

## **LADY SUSAN VERNON: THE REPRESENTATION OF AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN IN A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *LADY SUSAN***

**Tesalonika Patras<sup>1</sup>, Isnawati Lydia Wantasen<sup>2</sup>, Arter Jodi Senduk<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Sam Ratulangi University, Indonesia

E-mail: [tesalonikapatras5@gmail.com](mailto:tesalonikapatras5@gmail.com); [istywantasen23@unsrat.ac.id](mailto:istywantasen23@unsrat.ac.id);  
[arterjodi\\_senduk@unsrat.ac.id](mailto:arterjodi_senduk@unsrat.ac.id)

**Abstract:** Female representation in literature reflects not only artistic imagination but also cultural ideologies about gender and power. This study aims to analyze the concept and portrayal of an independent woman in a patriarchal society through the character Lady Susan Vernon in Jane Austen's epistolary novel *Lady Susan* (1794, published posthumously in 1871). This qualitative research employs a feminist literary approach supported by two theoretical frameworks: Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, as presented in *The Second Sex* (1949), and Robert Stanton's theory of character and characterization, as discussed in *An Introduction to Fiction* (1965). De Beauvoir's notion of "woman as the other" and her idea of female autonomy emphasize women's capacity for self-determination and existential freedom beyond patriarchal constraints. Stanton's theory, on the other hand, assists in examining Lady Susan as a round and multidimensional character revealed through her actions, dialogues, and the perspectives of other characters. The findings show that Lady Susan challenges traditional femininity through intelligence, manipulation, and rhetorical skill traits that enable her to exert informal power within a male dominated society. Although her methods are morally ambiguous, Lady Susan exemplifies nonconformist female independence and resistance to patriarchal norms. This study concludes that Jane Austen subtly critiques patriarchal limitations by presenting a female protagonist who actively negotiates social boundaries to assert her agency and autonomy. The research is limited to textual analysis of the novel and does not include comparative or historical reception studies; thus, the results should be interpreted within the chosen theoretical frameworks.

**Keywords:** *Lady Susan, feminism, female independence, patriarchal society, character analysis*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literature serves as a mirror of social reality, reflecting complex structures of power, gender, and ideology that shape human life. In this sense, literary works are not merely

aesthetic expressions but also social representations capable of questioning and critiquing existing systems. Wellek and Warren (1949) emphasize that literature is closely related to the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of human experience. Among various literary genres, the novel possesses a distinctive capacity to portray social dynamics and construct complex characters. Abrams and Harpham (2012:226) describe the novel as a narrative form that provides wide space for developing intricate personalities and profound social conflicts. Jane Austen stands out as a novelist renowned for her perceptive depiction of gender relations and social hierarchy in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. One of her less conventional works, *Lady Susan*, written in an epistolary form, offers a unique portrayal of a female protagonist who diverges from the moral and domestic ideals commonly associated with Austen's heroines. Lady Susan Vernon is intelligent, eloquent, and manipulative a woman who resists normative femininity and uses her wit, rhetoric, and social charm to navigate a patriarchal order that restricts women's agency. This distinctive portrayal makes *Lady Susan* an important site for feminist analysis, particularly through the lens of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir asserts that women are often constructed as "the other" within patriarchal ideology that privileges men as the universal subject. According to her, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," highlighting that femininity is socially produced through cultural norms and expectations. For de Beauvoir, an independent woman is one who transcends imposed roles by achieving existential awareness, intellectual freedom, and self-determination. Her statement, "It is through work that woman has been able, to a large extent, to close the gap that separated her from the male," underlines that autonomy and agency are central to female liberation. Within this framework, Lady Susan's assertiveness, rhetorical mastery, and strategic manipulation can be read as acts of transcendence a conscious resistance to her objectified position within a patriarchal society.

Based on this background, the study aims to address two central questions: (1) how the concept of female independence is defined within Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, and (2) how that concept is represented through the character of Lady Susan Vernon in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*. The study adopts both extrinsic and intrinsic approaches to analyze the novel. The extrinsic approach examines ideological and theoretical dimensions outside the text particularly patriarchal structures as discussed in de Beauvoir's theory while

the intrinsic approach focuses on the literary construction of Lady Susan's character using Robert Stanton's theory of character and characterization (1965). Stanton distinguishes between flat and round characters and proposes that characterization is revealed through actions, dialogue, thoughts, and others' responses. Lady Susan, as a round character, exhibits complexity, contradiction, and psychological depth, reflecting a woman's negotiation of selfhood and resistance within restrictive gender norms.

By integrating de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Stanton's character theory, this study provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting Lady Susan not only as a fictional figure but also as a symbolic representation of women's agency and resistance. The analysis explores how Austen critiques patriarchal ideology by constructing a female protagonist who consciously asserts her independence and challenges prescribed roles. The study concludes with a discussion of how the concept of female independence, as theorized by de Beauvoir, is embodied in Lady Susan's character and how Austen's narrative offers a subtle yet powerful commentary on gender, autonomy, and power in a patriarchal context.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative method with a text-based analytical approach informed by feminist theory. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth interpretation of a literary text, particularly in understanding the representation of an independent woman within a patriarchal social and cultural context. The primary data consist of non-numerical textual evidence taken from Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, supported by relevant theoretical and scholarly sources. The analysis focuses on interpreting meaning, narrative structure, and character development through the theoretical lenses of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism and Robert Stanton's theory of character and characterization.

The research was conducted through three systematic stages. First, in the preparation stage, the researcher conducted an intensive reading of *Lady Susan* to understand its context, characters, and central themes. A literature review was also carried out on feminist theory particularly Simone de Beauvoir's ideas and on literary theories concerning character and characterization proposed by Robert Stanton. Additional references, including academic articles and previous studies, were examined to strengthen the

theoretical framework and refine the research focus.

Second, in the data collection stage, the main data were obtained through close reading and systematic note-taking. Key textual passages depicting Lady Susan's attitudes, dialogues, and strategies in confronting patriarchal norms were identified, highlighted, and categorized thematically. Relevant excerpts were organized into analytical categories such as independence, manipulation, and resistance toward social structures.

Third, in the data analysis stage, the collected data were analyzed using content analysis and thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and themes. Two main theoretical frameworks guided the interpretation: (1) Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, which was applied to interpret Lady Susan's attitudes as forms of existential awareness and female agency; and (2) Robert Stanton's theory of character, which was used to evaluate Lady Susan as a round, complex, and dynamic figure within the narrative structure. Through these analytical steps, the study systematically addresses how the concept of female independence, as defined by de Beauvoir, is represented through the character of Lady Susan in a patriarchal society.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 1. The Concept of the Independent Woman According to Simone de Beauvoir in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*

#### a. The Concept of Woman as "the Other" and Its Relevance to the Character of Lady Susan

One of Simone de Beauvoir's most significant theoretical contributions in *The Second Sex* is the notion of woman as *l'Autre* "the Other." In patriarchal society, man occupies the position of the universal subject and the center of meaning, while woman is defined only in relation to man as wife, mother, or complement. Her existence is therefore derivative and subordinate: she is "the seen," not "the seer"; "the chosen," not "the chooser." Beauvoir argues that man has established himself as the absolute subject, relegating woman to the status of an object and denying her full human agency. This marginalization renders woman "the Other," a being whose identity is constructed through male-centered social values.

This concept becomes highly relevant in reading the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Lady*

*Susan*. In the midst of the patriarchal order of the eighteenth century, Austen presents a woman who not only recognizes her position as “the Other,” but also transforms it into a source of power. Lady Susan is acutely aware of how society perceives her, and she uses that awareness to manipulate social conventions to her advantage. As seen in Mrs. Vernon’s observation “*I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of symmetry, brilliancy and grace*” (Letter VI) Lady Susan is evaluated through aesthetic and social charm rather than intellect or moral autonomy. Even fellow women perpetuate patriarchal standards by reducing her to an object of admiration instead of a self-defining subject.

What distinguishes Lady Susan is her strategic consciousness. She manages her image deliberately, using beauty, wit, and social intelligence to gain influence in a system that seeks to restrain her. In her interactions with men such as Reginald De Courcy and Mr. Mainwaring, she consistently occupies the dominant position. Society both admires and condemns her a reflection of Beauvoir’s paradox that woman, as “the Other,” is necessary for social order yet rejected when she asserts subjectivity. Rather than overt rebellion, Lady Susan subverts the system from within, performing femininity to exercise control and autonomy.

Through the lens of existentialist feminism, Lady Susan embodies the possibility of transforming otherness into selfhood. Her awareness of alienation becomes a foundation for agency, as she reclaims authorship over her identity within restrictive social structures. Austen’s portrayal thus reveals a nuanced vision of female independence: a woman who does not destroy the patriarchal system but redefines her place within it. Lady Susan stands as a complex representation of a woman who, from the margins, reclaims autonomy, power, and existential freedom.

#### **b. Women and Economic Independence in de Beauvoir’s Perspective**

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that economic independence is the fundamental condition for women to achieve full subjectivity and freedom. As long as women remain financially dependent on men whether fathers, husbands, or protectors they are confined to a position of weakness and otherness. Patriarchal systems condition women to believe their security depends on male authority, depriving them of agency and reinforcing passive social roles. Beauvoir writes, “So long as she lives under the authority of her parents, the young girl sees herself as the object of other people’s desires and plans.” Economic autonomy, therefore, is not merely material but symbolic: it enables women to define their

own lives, reject exploitative situations, and negotiate fairer social positions.

This idea is vividly illustrated through the character of Lady Susan in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*. As a young widow, Lady Susan occupies a precarious financial position, yet she does not rush into marriage for security, as expected within patriarchal norms. Instead, she demonstrates sharp social and economic awareness, recognizing that financial stability grants control over her destiny. Her relationships and romantic pursuits function as tools for negotiation rather than dependence. In Letter XXIX, Lady Susan declares: "*I am still doubtful at times as to marrying; if the old man would die I might not hesitate; but a state of dependence on the caprice of Sir Reginald will not suit the freedom of my spirit.*" This statement reveals her unwillingness to sacrifice personal freedom for uncertain financial comfort. For Lady Susan, the "freedom of spirit" outweighs the false security of dependence.

In Beauvoir's terms, she embodies *transcendence* the capacity to act consciously, resist passivity, and shape her own meaning. Her approach to marriage is pragmatic, not emotional. In Letter XXX, she writes: "It will surely, therefore, be advisable to delay our union till appearances are more promising till affairs have taken a more favorable turn." Here, marriage becomes a calculated decision based on advantage, not submission. Lady Susan maintains control over her narrative, delaying commitment until circumstances serve her interest.

Within a patriarchal culture that idealizes women's dependence on men, Lady Susan emerges as an anomaly. She uses intelligence, beauty, and social acumen not to seek protection, but to preserve autonomy. By rejecting *immanence* the static, dependent state imposed upon women and embracing *transcendence*, she asserts herself as an active subject who determines her own path. From a Beauvoirian lens, Lady Susan embodies a woman who recognizes that true freedom requires mastery over economic resources and self-determination within social relations. Through this portrayal, Austen subtly critiques the gender norms of her era, revealing how a woman, even within oppression, can exercise agency and strategic control over her life.

### **c. The Social Construction of Femininity and Lady Susan's Resistance**

In Simone de Beauvoir's view, femininity is not an innate essence but a social construct shaped by patriarchal culture and norms. In *The Second Sex*, she argues that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing that the so-called feminine ideal is produced

through the internalization of values that demand obedience, gentleness, modesty, and self-sacrifice. The traits of “ideal womanhood” are therefore not derived from women’s authentic selves, but from societal expectations that turn them into passive objects within social and sexual relations.

Beauvoir explains that this construct imposes a performative framework on women: they must present themselves as “proper ladies” through manners, dress, speech, and accomplishments such as music, drawing, and languages skills meant not for self-actualization, but to please men, the social subjects and arbiters of value. Consequently, women become reflections of others’ desires rather than autonomous selves. In *Lady Susan*, the titular character openly rejects these conventions. She refuses to embody submissive femininity and instead challenges the social expectations that confine women to ornamental roles. In Letter VII, Lady Susan writes:

*“I was so much indulged in my infant years that I was never obliged to attend to anything, and consequently am without the accomplishments which are now necessary to finish a pretty woman. ... It is throwing time away to be mistress of French, Italian, and German: music, singing, and drawing, etc., will gain a woman some applause, but will not add one lover to her list grace and manner, after all, are of the greatest importance.”* (Letter VII)

This passage reveals her sharp critique of women’s education, which prioritizes superficial charm over intellectual or personal development. Lady Susan dismisses traditional accomplishments as futile and instead values *grace and manner* forms of social performance that allow her to exert influence and control. Her version of femininity is thus active, strategic, and performative in a liberating sense.

Rather than relying on innocence or moral purity, Lady Susan leverages intelligence, intuition, and manipulation to navigate a rigid social order. In Beauvoir’s terms, she refuses *immanence* the passive, fixed state imposed on women and embraces *transcendence* by acting as a conscious subject who defines her own choices. Her resistance extends to her relationships with other women who remain bound by patriarchal ideals. She refuses to conform to roles such as the self-sacrificing mother, grieving widow, or virtuous lady awaiting male rescue.

Lady Susan’s defiance is not overt rebellion but a subtle strategy: she understands the expectations of society and uses them to her advantage. Her performance of femininity is not

compliance but control an intentional act of self-stylization that grants her agency and power. Through this character, Austen reveals that women can assert existential freedom and social strategy even within the boundaries of patriarchy. In Beauvoirian terms, Lady Susan is not merely a woman who “refuses to be made,” but one who consciously *becomes*.

#### **d. Rejection of Traditional Roles of Wife and Mother**

In patriarchal society, women are often constructed as passive subjects whose primary function lies within the domestic sphere as obedient wives and nurturing mothers. Patriarchal ideology positions motherhood as a woman’s natural vocation and defines feminine fulfillment through devotion and self-sacrifice within the family. Thus, the roles of wife and mother are treated not merely as social duties but as the very essence of femininity. Women who deviate from these expectations are often labeled immoral, selfish, or as having “failed” in their womanhood.

In *Lady Susan*, however, Jane Austen presents a protagonist who explicitly rejects these prescribed roles. Lady Susan does not view being a wife or a mother as central to her identity. In her first letter, she offers a revealing account of her relationship with her daughter, Frederica:

*“The long illness of her dear father prevented my paying her [Frederica] that attention which duty and affection equally dictated... I have too much reason to fear that the governess... was unequal to the charge. I have therefore resolved... placing her at one of the best private schools in town, where I shall have an opportunity of leaving her myself in my way to you.”* (Letter I)

This statement exposes Lady Susan’s emotional detachment from her maternal role. Her tone is pragmatic and administrative rather than affectionate or remorseful. Instead of nurturing a bond with her daughter, she prioritizes convenience and her own social mobility. Child-rearing, in her view, is not a moral obligation but a logistical matter to be delegated.

According to Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist perspective, Lady Susan’s attitude signifies a rejection of *immanence* the static condition in which women’s existence is defined by others, particularly by men and familial roles. To attain freedom, a woman must transcend such limitations and assert herself as an autonomous subject. Lady Susan embodies this *transcendence* by refusing to internalize motherhood as her natural destiny. She treats it as a negotiable function rather than an essential calling.



Austen thus presents a female figure who subverts the patriarchal myth of motherhood as the foundation of femininity. Lady Susan destabilizes the domestic ideal not through open rebellion but through indifference by disregarding the sanctity of maternal affection. She inverts the moral logic of self-sacrifice, turning it into a form of agency and self-prioritization.

Within Beauvoir's framework, Lady Susan exemplifies the woman who refuses to be defined by ideological motherhood. She is not *made* a mother in the passive sense, but consciously chooses the extent to which that role serves her. Her defiance, therefore, is not merely social deviance but a radical act of existential autonomy an assertion of the right to define herself beyond the confines of patriarchy.

#### **e. Woman as Subject in Austen's Narrative**

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts that a woman can only become a subject when she refuses the patriarchal position that confines her to the status of an object passive, dependent, and marginalized. Within this framework, women are socially conditioned to live in a state of *immanence*, a static existence that limits them to traditional roles such as obedient wives, devoted mothers, and dependents under male protection. To become a subject, a woman must transcend this condition by creating meaning through conscious action, personal choice, and existential autonomy. Lady Susan, the protagonist of Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, embodies this conception of female subjectivity. Rather than conforming to the ideals of obedience and domestic virtue imposed by her society, she acts as an agent aware of her own intelligence, influence, and strategic capacity. She is not a passive participant in the narrative, but its driving force. Austen constructs Lady Susan not as a complement to male characters but as a dominant figure who manipulates, directs, and controls the social dynamics around her. This is evident when Mrs. Vernon describes her in Letter VI: "*I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of symmetry, brilliancy and grace.*" (Letter VI)

This observation reveals that Lady Susan's allure lies not only in her physical beauty but also in her intellectual brilliance and social poise. She is not portrayed as meek or submissive, but as a captivating and commanding presence. In a patriarchal world that expects women to be demure and compliant, Lady Susan achieves power through performative mastery using her charm as a means of agency rather than as a supplement to masculine

authority.

Her active subjectivity is further illustrated in Letter XXXIX, where she speaks about Mr. Mainwaring: “*Mainwaring is more devoted to me than ever... I doubt if I could resist even matrimony offered by him.*” (Letter XXXIX) Here, Lady Susan does not idealize marriage as a path to security or affection. Instead, she views it as a strategic decision, exercising full awareness of her control over both herself and her relationships. From Beauvoir’s existentialist standpoint, this marks her movement from *immanence* to *transcendence*. Lady Susan is not a victim of the system but an active agent who manipulates it to serve her purposes.

Austen does not portray Lady Susan as a woman who imitates masculinity to gain power, but as one who wields femininity as an intelligent, performative tool. Her awareness of how social perception operates allows her to manage reputation, shape opinion, and use personal relationships to assert her position. In this sense, Austen’s narrative positions Lady Susan as a fully realized female subject one who demonstrates that even within a patriarchal order, women can achieve existential liberation by claiming authorship over their own lives.

## **2. Analysis of the Independent Woman Character in a Patriarchal Society through the Character of Lady Susan Vernon Based on Robert Stanton’s Theory**

### **a. Lady Susan as a Round Character**

According to Robert Stanton in *An Introduction to Fiction* (1965), a round character is complex, dynamic, and psychologically realistic, showing multiple and often contradictory traits. In *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen presents Lady Susan Vernon as a quintessential round character whose personality cannot be defined in simple moral terms. Lady Susan embodies tension between intelligence and manipulation, affection and self-interest, ambition and vulnerability. She is self-aware and strategic, aware of how language and charm can be used as tools of influence. In Letter XVI, she writes, “*If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence... Consideration and esteem surely follow command of language as admiration waits on beauty.*” This statement reveals her confidence in intellect as a source of power, not just beauty. Her calculated control over relationships such as manipulating Reginald De Courcy and arranging Frederica’s marriage shows both rationality and moral ambiguity. Yet beneath her composure lies insecurity and fear of social rejection, highlighting her human

complexity.

Through Lady Susan, Austen depicts a woman who resists passive roles and asserts autonomy within a patriarchal society. She is neither heroine nor villain, but a multifaceted figure whose intelligence and contradictions make her a vivid round character and a subtle critique of gender norms in Austen's era.

### **b. Indirect Presentation in the Portrayal of Lady Susan**

According to Robert Stanton (1965), one of the main methods of character presentation is *indirect presentation*, in which a character is revealed through speech, actions, or other characters' responses. This technique allows the character to appear more realistic because readers must interpret the clues scattered throughout the text. Jane Austen employs this method effectively in *Lady Susan*, an epistolary novel composed entirely of letters without an objective narrator. Consequently, readers must construct their understanding of Lady Susan through the subjective perceptions of others. A strong example of this technique appears in Letter VIII, when Catherine Vernon writes to Mrs. Johnson:

*"I am, indeed, provoked at the artifice of this unprincipled woman; what stronger proof of her dangerous abilities can be given than this perversion of Reginald's judgment... Her behavior, I confess, has been calculated to do away with such an idea; I have not detected the smallest impropriety in it... but against reason, against conviction, to be so well pleased with her, as I am sure he is, does really astonish me."* (Letter VIII)

Here, Catherine condemns Lady Susan as deceitful but also admits that she cannot find any real fault in her behavior. This paradox reveals Lady Susan's mastery in shaping her social image appearing virtuous and refined while concealing her manipulative intentions. The ambiguity created by this indirect portrayal makes her character psychologically rich and morally complex.

Through this technique, Austen depicts Lady Susan as both intelligent and calculating, a woman who manipulates perception and uses charm as a form of social strategy. Reginald's transformation from a critic to an admirer further demonstrates her power of persuasion, which readers can only discern through the tone and content of his letters. This indirect presentation also serves as Austen's critique of patriarchal society, which judges women by appearances rather than intellect or agency.

In conclusion, Austen's use of *indirect presentation* not only deepens Lady Susan's characterization but also invites readers to question moral judgment, social perception, and the construction of female identity. Rather than defining Lady Susan as good or evil, Austen

presents her as a complex woman who controls her own narrative within a patriarchal world.

### **c. Interaction between Lady Susan and Other Characters**

According to Robert Stanton, character interaction is a key element in building a vivid and multidimensional portrayal. Through interactions, readers can observe how a character influences and is influenced by others, revealing emotional depth and social dynamics. In *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen constructs the protagonist not through direct description but through her relationships with those around her. These interactions expose Lady Susan's psychological complexity and her mastery of social manipulation.

A revealing example appears in Letter XX, when Catherine Vernon describes Lady Susan's behavior upon introducing Sir James Martin:

*"In the breakfast room we found Lady Susan, and a young man of gentlemanlike appearance, whom she introduced by the name of Sir James Martin ... Lady Susan behaved with great attention to her visitor; and yet I thought I could perceive that she had no particular pleasure in seeing him."* (Letter XX)

Here, Lady Susan appears polite and attentive, fulfilling the expected role of a refined mother. Yet Catherine senses her insincerity. Lady Susan performs two roles simultaneously dutiful parent and calculating social strategist. Her civility is a form of control; she uses politeness as a social weapon within a patriarchal system that values female decorum.

This interaction also reveals her influence over others. Frederica's discomfort reflects her mother's emotional dominance, while Reginald and Catherine feel uneasy yet powerless to challenge her due to her impeccable manners. Austen illustrates that Lady Susan's power lies not in aggression but in mastery of emotion, language, and etiquette.

Through these interactions, Lady Susan emerges as a complex, round character who manipulates social expectations to secure autonomy. Austen uses this technique to critique gendered norms, showing how a woman can turn the very codes of patriarchy into tools of self-preservation and control. Lady Susan thus stands not only as a compelling character but also as a subtle vehicle for social criticism.

### **d. Lady Susan's Moral Ambiguity and Psychological Complexity**

In Robert Stanton's framework, a round character is defined not only by psychological depth but also by *moral ambiguity* the tension between expressed values and actual behavior. Jane Austen constructs Lady Susan as a character full of contradictions: she appears caring

and remorseful, yet her empathy often conceals strategic manipulation. Through her letters, Austen allows readers to witness both Lady Susan's inner reflections and her rhetorical skill in shaping others' perceptions. One of the clearest examples appears in Letter XXIV, where Lady Susan writes to Mrs. Johnson after a quarrel with Reginald De Courcy:

*"He came to expostulate with me; his compassion all alive for this ill-used girl, this heroine in distress!... We were both warm, and of course both to blame... I have a real regard for him, and was beyond expression mortified to find it, as I thought, so ill bestowed... I am convinced of Frederica's having a reasonable dislike to Sir James, I shall instantly inform him that he must give up all hope of her."* (Letter XXIV)

Here, Lady Susan presents herself as remorseful and considerate, appearing to abandon her plan to marry off Frederica. However, previous letters reveal that this decision is motivated less by maternal affection than by a desire to preserve her relationship with Reginald and protect her social image. Her phrase "this heroine in distress" functions as calculated rhetoric, designed to direct sympathy while maintaining control of the narrative.

This moral duality between seeming sincerity and underlying self-interest creates the ambiguity that defines her character. Lady Susan's confession "I have a real regard for him" can be read as genuine affection or as an attempt to emotionally manipulate Reginald. Austen avoids moral judgment, instead inviting readers to interpret the character's motives on their own.

According to Stanton, such ambiguity deepens the reader's engagement, as Lady Susan embodies the complex interplay between personal desire, social pressure, and self-preservation. In a patriarchal society that limits women's agency, she survives not through submission but through rhetorical intelligence and control over appearances.

In conclusion, Lady Susan's moral ambiguity and psychological complexity make her a deeply realistic and enduring character. Austen presents her not as purely virtuous or villainous, but as a woman navigating power and survival through intellect and strategy qualities that continue to fascinate readers long after the novel's creation.

#### **e. The Social Symbolism of Lady Susan**

According to Robert Stanton's theory of characterization, a literary character is not only an individual but also a symbolic representation of social values or structures. In *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen presents her protagonist as a woman who refuses to submit to traditional norms

and instead manipulates the very social system that seeks to confine her. As a widow, Lady Susan occupies an ambiguous position free from male authority yet socially vulnerable and morally scrutinized if too independent. Rather than being constrained, she uses this status to maneuver strategically within upper-class society. This attitude is captured in Letter VII, where she declares: "*There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person predetermined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority.*" (Letter VII)

This statement reveals Lady Susan's perception of social life as a site of power and control, not mere social acceptance. She becomes a symbol of a woman aware of her position and determined to assert dominance through intellect and charm. Lady Susan also reflects the shifting image of women during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She is neither the nurturing mother nor the obedient wife but a social strategist who arranges her daughter's marriage for financial and social advantage.

Thus, Lady Susan embodies the paradox of feminine roles: outwardly graceful and polite, yet internally calculating and self-directed. Through her, Austen critiques a patriarchal society that values appearance over authenticity and compliance over autonomy. Lady Susan's elegance masks her resistance, turning her into a symbol of female agency within constraint.

In conclusion, Lady Susan represents a socially subversive figure a woman who refuses victimhood and redefines power on her own terms. Though morally ambiguous, she stands as Austen's subtle critique of gender expectations, illustrating how women can use the very norms of patriarchy to secure independence and authority.

#### **f. The Relevance of Lady Susan to Stanton's Concept of a Round Character**

According to Robert Stanton, a *round character* possesses psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and the ability to influence other characters or drive narrative change. Lady Susan, as portrayed in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, exemplifies this complexity. She is self-aware, emotionally intricate, and exerts strong narrative and psychological influence on those around her. Her self-perception is clearly articulated in Letter XVI, where she writes: "*If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence... Consideration and esteem surely follow command of language as admiration waits on beauty.*" (Letter XVI)

This statement highlights Lady Susan's acute self-awareness and intellectual pride. She recognizes that power lies not only in beauty but also in mastery of language, using rhetoric

as her means of control and persuasion. Her candid admission of vanity demonstrates openness and confidence traits consistent with Stanton's notion of a round character who knows herself and embraces her flaws. A contrasting moment appears in Letter XXXIX: "*I have given up too much... I am tired of submitting my will to the caprices of others... Mainwaring is more devoted to me than ever... were we at liberty, I doubt if I could resist even matrimony offered by him.*" (Letter XXXIX) Here, Lady Susan's inner conflict and moral duality emerge. She rejects submission to social expectations yet simultaneously craves admiration and power within them. Her choices are not guided by affection but by strategy and self-preservation, reflecting Stanton's idea that round characters embody moral and psychological contradictions.

Together, these letters reveal Lady Susan's multidimensional nature proud yet vulnerable, manipulative yet emotionally aware. Her actions provoke complex emotional and intellectual responses from both the reader and other characters, such as Reginald, Catherine, and Frederica. Like Stanton's archetypal round character, she resists simple moral judgment and remains open to interpretation.

In conclusion, Lady Susan fulfills Stanton's category of a round character through her psychological depth, internal conflict, and nuanced moral consciousness. Austen allows her to exist beyond simple binaries of good or evil, crafting a character who is authentic, contradictory, and persistently thought-provoking a compelling embodiment of realism in eighteenth-century fiction.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Lady Susan Vernon, the main character in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, represents a complex and independent woman who resists the patriarchal constraints of eighteenth-century English society. Unlike conventional female figures who conform to domestic and moral ideals, Lady Susan demonstrates self-awareness and agency through her intelligence, eloquence, and social strategy. By exercising control over her circumstances, she embodies Simone de Beauvoir's concept of *transcendence*, rejecting the role of "the Other" and asserting herself as a free and active subject. Through Robert Stanton's theory of character and characterization, Lady Susan is identified as a round and multidimensional figure whose contradictory qualities charming yet manipulative, confident yet self-serving

reveal her psychological realism and complexity. The negative judgments from other characters toward her nonconformity emphasize Austen's critique of how patriarchal society punishes female autonomy.

The findings of this research highlight that Lady Susan is not merely a literary character but a symbolic representation of women's struggle for independence and recognition within restrictive gender structures. Future studies are encouraged to further explore female figures in Austen's lesser-studied works or in other classic English novels to deepen the understanding of women's representation and resistance. Researchers are also advised to employ interdisciplinary perspectives such as feminism, literary sociology, or psychology to broaden the analytical scope of gender and power in literary studies.

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