeois* engagement with culture but formally stages it, revealing how it is constructed through repetition and performativity.

Another character that demonstrates the performativity of upper-class values and etiquette is Rodolphe Boulanger. This can be seen many times throughout the novel, but most prominently at the Agricultural Show in the second chapter. In an attempt to seduce Emma, Rodolphe invites her to attend the Agricultural Show in Yonville, an event that the townspeople have long anticipated, decorating the streets and carefully preparing their homes in honour of the occasion. Upon arriving, Rodolphe avoids becoming engaged in conversation with the other attendees and instead quickly guides Emma toward their reserved private seats, separating themselves from the larger crowd (146-147). He then begins commenting on the clothing and appearance of the women present at the event, while modestly excusing his own supposedly inadequate attire for the occasion. His outfit is described as:

[...] an incongruous mix of the ordinary and the refined, in which, as a rule, the common herd thinks it can glimpse signs of an eccentric existence, dissolute feelings, the tyrannies of art, and always a certain contempt for social conventions, which it finds either seductive or exasperating (149).

It is then further described how he, despite wearing highly polished shoes, casually steps into horse droppings while walking through the square with a relaxed ease, one hand tucked into his jacket. As they observe the crowd, both he and Emma comment on the futility of ambition in the countryside and the mediocrity of provincial society. Rodolphe remarks that the people around them are incapable of appreciating even something as simple as the cut of a coat (149). Rodolphe's behavior reinforces his attitude of detachment and refinement in contrast to the provincial environment surrounding them.

This scene can be closely connected to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Rodolphe's gestures, conversational style, bodily ease, and manner of dress all reflect an upper-class *habitus* shaped by inherited economic, cultural, and social capital. Unlike the townspeople's anxious social performances of the *petite bourgeoisie*, Rodolphe's refinement appears effortless. His indifference toward the crowd, his relaxed bodily posture, and even his careless stepping into horse droppings despite his polished shoes all communicate a form of embodied superiority in which status no longer needs to be anxiously asserted. At the same time, Rodolphe's comments about fashion and provincial mediocrity reveal how taste functions as a mechanism of social distinction. His remark that the people around him cannot appreciate the cut of a coat reflects the understanding of taste as socially conditioned cultural capital. For Rodolphe, aesthetic judgement becomes a way of distinguishing himself from the provincial middle and lower classes, whose tastes are implicitly framed as vulgar or uncultivated. His ability to recognize and embody refined taste, therefore, reinforces his position within the dominant social hierarchy. In this sense, the Agricultural Show scene demonstrates how class identity is performed not only through material wealth but through manners, posture, speech, and taste, all of which function as visible expressions of *habitus*.

In this case, however, the performance of class also operates on another level, as Rodolphe deliberately stages his social refinement and upper-class identity as part of his attempt to seduce Emma. Rightfully assuming that Emma is a bored housewife in the countryside, he purposely portrays himself in the light of the *Grand Notables*. This becomes visible throughout the Agricultural Show, where Rodolphe consistently presents himself as a refined member of society. He speaks about art and music with ease, associating these markers of cultivated taste with emotion and passion (156). In doing so, he constructs an image in which education, cultural refinement, and sophistication appear inherently desirable, linking intellectual cultivation to pleasure and social prestige. To reinforce his image, he then calls out the impropriety of the Agricultural Show:

Aren't you revolted by this conspiracy of society? Is there a single feeling that it does not condemn? The nobles of instincts, the purest of sympathies, are persecuted, slandered, and, if two poor souls do finally meet, all's organised so they cannot consort (158).

Rodolphe continuously performs his class identity while subtly diminishing the provincial society around him, using the image of upper-class refinement to appeal to Emma's desires for sophistication and social elevation. In this sense, class performance becomes instrumentalized as a means of seduction: Rodolphe consciously mobilizes the manners, tastes, and confidence associated with the cultural *habitus* to gain power over Emma and draw her into the world he represents. The seductive performance of class identity becomes a weapon to conquer.

The narrative form strengthens the performative aspect. Although Rodolphe's gestures and speech represent refinement and aristocratic ease, the narration exposes this as constructed. His language draws on familiar cultural clichés of art, functioning as rehearsed markers of distinction. Crucially, the Agricultural Show itself is already a staged social spectacle. It is a carefully organized public event in which visibility, display, and recognition structure all interactions. Rodolphe's performance of refinement therefore takes place within an already theatricalized space, where social roles are collectively enacted rather than naturally given. The narrative distance from his perspective presents his self-fashioning as strategic. In this sense, Flaubert does not simply depict individual performance but reveals a doubly staged reality in which both social space and identity are constructed through performance.

All in all, what emerges is that class in *Madame Bovary* is not only a fixed economic position, but a system that is continuously produced and reproduced through the *habitus*, and above all, performance. Across Monsieur Homais and Rodolphe Boulanger, class appears less as something individuals simply are and

more as something they constantly perform through speech, bodily comportment, education, judgement, and social interaction. The upper-class *habitus* becomes visible as a set of internalized dispositions that generate practices that both express and reinforce social position, forcing a certain performative aspect to achieve success in the system and through this system. It becomes visible as a form of power to establish one's status and to fulfill one's desires.

This framework inevitably sustains certain kinds of relationships between people, ones that are structured by performativity, social mobility, power, and self-centeredness. With this, Buber's relational system of *I-It* and *I-Thou* again becomes relevant in the analysis. What becomes visible through the novel is that both Monsieur Homais and Rodolphe engage in *I-It* relationships, meaning treating others as objects of function, value, or utility. These relationships are structured specifically in a way in which individuals view both themselves and others in terms of performance and exchange, ultimately stripping an individual of their subjective value. In Monsieur Homais' case, it repeatedly becomes obvious how most of his interactions are driven by performance, and by the drive for distinction as well as self-importance. Therefore, he engages with others in a way that is influenced by competition and vanity, treating others solely based on utility: whether they are useful for his professional, social, or personal advancement. This becomes visible in many scenes, one of them concerning Emma's death. With the excuse of helping Charles, Monsieur Homais keeps on going about town and bringing Charles aromatics for Emma's room. Though it becomes visible quickly that this is not an act of niceness, but one of self-serving nature. It is described: "Although a Philosopher, Monsieur Homais respected the dead. And without bearing any ill-will towards poor Charles, he came back in the evening to keep vigil over the body, bearing with him three volumes, and a pocket-book, in order to make notes" (359). The only reason Monsieur Homais comes over to help Charles is so that he can examine Emma's dead body. His *petite-bourgeois* drive for academic and social advancement and his obsession with intellectuality led him to use this tragic situation for his benefit. This

again shows the way Monsieur Homais exploits others for his own benefit, assessing situations based on the way he can benefit from them.

The same pattern can be seen in the way Rodolphe engages with others, specifically with Emma. As established, his relationship to Emma is constructed on the basis of seduction and on his own need for a sexually adventurous life. Tired of his old mistress, he concludes: “Ah, Madame Bovary,[...], is a deal prettier than her, and certainly fresher. Virginie is becoming decidedly too fat. She’s so tiresome with those pleasures of hers” (141). His desire to seduce Emma does not stem from an authentic interest in her as a person, but from a selfish need to fulfill his desires, ultimately making her an object of utility. This aligns with Buber’s idea of the *I-It* relationship.

Having established that both characters are deeply influenced by class society in the way they perform in conversations and in the way they relate to others, it is important to inspect how class also forms the way they relate to themselves. For this, Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of *bad faith* offers a useful way of further specifying how the performative dimension of class operates within *Madame Bovary*. Monsieur Homais’ self-perception as a rational, enlightened figure depends on the constant enactment of intellectual authority. His speeches, references, and moral positions are not only attempts to accumulate cultural capital and perform upper-class *habitus* but also ways of inhabiting the role of the modern, progressive *bourgeois* thinker, in which he fully invests. Rather than acknowledging the partial or inconsistent nature of his knowledge, he consistently performs certainty and authority, as if his alignment with Enlightenment discourse were self-evident and complete. Monsieur Homais’ beliefs further deepen this reading of *bad faith*. He strongly defends the values of the French Revolution, despite the irony that the Revolution ultimately enabled the rise of the *bourgeoisie*, the very class that structurally dominates and marginalizes the *petite bourgeois* position he himself occupies. In this sense, he remains so invested in his ideological self-understanding that he fails to recognize

how the historical and social consequences of the Revolution have contributed to the limitations and contradictions of his own social reality. His identity is therefore sustained through a refusal to critically acknowledge the conditions that produce it. Ultimately, Monsieur Homais lives a life almost entirely structured by *petite-bourgeois* values and the need to socially ascend, leaving little room for genuine self-reflection or the pursuit of freedom beyond social respectability and recognition. His supposedly rational and scientific worldview, therefore, becomes a form of self-illusion, trapping him within the very social logic he believes himself to transcend. He has internalized his social role so deeply that, in Sartrean terms, he can no longer recognize the truth of his own condition or the contradictions embedded within it. Rather than living authentically, Monsieur Homais continuously reproduces an identity founded on performance, conformity, competition, and ideological self-deception.

Rodolphe, on the other hand, does not practice in *bad faith*; his performance of class identity seems strictly strategic and comfortable. His upper-class refinement is not only embodied *habitus* but also consciously performed as a social role: the detached, sophisticated aristocrat who stands above provincial mediocrity. In his interactions with Emma, he does not simply possess distinction, but actively enacts it, adjusting his speech, tastes, and attitudes to match the image of aristocratic ease. He purposely connects all elements of upper-class taste and etiquette with desire to make Emma fall into his trap and successfully seduce her. So, while he does play into the role of the aristocrat, he does so in a conscious manner, which in turn is more representative of Buber's *I-It* relationships than of a proper disillusionment with his own identity, as seen in Monsieur Homais.

Overall, it has been established that both characters constantly perform class identity through manners, speech, education, and refinement to gain recognition, distinction, or power. Through Monsieur Homais and Rodolphe Boulanger, it becomes visible that etiquette and taste operate as forms of social performance tied to

ambition, competition, status anxiety, and self-centered desires. At the same time, these performances deeply shape their human relationships, as interactions are often driven less by authentic connection than by self-interest, social aspiration, and self-importance. Ultimately, this also reveals how class can become internalized within the individual, shaping not only how people are perceived by others but also how they understand themselves and relate to the world around them.

3.1.3 Consumption, Imagination and Mobility: The Case of Emma Bovary

Simultaneously, it is important to examine the way Emma specifically engages with the tastes and etiquette of the upper-class. Unlike characters such as Rodolphe and Monsieur Homais, Emma's relationship to *bourgeois* and aristocratic culture emerges from aspiration and imagination, something that becomes particularly visible during her years at the convent. During her stay there, she feels little connection to the pastoral countryside imagery presented in religious teachings and Bible study, largely because she herself comes from a rural environment and therefore does not experience these depictions as desirable. Instead, she is far more captivated by the stories told by an elderly maid working at the convent. These stories were filled with passion, romance, heartbreak, and, above all, wealthy and sophisticated men: "[...] gentlemen as brave as lions, as gentle as lambs, as virtuous as no one ever is, always well dressed, and who cry in bucketloads" (39-40). This exposed Emma to an imagined world of refinement and emotional intensity that stands in sharp contrast to the provincial reality of her own upbringing. It is described how she would get obsessed with literature by authors like Walter Scott and would start to form an idealized version of the life represented in these novels.

She would have liked to have lived in an old manor-house, like those châtelaines in their long dresses, who, under the trefoil of pointed arches, whiled away their days leaning on the stone and cupping their chin, to watch the white plumed knight on a black horse gallop towards them from the depths of the countryside (40).

Emma's idea of refinement, etiquette, and taste is mostly connected to the romantic imagery she has consumed. From Bourdieu's perspective, these stories function as early forms of cultural capital that structure Emma's imagination, providing her with socially coded images of refinement, luxury, and emotional intensity. This exposure produces an internalized set of dispositions within her: Emma begins to associate value, beauty, and desire with aristocratic lifestyles that she has never actually inhabited. Emma's idea of refinement, etiquette, and taste is therefore not grounded in lived social practice, but in the consumption of culturally produced fantasies that carry the symbolic authority of higher-class life. In this sense, her desires illustrate Bourdieu's argument that taste is socially constructed: what appears as individual longing is in fact the internalization of classed cultural representations. Her engagement with the *habitus* is formed through exposure to idealized forms of legitimate culture, producing a persistent gap between her aspirations and her actual social position.

This is also what ultimately shapes Emma's understanding of class when she encounters it in real life, most clearly during the La Vaubyessard ball. There, the behavior of the guests appears to perfectly align with her imagined idea of aristocratic life: refinement is expressed through manners, elegance, and effortless social interaction, beautiful decorations, and rich architecture. Immersed in this environment, Emma temporarily loses awareness of her own outsider position, as she becomes absorbed into the atmosphere of the performance itself. It is described: "But under the lightning-flashes of the present moment, her past life, so clear up to now, faded away entirely, and she almost doubted that she had ever lived it" (55). In this sense, she comes to equate the outward display of etiquette and the possession of refined goods with class itself. As a result, class appears to her not as a fixed structure, but as something that can be accessed and reproduced through the correct set of behaviors and possessions.

The use of focalization in this scene immerses the reader in Emma's perception, making her reading of the La Vaubyessard ball appear immediate and convincing as an experience of aristocratic life. At the same time, this immersion is subtly destabilized by narrative distance, which prevents her interpretation from being fully endorsed. What appears through Emma's perspective as the reality of class is thus quietly revealed as a misreading produced by desire and social imagination. In this way, focalization both generates the illusion of class authenticity and exposes its constructed nature.

After the ball, it is described how she puts away her clothing from the night of the ball and how she starts to reminisce:

Nevertheless, she was resigned: she reverently folded away in the chest of her drawers her beautiful costume, right down to her satin slippers, whose soles had been yellowed by the parquet's beeswax. Her heart was like them: rubbed against wealth, it had been left a surface deposit which would never wash off (60).

It is visible how specifically wealth and possessions become a marker of the upper-class to her, which in turn to her signifies the life she had imagined in the convent. This sets off a central problematic in Emma, which is a compulsive need to consume, to achieve her desired life, as she becomes convinced that class identity can be achieved through consumption. The way she engages with consumption is heavily influenced by her lived experience, which is fundamentally structured by her position as a woman within nineteenth-century French society. In the aftermath of the *Napoleonic Code*, French social organization was increasingly codified through a patriarchal legal framework. This consolidated a strict division between the public sphere, associated with political participation, labour, and civic authority, and the private sphere, associated with femininity, domesticity, and moral respectability. Within this structure, women's legal and economic autonomy was significantly curtailed, rendering them increasingly dependent on male relatives, particularly husbands. *Bourgeois* culture further reinforced this separation by idealizing domestic

femininity and respectability. The result was a deeply hierarchical social order in which gender and class were mutually reinforcing, sustaining systems of control while also maintaining the *bourgeois* promise of merit, progress, and economic rationality. Building on this historical context, Wright has argued that gendered forms of inequality are not external to class relations but are embedded within their very structure, producing complex and often contradictory positions for women within capitalist social relations. In relation to Emma, his discussion of the figure of the housewife is particularly illuminating. Housewives do not participate directly in wage labour; as a result, their class position is mediated through the economic status of their husbands, aligning their material conditions with the household rather than with independent economic activity. In Emma's case, Charles' economic reality, which is also her own, does not correspond to the life she desires. Lacking meaningful economic autonomy, she increasingly turns to consumption as a means of escape, gradually spending beyond what is possible and eventually beyond what is sustainable. Her longing for the lifestyle she associates with the upper class begins to dominate her decisions. Her disregard for Charles' limited means contributes to a progressive detachment from reality, spending more than is possible and trying to attain a lifestyle that is not accessible to her.

What eventually becomes evident through this condition is that Emma cannot form genuine *I-Thou* relationships, even though she might want to. All the relationships, whether with Charles, Léon, or Rodolphe, are constructed within the sphere of utility. They all serve her means to escape a life that she deems unsuitable. Her illusion creates an obsession with a prosperous, upper-class lifestyle, which to her signifies a romantic, fulfilled life, rich in emotions. This, in turn, fosters an increasingly objectifying stance toward her relationships, gradually developing into a form of self-centeredness in how she perceives and relates to others. However, it is important to stress that this should not be equated with a similar kind of calculated selfishness as seen in figures such as Monsieur Homais. Within the constraints of nineteenth-century French society, Emma's autonomy is significantly limited. Her

actions are less an expression of deliberate egoism than of longing, an attempt to reach ideals of love, escape, and a desired life that remains fundamentally beyond her control.

Inevitably, this also influences the way Emma engages with herself. She represents another case of *bad faith*, as her entire relationship to class and herself is structured through imagined identities. Throughout the novel, she repeatedly adopts and identifies with idealized roles, like the romantic heroine, the aristocratic lady, or the passionate lover, without recognizing the gap between these identities and her actual social reality. In moments such as the La Vaubyessard ball, she temporarily inhabits the performance of aristocratic life so fully that she falsely recognizes it as authenticity itself. Her subjectivity is therefore shaped by a continuous oscillation between lived constraint and imagined identity, where the performance and consumption become a substitute for stable self-understanding. She is constantly living in a self-constructed lie of her own identity, which she cannot overcome. She continuously loses her authenticity and a clear vision of who she is as a person.⁶

Overall, Emma's relationship to class, taste, and identity reveals how deeply her desires are shaped by socially produced fantasies rather than lived experience. From her early exposure to romantic literature to her later encounters with aristocratic society, she consistently interprets class as something performative and attainable through consumption, etiquette, and appearance. Yet this belief is fundamentally misaligned with the structural realities of her position as a woman in nineteenth-century provincial France, where both economic dependence and gendered constraints sharply limit her autonomy. As a result, her attempts to bridge the gap between imagination and reality intensify rather than resolve it, producing increasingly strained relationships with others and with herself. Ultimately, Emma's tragedy lies in this persistent disjunction: she lives through borrowed ideals of

⁶ Authenticity in this case is to be understood as her own, uninfluenced personal truth. One has to take into account, though, that Emma has lived her entire life in a fantasy, so in some regards she lives as authentically as she can for a person who never really had a sense of self.

romance and refinement that promise fulfillment but can never be grounded in her actual social world, leaving her caught between aspiration and constraint without a stable sense of self.

3.2. Feeling Past Each Other: Losing Empathy in Self-Absorption

Throughout *Madame Bovary*, relationships are repeatedly mediated by ambition, consumption, performance, and social aspiration, reducing others to objects of utility, validation, or escape. Whether through Homais' *bourgeois* self-interest, Rodolphe's strategic seduction, or Emma's longing for an imagined aristocratic existence, the novel consistently demonstrates how class society encourages forms of relational detachment that undermine genuine recognition of others as autonomous subjects. This chapter now shifts the focus toward the emotional consequences of these structures and the way they influence the characters' ability to empathize with one another. It aims to analyze how the characters are impacted in their capacity to empathize and to move beyond the logic of social competition, performance, and self-interest imposed by their class positions and internalized *habitus*. Examining empathy, therefore, allows for a deeper understanding of how class not only organizes material and social life in the novel but also fundamentally shapes the emotional and ethical dimensions of human relationships. For this, the chapter explores three specific scenes from *Madame Bovary* involving the same three characters, Monsieur Homais, Rodolphe Boulanger, and Emma Bovary, applying the theoretical framework that has been developed throughout the thesis.

The first character to be discussed is Monsieur Homais, who, throughout the novel, stood out for his selfish, self-serving, and mobility-oriented behavior. He consistently views others in terms of their utility and what they can contribute to his life, a perspective that profoundly shapes his relationships with other people. Moreover, his self-identification as a member of the *petite bourgeoisie* further influences the way he engages with others and with himself within society. All these factors heavily impact his capacity for empathy, which is visible in multiple scenes in

the novel. One of the most prominent ones is found in the second part of the novel, when Monsieur Homais and Charles Bovary want to operate on Hippolyte's club foot. After reading a medical article describing a new surgical technique, Monsieur Homais proposes to Emma that Charles should operate on Hippolyte. Enthralled by the idea, Homais imagines Yonville becoming a modern and progressive town known for advanced medical procedures. Seemingly aware of Emma's ambitions, he presents the operation as an opportunity for Charles to gain prestige and recognition, especially since he intends to publicize the achievement in the newspapers, allowing Emma to enjoy the status of having a celebrated husband. They quickly persuade Charles, and Monsieur Homais sets off to visit Hippolyte, trying to convince him of this modern operation (188-189). He frames his suggestion as a benevolent act to help him:

Yet [...] it's no concern of mine. It's for your own sake. Out of humanity! I would like to see you, my friend, unburdened of your dreadful lameness, with this swaying of the lumbar region, which, whatever you say, must be of a considerable disadvantage to you in the exercise of your occupation (189).

He quickly gets frustrated when Hippolyte does not immediately agree to his suggestion, claiming he cannot understand how he can deny himself the benefits of science (189). As soon as Hippolyte agrees, Charles and Monsieur Homais get to planning, and Monsieur Homais is visibly excited and provides Charles with all the necessary means. It is described: "It was Monsieur Homais, who, from first thing that morning, had gotten all these things ready, as much to dazzle the multitude as to delude himself" (191). After seemingly finishing the operation successfully, Homais writes, as promised, an article for the newspaper, praising Charles' talents. After a few days, though, Hippolyte is doing badly and seems to be on the brink of dying. Charles attempts to help Hippolyte but ultimately fails (193-196). Monsieur Homais' response to the incident is strikingly devoid of empathy, specifically to Hippolyte. Firstly, when the priest visits Hippolyte to pray for him, Homais dismisses the gesture, complaining that such mysticism only weakens the patient's morale (196).

Later, when another doctor is called in to intervene, Homais is forced into a revealing exchange with him. After Doctor Canivet exposes the absurdity of Homais' delusions, Homais reacts in a particularly revealing manner:

Homais suffered, listening to his speech, and he concealed his unease beneath a courtier's smile, needing to treat Monsieur Canivet with care, his prescriptions sometimes reaching as far as Yonville; neither did he take Bovary's part, nor make so much as a single observation, and, abandoning his principles, he sacrificed his dignity to the weightier interests of his business (197).

What is visible here is that instead of showing empathy for Hippolyte's situation, Monsieur Homais is concerned with his own status. The passage reveals that Monsieur Homais is ultimately motivated less by science, morality, or loyalty than by ambition and self-preservation. When the operation fails, he distances himself from responsibility and prioritizes his business connections and his reputation in front of a higher-ranking doctor over empathy or integrity. This is also specifically visible within the structure of the narration. The persistent use of irony destabilizes Homais's self-presentation as rational, scientific, and humane. At the same time, the narrative maintains distance from Homais's perspective, preventing his self-justifications from being taken as reliable. This results in a satirical framing. In this way, the narrative does not simply depict a lack of empathy, but formally exposes how *bourgeois* self-perception transforms harm into justified progress through language and social display.

Applying Rousseau to this scene, it becomes evident that within Monsieur Homais *amour propre* succeeds over *amour de soi*. Monsieur Homais' idea to operate is primarily motivated by social recognition, prestige, and professional advancement, rather than genuine compassion or a natural desire to alleviate suffering. Although he frames the operation as a humanitarian act intended to improve Hippolyte's life, his language and actions reveal that his true concern lies in the potential fame the procedure could bring to himself and the town of Yonville. Furthermore, he disregards his ethical responsibilities as a medical professional when he persuades

Charles to operate on Hippolyte, despite being aware that Charles, and likely any other local doctor, lacks the necessary expertise to carry out such a complex procedure successfully. This reflects the logic of *amour propre*, as it shows that Monsieur Homais' self-love is socially produced, rooted in comparison, reputation, and the desire for superiority in the eyes of others. Rousseau argues that in the state of *amour de soi*, pity, similar to empathy, moderates the instinct for self-preservation and inclines individuals to avoid causing harm to others. Monsieur Homais, however, demonstrates a diminished capacity for such pity because his thinking is structured by social ambition and *bourgeois* ideals of progress and status. Hippolyte ceases to exist as a suffering individual and instead becomes a means through which Monsieur Homais can demonstrate personal superiority and scientific advancement. This instrumentalization of another human being mirrors Rousseau's argument that social inequality, such as the one produced by class, transforms human relationships into competitive and utilitarian ones. The aftermath of the failed surgery further exposes this dominance of *amour propre*. Once the operation collapses into disaster, Monsieur Homais immediately distances himself from responsibility. Rather than expressing empathy for Hippolyte's suffering or loyalty toward Charles, he becomes preoccupied with preserving his reputation and professional relationships. The narration explicitly emphasizes this when Homais silently endures Doctor Canivet's criticism to protect his business interests and his reputation. His willingness to sacrifice his dignity to the weightier interests of his business and social standing illustrates Rousseau's claim that a divided society encourages individuals to value appearance, status, and social advantage above authentic feeling. After all, Monsieur Homais' prevailing sense of *amour propre* inhibits him from expressing genuine empathy towards any character in this situation; he keeps on being concerned about himself, his reputation, and his alliances with more prestigious doctors.

His incapacity to show empathy towards Hippolyte can be further explained through Sara Ahmed's concept of stickiness, specifically through the body of the worker. Ahmed explained that, for example, the label of "ordinary" sticks to specific

class figures like the worker, the housewife, or the farmer, which in turn reinforces their position. In Hippolyte's case, a stableman at the inn, the label of "ordinary" is already attached to him, and through this designation, further classed meanings are assigned. Within a class-based social perspective, his body is read through a logic of lack: a lack of refinement and a lack of social value. Additionally, due to his illness, his body is attached with the label of lacking in health, being unhealthy. As a result, additional labels such as "stupid," "improvable," or "fixable" come to be associated with him. From Monsieur Homais' *petite-bourgeois* standpoint, shaped by his desire for recognition as a man of science and honour, and through his prevailing sense of superiority, these perceptions are not questioned but instead reinforce the idea that Hippolyte, as an ordinary man, lacking the intelligence to care for himself, is an object to be corrected and improved. From this perspective, Monsieur Homais recognizes his actions as self-evidently justified, even when they are harmful. As Ahmed has argued, empathy, in a system that pre-describes labels and emotions to people, can only be limited. Monsieur Homais' empathy towards Hippolyte's situation is seemingly nonexistent because he has already determined that he is an object to be fixed, to be refined, and he himself is the man who has the status, knowledge, and authority to decide this. This again reflects the deluded mindset of the *petite bourgeoisie*, as Monsieur Homais, a pharmacist, lacks the authority to determine the appropriate course of action. Instead, his behavior reveals a drive toward social display and performativity, which not only shapes how he presents himself to others but also distorts his own judgment, ultimately to Hippolyte's detriment. In such circumstances, empathy is displaced by a drive for self-optimization, social mobility, and the performance of refinement, ultimately aimed at gaining status and recognition.

Rodolphe, similar to Monsieur Homais, constantly acts selfishly regarding his connections with other characters in the novel. Being self-involved with his own needs and his superior class status, Rodolphe does not concern himself with the emotions of others, constantly pursuing connection based on his desires, needs, and

ideals. This, in turn, strongly impacts his capacity to empathize. This becomes particularly evident in the scene in which he attempts to end his affair with Emma by composing a letter. He carefully constructs it to appear benevolent and considerate, positioning himself in a favorable light. He claims that his decision is motivated by concern for her happiness and best interests, suggesting that she has not seriously considered the implications of their plan to run away together (219). In order to make his justification more convincing, he searches for an appropriate excuse to bring their affair to a close: "If I were to say to her that my fortune is lost?... Ah no! And besides, that would make no difference. It would simply start up again later. It is impossible to make such a woman hear reason!" (219). He argues that their relationship is bound to end in any case, as they will eventually grow tired of one another and Emma will, at some point, come to feel remorseful about their affair, claiming that he wishes to spare her from future pain. Calculatingly, he adds that it is fate that their relationship has to end, as he thinks the word produces a proper effect. He wonders whether the letter might make him appear stingy, but ultimately dismisses the concern, determined that the relationship must come to an end (219-220). After adding further passages that seem to express care and consideration for Emma, he, for a moment, concludes writing by stating, "That's everything, it seems to me. Ah, just one more thing lest she come around to badger me" (220). So he adds that he will be away traveling, so as not to fall into further temptation of being with her. After finishing the letter, he adds some sprinkles of water onto it, to make it appear he had been crying: "Poor little woman! [...] She will reckon me more insensitive than a rock; it needed a few tears on here; but, for my part, I cannot cry; it's not my fault" (221). He then closes the letter and, before going to bed, smokes three pipes (221). This scene shows how a seemingly emotional, empathic letter was constructed in an unemotional, un-empathic way. It becomes evident that his apparent empathy toward Emma is largely performative, crafted to create the impression that he cares about her while ultimately enabling him to end the relationship. In this sense, he instrumentalized empathy as a strategy to achieve his desired outcome while avoiding conflict and emotional repercussions. This is also

strengthened within the construction of the narrative. It reinforces this artificiality through focalization and irony, as Rodolphe's reflections are presented in a way that closely follows his own justification while simultaneously exposing their constructed nature. At the same time, narrative distance prevents these justifications from being seen as truthful, revealing the gap between the emotional effect he intends to produce and the self-interested logic underneath it. In this sense, the letter appears not as an expression of empathy but as a narrative performance of emotion shaped by social language.

Viewing this scene from Rousseau's lens, it is obvious that, also in Rodolphe's case, *amour propre* takes the place of *amour de soi*. Rodolphe's actions are governed not by natural pity or empathy for Emma's emotional suffering but by a socially mediated concern for how he will appear and how best to preserve his autonomy and class position. This is evident in the calculated structure of the letter itself, which simulates emotional depth while serving a fundamentally self-protective function. His repeated efforts to justify the breakup as being for her own good, his concern about appearing stingy, and his deliberate staging of emotional authenticity all demonstrate that feeling has been replaced by performance. Within Rousseau's framework, this can be read as a consequence of *amour propre*: Rodolphe is less concerned with Emma's actual suffering than with managing the image of himself as a considerate, rational, and socially superior man who ends the affair "properly." Furthermore, Rousseau's account of the rise of comparison and social inequality helps explain why Rodolphe can detach so easily. As a member of the higher class, his relationship to Emma is structured by difference and hierarchy rather than mutual recognition grounded in pity or empathy. Emma is not encountered as an equal subject of suffering but as someone whose emotions can be anticipated, managed, and ultimately dismissed. His claim that it is fated that the relationship must end illustrates this shift: responsibility is displaced into an abstract justification that masks personal self-interest, while also playing with the romantic imagery that he knows Emma has internalized. Empathy here becomes strategically constructed,

shaped by social expectations, class position, and the need to maintain control over one's image. Empathy, therefore, does not disappear entirely, but is transformed into something performative, used to justify separation rather than to respond to suffering. This again aligns with Rodolphe's tendency to weaponize his class position for his own needs, only that in this case, he weaponizes empathy to remove himself from a situation he deems uncomfortable.

This argument is deepened when applying Ahmed's theory of bodily worlds to the scene. As Ahmed argued, the worlds we inhabit condition how individuals experience and interpret emotions, which, in turn, create unbridgeable divisions. Rodolphe clearly inhabits a different bodily world than Emma, as he lives a life of privilege, money, power, and freedom. As an upper-class landowner, Rodolphe approaches his relationship with Emma from a position of emotional detachment and social security. For him, the affair is temporary, manageable, and ultimately disposable. Emma, by contrast, experiences the relationship as emotionally totalizing and tied to her desire to escape the limitations of her provincial *bourgeois* existence. Their emotional investments are therefore profoundly unequal. Rodolphe is aware of Emma's emotional dependence, yet he cannot truly inhabit or understand the intensity of her experience because his own social position shields him from the consequences she faces. This gap between their bodily worlds becomes particularly visible in the construction of the letter itself. Rodolphe attempts to simulate empathy by performing the outward signs of emotion: careful wording, expressions of concern, even artificial tears. Yet these gestures remain calculated rather than emotional. Rodolphe's empathy is inhibited because he does not actually share Emma's emotional reality but instead imagines and manages it from a distance shaped by class and gender privilege. His empathy, therefore, becomes performative, not because emotion is absent entirely, but because the social and emotional distance between them cannot truly be overcome. Furthermore, the scene reveals how emotional relations themselves are structured by hierarchy. Rodolphe possesses the social freedom to leave the relationship without serious consequences, whereas

Emma bears the emotional and social risks of abandonment. Their differing bodily worlds thus produce an unequal emotional situation in which Rodolphe can aestheticize and stage feeling while remaining fundamentally detached from Emma's suffering. Empathy, in this case, is structurally diminished and at the same time instrumentalized for self-serving desires. At the same time, it reinforces class positions, as empathy seems to fail at the border of the imagination of real-life conditions.

Finally, it becomes imperative to analyze Emma's character and her inability to show empathy. Emma, who, as has been established, is heavily influenced by fantasies of a romantic upper-class lifestyle, values superficial traits such as status, wealth, and recognition. Most of her relationships are utility-oriented, as she is constantly searching for salvation from her unhappy life. Consequently, her capacity to empathize with others is restricted. This is visible in multiple scenes, but most prominently in scenes involving her husband Charles. One such scene can be found in the second part of the novel, after Charles' operation on Hippolyte fails. After another, more experienced doctor takes over the case, Charles remains at home, overwhelmed by anxiety. Tormented by his actions, he fears that he may have potentially become a murderer and obsessively worries about the consequences the failed procedure might have for his reputation, including public disgrace and possible prosecution (199). Meanwhile, Emma is likewise described as suffering, though not because of the possible consequences of the failed operation or out of concern for Charles. Rather, she is frustrated with herself for ever having believed that Charles was capable of accomplishing something remarkable (200). While Charles is visibly suffering, being described as pale and uneasy, Emma fails to recognize his distress. Completely consumed by her resentment toward him, she assumes that he feels nothing at all, that he is incapable of perceiving the ridicule surrounding him, and that he remains fundamentally oblivious to the gravity of the situation (200). She looks at him in complete disregard and hatred:

Everything about him irritated her now, his face, his clothes, what he did not say, his whole person, in short his existence. She repented of her past virtuousness as of a felony, and what was left broke up under the furious blows of her pride. She took delight in all the wicked ironies of the triumphant adulteress. The memory of her lover came back to her with giddy charm: she cast her soul upon it, swept towards this image by a fresh enthusiasm; and Charles seemed to her so detached from life, so permanently absent, so ridiculous and crushed, that it was as though he was about to expire and would suffer the pangs of death under her very eyes (201).

When Charles then looks for comfort in Emma, trying to kiss her, telling her he loves her, she screams at him to leave her alone and escapes the room. The same evening, Emma meets Rodolphe to have sexual intercourse, seemingly also to spite Charles (201-202). What becomes evident in this scene is Emma's inability to empathize with Charles' situation. Rather than recognizing his guilt, anxiety, and emotional distress, she responds with anger and resentment toward him, to the extent that she convinces herself she is justified in betraying him with Rodolphe. Her primary concern lies in the implications the failed operation has for her own life and aspirations, while she remains incapable of acknowledging that Charles is himself tormented by the possibility of having nearly caused another person's death. This is also structurally enhanced by the narrative construction of the scene. While the scene is largely filtered through Emma's perspective, allowing her resentment and disappointment to structure the representation of Charles, the narration simultaneously prevents her viewpoint from being fully convincing. Charles's suffering is presented more immediately, thereby creating a contrast with Emma's internally mediated perception. This narrative contrast exposes how her judgment is shaped by projection rather than the recognition of Charles, as the narrative subtly reveals what her focalization excludes. In this sense, the narrative already exposes the limits of Emma's perception.

The reasoning, though, behind her lack of empathy for Charles is again explainable through Rousseau's differentiation of *amour propre* and *amour de soi*. The structural conditions of class and gender fostered a strong sense of *amour propre*

in Emma, as her strong inclinations towards mobility, utility, and consumerism instilled in her an approach to human relationships based on performance, status, and appearance. Emma's desires are shaped by fantasies of an elevated social position, in which love, marriage, and identity are measured against ideals of wealth, refinement, and status. From this perspective, Charles is not encountered as an autonomous subject capable of suffering, but as a figure whose value is defined through Emma's comparative social gaze. After the failed operation on Hippolyte, Charles' anxiety and moral torment do not register as expressions of human vulnerability; instead, they are interpreted through Emma's gaze, one that is permeated by appearances and social ascension. Because *amour propre* is sustained by the logic of comparison, Charles is perceived primarily in terms of his failure to match Emma's imagined ideal of his success, which would, in turn, create a distinction from other members of society, which is something she deems vital in achieving her dream of a romantic, rich life. This prevents any form of pity or empathy from emerging. Emma's inability to empathize is therefore a consequence of a social order that replaces immediate human compassion, the natural sense of pity, and empathy with status-driven comparison and performativity.

In Emma's case, the dimension of gender is also important to consider. When Rousseau argues that in an unequal society, human relationships are based on comparison and competitiveness, not only is class a vital aspect of that inequality, but also gender. This adds to her layer of frustration as it is her helplessness in achieving her goals of what she deems a proper life that makes her dependent on Charles' success. As a result, her emotional world becomes increasingly shaped by resentment and comparison, since Charles' failures are experienced not only as personal disappointments but as obstacles to her own imagined social identity. In this framework, empathy is suppressed, first by Emma's disappointment as her imagined romantic world begins to collapse, an ideal she believed she could achieve through attaining a higher social status, and second by the structural conditions of inequality that have shaped her perception. She has been conditioned to equate status and

performative social success with happiness, with romance, and with the life she had always wanted.

This can be further elaborated through Ahmed's theory of stickiness. As Ahmed argues, if a certain body has often been touched by a specific affect, it makes it appear as an inherent quality to that body. These affects can be manifold, but, as established, are also connected to class. In the case of Emma and Charles, Charles' body has been repeatedly touched by the affects of disappointment and labels like inadequacy and failure. These affects, for Emma, stick to Charles through his inability to make her feel strong romantic emotions, passion, and to give her the life she had imagined. This, though, can be attributed to his class positioning in the *petty-bourgeoisie*. To her, members of the upper classes, such as the Vicomte and Rodolphe, are sticky with romance, excitement, and happiness, as she strongly connects these emotions with their class position, because of the way romantic storytelling has influenced her. Looking at these opposite sides of sticky affects, she is unable to empathize with Charles, because she already pre-described labels and emotions to him. This makes it impossible for her to actually feel empathy with Charles, as Emma encounters him not as a neutral subject, but as someone already marked by the emotional associations of mediocrity and social limitation. Furthermore, this correlates with another aspect of Ahmed's theory, as Emma can only relate to Charles' situation through her own pre-structured expectations, rather than through an immediate or unmediated access to his experience. Empathy, after Ahmed, is shaped by one's own perceptions, assumptions, and in this case, Emma's empathy is mediated by her perception of Charles as being incapable and disappointing. His anxiety after the failed operation, therefore, fails to register as legitimate suffering within Emma's perfection, as they are overshadowed by the disappointment and social failure that already governs her perception of him. Consequently, empathy in this situation is limited by Emma's perception, in which certain objects, lifestyles, and figures are already saturated with positive affect, while others are marked by disappointment, mediocrity, or failure. This is a gap she

continuously fails to bridge, and so is inherently limited in her capacity to show empathy.

3.3 Illusions and Performativity: A Concluding Synthesis on *Madame Bovary*

What can ultimately be deduced from this case study is that the prevailing class structures of *19th-century* France systematically restrict empathy among many characters in *Madame Bovary*. Across the characters of Monsieur Homais, Rodolphe Boulanger, and Emma Bovary, it has been visible that their emotional worlds were mediated through social ambition, competition, and utility, preventing genuine recognition of others as autonomous subjects, interpreting one another through the logic of status, mobility, and self-interest.

A central insight of the chapter is that class permeates emotional perception and recognition. Applying Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the chapter has shown how speech, bodily expressions, refinement, education, and cultural distinction function as embodied expressions of social position, shaping not only outward behavior but also the characters' perceptions, desires, and understanding of themselves. While Homais anxiously performs intellectual legitimacy and *bourgeois* respectability in pursuit of status, Rodolphe embodies an upper-class *habitus* that appears natural, allowing him to use refinement and distinction as forms of power and seduction. This, in turn, influences the way they relate to others, creating relationships that increasingly become structured through utility, ambition, competition, and self-interest rather than authentic mutual recognition. Furthermore, it also influences the way the characters relate to themselves. Homais becomes trapped within the ideological role of the enlightened *bourgeois* intellectual, reproducing a socially constructed identity that prevents genuine self-awareness. Meanwhile, Rodolphe consciously performs aristocratic sophistication as a strategic social role. In Emma's case, the *habitus* is influencing her imagination, as it becomes structured through the cultural ideals she consumes in novels and aristocratic environments, leading her to internalize upper-class values and forms of taste that remain disconnected from her

actual social position. As a result, Emma comes to perceive class as something attainable through consumption, etiquette, appearance, and performance. This persistent gap between imagination and reality fundamentally shapes her relationships with others, as Emma increasingly approaches people not as autonomous subjects but as possible means of escape from her dissatisfaction and social confinement. Also, Emma's self-perception is heavily influenced as she continuously adopts imagined identities without confronting the realities of her own social position.

This discovery has provided the base for further analysis of empathy in said characters. Through the close readings, it has become visible that the explored class structures and their influences on the characters restrict their ability for empathy. Drawing on Rousseau's distinction between *amour propre* and *amour de soi*, the chapter has shown how socially conditioned self-love, rooted in comparison, status, and recognition, repeatedly overrides natural pity and empathy. In each case, the characters' concern for appearance, prestige, or personal desire suppresses their capacity to genuinely empathize with suffering. Homais instrumentalized Hippolyte's body for scientific prestige and social advancement, Rodolphe transforms empathy itself into a calculated performance to preserve his own comfort and superiority, and Emma's obsession with romantic and social ideals prevents her from recognizing Charles' emotional pain. Ahmed's theories of stickiness and bodily worlds further reveal how empathy is conditioned by classed and gendered perceptions that pre-structure emotional understanding before interaction even occurs. Certain bodies and identities become attached to affects such as mediocrity, sophistication, failure, or refinement, shaping how characters emotionally interpret one another. As a result, empathy becomes limited because individuals no longer encounter others directly, but through socially produced assumptions, fantasies, and hierarchies tied to class and status.

Across these close readings, it also becomes evident that Flaubert's narrative form itself is crucial in exposing how empathy is distorted under class conditions. Through shifting focalization, ironic narrative distance, and the strategic use of social clichés, the novel rarely grants full authority to the characters' self-understandings. Instead, Homais's scientific rhetoric, Rodolphe's emotional language, and Emma's romantic imagination are all subtly reframed as performances shaped by socially coded discourses. The narration neither fully inhabits nor fully rejects their perspectives, but instead maintains a critical distance that reveals the gap between how characters interpret themselves and how their actions are structured by class logic. In this sense, empathy is not only restricted at the level of character interaction, but also formally destabilized at the level of narrative representation itself.

Finally, this chapter then shows that *Madame Bovary* portrays a society in which class infiltrates every layer of life: manners, desire, selfhood, relationships, and emotional experiences. These characters, though, are not inherently devoid of empathy; rather, empathy is diminished under the pressure and comfort of class society. *Bourgeois* society itself conditions people to live performatively, competitively, and self-referentially. In such a world, empathy becomes increasingly difficult because individuals are alienated both from others and from themselves in pursuit of status. This, finally, aligns with the working definition of empathy constructed in this thesis.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown how empathy in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Madame Bovary* is not represented as an inherent human quality or an unmediated, everyday practice but as something that is heavily restricted, redirected, or mediated by class society. While empathy is not naturally absent in the analyzed characters, it becomes visible that both novels depict a society that permeates the life of the characters in such a way that the structures of class decide what can be felt and recognized.

Empathy becomes a socially mediated emotion and dependent experience, which is not equal for all characters.

Empathy in both books is conditioned structurally, culturally, and ideologically. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the social structures of nineteenth-century English society, especially those surrounding marriage, gender, and class, impose systems of mediation and redirection upon empathy. These function to preserve social status and maintain established hierarchies. As the analysis has demonstrated, the characters are shaped by a social environment that encourages competition and comparison, transforming marriage and romantic relationships into forms of social exchange through which individuals seek recognition, security, and social advancement. Love and marriage thus operate as social economies that must be successfully negotiated to attain a desired position in society. Within such a framework, empathy becomes increasingly constrained, as relationships are governed by strategic considerations of status, respectability, and self-preservation. This dynamic is particularly evident among the depicted women, whose social value is largely determined by their ability to secure advantageous relationships and conform to dominant expectations of femininity. Consequently, social structures foster forms of rivalry that limit solidarity and emotional identification with others. Empathy is not simply absent. Rather, it is redirected and restricted by the demands of survival within a society that recognizes and rewards women only under highly specific social conditions. In *Madame Bovary*, the characters are profoundly shaped by the class structures that impact their perceptions of themselves, others, and the world around them. Class conditions their desires, aspirations, and social interactions, fostering constant competition in terms of wealth, education, social standing, and appearance. Flaubert presents a society governed by performance, distinction, and the pursuit of socially validated forms of success, in which outward appearances often take precedence over genuine human connection. Within such a world, empathy inevitably suffers. Rather than emerging as a spontaneous recognition of another person, it becomes mediated by concerns of status, self-interest, and social aspiration. Consequently, empathy is not merely

restricted but frequently transformed into a performative and instrumentalized practice, deployed to achieve particular social or personal ends. The novel therefore suggests that the erasure of empathy is not primarily a matter of survival, but a consequence of a social order characterized by superficiality, artificiality, and self-performance. As individuals become increasingly absorbed in maintaining identities and pursuing socially prescribed ideals, their capacity to engage genuinely with others is diminished, reducing human relationships to forms of calculation and social display.

In order to analyze and contextualize both books better, it has been important to consider the effect of the differing narrative strategies on the construction of empathy itself. In Austen's case, irony and free indirect discourse often align the reader with a shared perspective, making social judgements more morally understandable within a lightly satirical framework. Empathy and its absence are thus mediated through a narrator who encourages interpretation and moral positioning. In Flaubert, by contrast, focalization and narrative distance produce a more ambiguous relation to empathy. The narration frequently filters perception through the characters' limited understanding while simultaneously undermining it through irony. As a result, readers are positioned within shifting emotional and perceptual frameworks in which empathy is continually constructed and deconstructed rather than stabilized. Across both novels, narrative form does not simply represent empathy, but actively shapes its possibility, direction, and limits, determining how readers perceive, evaluate, and emotionally respond to the characters' social worlds.

Ultimately, both novels suggest that empathy deteriorates when social systems encourage individuals to value status over genuine human connection. Yet while Austen presents this limitation as a consequence of structural constraints that individuals must navigate, Flaubert portrays it as the result of a culture of performance and self-deception that reshapes the individual's entire emotional world. Together, the novels reveal two complementary dimensions of social influence on

empathy. One is rooted in external conditions of survival and social positioning, the other in the internalization of social values that transform how individuals understand themselves and relate to others. This finally proves the question posed in this thesis, consequently arguing that empathy is a socially mediated emotion, something that is inhibited, restricted, redirected, and conditioned by class society.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

La sottoscritta Alessa Maria Letzelter, matricola numero 905724, iscritta presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in European, American and Postcolonial Languages and Literature, autrice dell'elaborato finale/tesi di laurea "The Social Construction of Feeling: The Connection between Class and Empathy in Austen's Pride and Prejudice and Flaubert's Madame Bovary", relatore Stefano Ercolino, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

DICHIARA

- ✕ di NON aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura del suo elaborato finale/della sua tesi di laurea;

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