

Lady Susan Study Guide

Lady Susan by Jane Austen

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Austen, Jane. *The Complete Novels with Introduction* by Karen Joy Fowler. Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition, 2006.

Lady Susan is an epistolary novel by Jane Austen, telling the story of an unscrupulous widow who manipulates her family and acquaintances for her own social survival. The novel takes place in Victorian England over the course of several months.

After the death of her husband, Lady Susan writes to her ex-brother-in-law, Mr. Vernon, and warmly informs him she wishes to visit his estate Churchill to meet her nieces and nephews. Mrs. Vernon knows that Lady Susan has a scandalous reputation for seducing the men away from her last hostess, Mrs. Manwaring. The Vernons are powerless to stop her from coming because of social etiquette and Lady Susan moves in. Lady Susan writes to her friend Mrs. Johnson about how much she detests the Vernons and that she's only using them. She soon sets her sights on Mrs. Vernon's brother, Reginald De Courcy, for the simple reason he has been warned to stay from her and she enjoys the ego boost of taming a man predisposed to dislike her. Lady Susan's extreme beauty and conniving tactics win Reginald away from his sister. Mrs. Vernon fears he will end up marrying Lady Susan and that she's after his fortune. Reginald grills Lady Susan about all the negative rumors he heard about her, but she convinces him they are all untrue. The De Courcys write to their son begging him not to marry Lady Susan. He insists they are only friends while he continues to fall infatuated with her. Lady Susan writes to her friend, Mrs. Johnson, telling her how much she despises Reginald because he is so naive. Lady Susan continues to flirt with the idea of marrying Mr. Manwaring if his marriage implodes after all her efforts.

Lady Susan plans to marry her daughter Frederica to Sir James, a man Lady Susan also seduced away from the younger Miss Manwaring. Not wanting to marry Sir James, Frederica runs away from boarding school and ends up living with the Vernons in Churchill. The Vernons are prepared to dislike Frederica because of her mother, but Frederica turns out to be a gentle and kindhearted young girl who has not been shown any true affection. Mrs. Vernon becomes a mother figure to Frederica. Reginald continues to hate Frederica as he is still under Lady Susan's thumb. Lady Susan plans to still force Frederica to marry Sir James and threatens her not to reveal the truth to the Vernons. When Sir James makes a surprise appearance to Churchill, Frederica confesses the truth to Reginald. Reginald confronts Lady Susan in a furor, finally seeing her for the manipulator she is. The Vernons celebrate Lady Susan's defeat- until Lady Susan convinces Reginald everything was a misunderstanding.

Lady Susan travels to London to meet with Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Manwaring. To her annoyance, a lovesick Reginald follows her to London although she tried to get rid of him. While Lady Susan courts Mr. Manwaring in private, Reginald learns the truth about Lady Susan from Mrs. Manwaring. He cuts off Lady Susan for good. Mrs. Vernon endeavors to set up Reginald and Frederica, but her plan is foiled when Lady Susan



retrieves Frederica and brings her to London. She intends to follow through with her plan and force her daughter to marry Sir James against her will. The novel ends in an epilogue describing how Mrs. Vernon traveled to London and won Frederica back from Lady Susan owing to the fear of an influenza epidemic. Lady Susan marries Sir James herself. An unnamed narrator muses on whether or not she's truly happy. It is also implied Frederica and Reginald fall in love.



Letters 1 - 8

Summary

Lady Susan, a recent widow, writes to her former brother-in-law, Mr. Vernon, to inform him she will be visiting his estate in Churchill. Her letter is glowing and she tells him she's long overdue to meet her nieces and nephews. She tells him her daughter will not be joining because she's in private school after the toll her father's death took on her. In a separate letter to a friend, Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan reveals herself to be a schemer and hypocrite who actually loathes the idea of visiting her former brother-in-law, only doing so because she's run out of money. Her current living situation has no longer become tenable after getting into some kind of trouble with her current hosts, Mr. and Mrs. Manwaring. She writes, "Were there another place in England open to me, I would prefer it. Charles Vernon is my aversion, and I am afraid of his wife" (1236).

Catherine Vernon writes to her mother informing her of Lady Susan's visit. She expresses regret because it means she will not be able to keep her promise of visiting for Christmas and seeing her sick father. Catherine relates how suspicious she is of Lady Susan; she does not believe the woman truly wants to meet her nieces and nephews because she treats her own daughter so poorly. Catherine is also bitter from when Susan tried to break up her engagement to Mr. Vernon. She thinks her husband is too obliging with her when Lady Susan has been cruel to him. Catherine's brother Reginald De Courcy writes to his sister he's eager to come to Churchill and meet, "the most accomplished coquette in England" (1238). Reginald relates a story he heard about Lady Susan trying to break up Mr. and Mrs. Manwaring, as well as paying undue attention to a man engaged to the younger Mrs. Manwaring which caused them to separate.

Lady Susan writes to Mrs. Johnson to tell her she arrived in Churchill and that Mrs. Vernon was cold to her. She suspects Mrs. Vernon still resents Lady Susan trying to break off her marriage to Mr. Vernon and also resents Lady's Susan not allowing Mr. Vernon to buy Vernon Castle after his brother passed. Lady Susan cannot understand why Mrs. Vernon is not over those events already. She plans to win her sister-in-law's heart through her children. She tells Mrs. Johnson she misses Mr. Manwaring and will write to him through her.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her brother that Lady Susan is indeed exceptionally pretty, which allows her to manipulate men. She expresses how clever and manipulative Lady Susan is too. She cautions her brother to be wary.

In a letter to Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan writes how stupid and disappointing her daughter Frederica has turned out to be. Lady Susan shipped Frederica off to boarding school to be rid of her, but now she intends to marry Frederica daughter against her will to Sir James, the man once betrothed to the younger Mrs. Manwaring. She thinks Churchill has been dull until Reginald De Courcy arrives. Lady Susan intends to flirt with



him to ease her own boredom, writing, “there is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one’s superiority” (1241).

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother, relating worry for her brother Reginald who has fallen under Lady Susan’s spell. Reginald came to Churchill with a prejudice against Lady Susan but now has become enchanted with her and believes the former stories are false. Catherine knows Lady Susan is manipulating him.

Analysis

The novel’s structure reflects its content thematically. Lady Susan is told in an epistolary structure (meaning a format of letters written back and forth between characters), a structural decision which alone communicates one of the novel’s core themes: the necessity of keeping up appearances and how nobody can say what they really mean. Because of inherently repressive social customs with unspoken codes of conduct, every character is playing a chess game of sorts without ever being able to make their motivations known outwardly. The novel examines the inherent nature and failings of this Victorian mode of conduct, and how it can be exploited by someone as cunning as Lady Susan.

Lady Susan tells her brother-in-law she wants to, “spend long weeks at Churchill” (1235) because she hopes to be, “introduced to a sister whom I have so long desired to be acquainted with” (1235). In her next letter to Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan writes, “were there another place in England open to me, I would prefer it. Charles Vernon is my aversion, and I am afraid of his wife” (1236). This contrast in letters is important to establish the obvious from the beginning: Lady Susan is a liar and hypocrite. While she is by far the novel’s biggest hypocrite, no character is entirely blameless either. Catherine Vernon, Lady Susan’s chief rival throughout the novel, is forced to remain cordial with her in public while writing behind her back to her brother Reginald and her mother lady De Courcy. Austen is critiquing this hypocrisy while finding the humor in it. Much of the suffering in the novel is caused by people unable to speak their mind.

Lady Susan represents the worst of social custom’s hypocrisies. Lady Susan manipulates her brother-in-law into letting her stay in his home indefinitely. Although the Vernons do not want Lady Susan in her home, they are forced by social custom to allow her stay. Lady Susan is able to navigate and manipulate society by abiding by its customs in the open. She says and does all the superficial right things, such as professing to love her daughter and family. Nobody can rightly take issue with her because she has not crossed a line in public. She takes advantage of implicit hospitality. No one wants her around, but no one can deny her presence because it is simply not done.

She is a true Machiavellian character (meaning someone who is a conniving sociopath who uses others to achieve their own ends). Lady Susan shows herself to have no love for her daughter or her late husband. Her first stay at the Manwarings ended in disaster



when Lady Susan destroyed both relationships of her hosts, Mr. Manwaring and Sir James. Mr. Manwaring's name is of particular note; it literally sounds like Man Warring. His name represents his insane jealousy and obsession for Lady Susan. Men react to her by warring with each other.

To while away the time at Churchill, she decides to manipulate Reginald De Courcy into falling in love with her because she enjoys the power trip of making someone who once disliked her change their mind. She writes, "this project will serve at least to amuse me, and prevent my feeling so acutely this dreadful separation from you and all whom I love" (1241). What is interesting to note in the final part of Lady Susan's letter to Mrs. Johnson is that her friend, not her daughter, is the closest person she loves.

Discussion Question 1

Is Lady Susan quintessentially a Victorian villain or is she like any other antagonist?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is Lady Susan a Machiavellian character?

Discussion Question 3

How can Lady Susan have a bad reputation and still keep her standing society?

Vocabulary

foretold, consigned, hither, simpleton, bestowed, contemptibly, adieu, latter, disposed, inattention, wretched, coquette, amiable, captivating, dissimulation, bewitching, ladyship, cordiality, delicacy, perpetually



Letters 9 - 16

Summary

Mrs. Johnson writes to Lady Susan telling her she should contrive to marry Reginald De Courcy, who is twelve years younger, rich, and malleable. She knows Mr. Manwaring will rage but Lady Susan can pacify him. Sir James visited Mrs. Johnson and gave her the impression he would be happy to marry either Lady Susan or her daughter.

Lady Susan writes back thanking her friend for the advice but does not think she will marry Reginald. She is not in immediate need of money yet, though she enjoys making Reginald fall in love with her and then rebuffing him. Lady Susan considers it revenge over how Mrs. Vernon treated her.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother that she's grown more uneasy over Reginald and Lady Susan. They have grown very close, taking long walks and talking all day together. She fears Lady Susan is trying to manipulate Reginald into marriage and that it might work. She regrets bringing Reginald to Churchill and how he fell for Lady Susan. She asks her mother not to breathe a word to her sick father for fear of greatly disturbing him.

Her father writes to Reginald imploring him not to marry Lady Susan if the rumors are true. He writes that he knows better of his son than to rush headlong into a marriage without consulting his own parents first. He reminds his son about Lady Susan's questionable character, such as her encouragement of other men and how badly she treated her late husband. His marriage to Lady Susan would be the death of his pride in his son.

Lady De Courcy writes to her daughter apologizing that Reginald De Courcy Sr. discovered their correspondence, claiming it happened by accident when her husband had to read her letters to her while she had a cold. She is upset that Reginald De Courcy Sr. reacted exactly how they feared he would.

Reginald writes back to his father, telling him he's astonished and upset with his sister for spreading rumors. He eases his father's mind by stating he has no intention of marrying Lady Susan, only that she's become a dear friend who has been unfairly maligned by gossip. All those rumors about Lady Susan are untrue, in his view. She provided him with a suitable explanation for every single rumor he ever heard about her. He praises her virtues and blames himself for having readily believe everything bad about her before meeting her.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother expressing relief at her brother's letter to their father. She still worries her brother will choose to marry Lady Susan three months later. She laments how Reginald has turned against her, now he's a creature of Lady Susan's. Mrs. Vernon also tells her mother that Lady Susan received a letter from her daughter's school about Frederica trying to run away. Mr. Vernon is off to town to pick up Frederica



and bring her to Churchill. Mrs. Vernon thinks Frederica will be as loathsome as her mother, which her escape attempt hints at. Lady Susan also told Mrs. Vernon she's too lenient with her daughter because of her soft heart, and that it was necessary to discipline Frederica.

Lady Susan writes to Mrs. Johnson, fuming over her daughter's arrival at Churchill and attempt to run away. Frederica's escape attempted was motivated by her mother's order for her to marry Sir James. Lady Susan states that Frederica will marry Sir James no matter what. Lady Susan is confident her daughter is too shy to reveal the truth to anyone, so her plot should remain intact.

Analysis

In Letters 9-16, one of the novel's main themes emerges: the nature of reconciling rumors and truth. Despite many warnings to Reginald about Lady Susan's character and the scandals that plague her (which he believes wholeheartedly before his arrival), Reginald is duped by Lady Susan. In a letter to his father, Reginald regrets how much he fell for the rumors. He writes it, "may also convince us how little the general report of anyone ought to be credited, since no character, however upright, can escape the malevolence of slander" (1248). The irony is that while this is a true statement and can be applied to other characters, the rumors are all true in Lady Susan's case. It is important to take note of this theme here, because slander plagues other characters unfairly, which is seen at the end of the section in Frederica.

Reginald and the Vernons readily believe the rumors about Frederica before having met her. Mrs. Vernon writes, "Reginald is so incensed against the poor silly girl (...) it is not to Lady Susan's credit that he should be so bitter against her daughter; the idea of her must be drawn from the mother's description" (1250). As seen at the close of Part Two, Frederica is the polar opposite of her mother; a kind, timid girl who is manipulated into marriage by a conniving mother. Her apparent act of disobedience- running away from school- becomes justified when it is learned she was escaping marriage. Unlike Lady Susan, all the rumors about Frederica turn out to be untrue. The contrast between mother and daughter point to the unknowable nature of slander. Reginald may be right when he decries buying into a person's reputation too readily, but he fails to practice it when Frederica visits; prejudiced against her based on rumor. Every character has an opinion about somebody else before having ever met them; Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon despised each other well before their introduction documented in the first ten letters. Every struggle in the novel can be traced back to the need to discover the truth about their prejudice.

The novel suggests that the truth often loses when pitted against matters of the heart. Lady Susan writes, "I have never yet found the advice of a sister could prevent a young man's being in love if he so chose it" (1244). Reginald is obviously naive and gullible, but that is not the only reason he stops believing in Lady Susan's scandals. He wants to stop believing in the rumors about Lady Susan after meeting her and falling for her. This effect is seen with most men in the novel- from Mr. Manwaring to Sir James and



Reginald. In regards to Manwaring, Lady Susan writes, “he is distracted by jealousy, which I am not sorry for, as I know no better support of love” (1251). The power of a coquette can ruin lives. The De Courcys are aware of this phenomenon; their desperate attempt to stop Reginald from marrying Lady Susan comes from their knowledge of an age-old truth: the power of love can drive one to irrationality and impulsive decisions, especially in a time when relationships needed to be sealed in marriage to be seen as legitimate. Although Reginald does not claim to want to marry Lady Susan, they can sense him falling for her and they fear the ruin of their good name by assimilating Lady Susan into their family tree.

Discussion Question 1

How much faith should people put into rumors?

Discussion Question 2

Is Reginald right to give Lady Susan a chance or is he too gullible?

Discussion Question 3

Would it be proper for Mrs. Vernon to kick Lady Susan out of her house?

Vocabulary

obliged, prevail, repressing, platonic, endeavouring, dominion, semblance, plausible, precarious, captivated, enquiry, desirous, vanity, yielding, occasioned, alteration, vexation, moreover, artful, apprehending



Letters 17 - 24

Summary

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother that Frederica was frightened when she came to their home. She burst into tears as soon as they were seated. Lady Susan was been crying all day over her daughter and Reginald was concerned. Mrs. Vernon thinks Frederica is very pretty and feels bad for the girl because her mother is so horrible. Her niece is too shy to speak with her and so they have not bonded. Reginald thinks Frederica has treated her mother awfully. Mrs. Vernon knows he's only parroting what Lady Susan has told him.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother again, expressing an even deeper fondness for Frederica. She's glad that Lady De Courcy approves of Frederica too. Mrs. Vernon confides a plan to make all their troubles disappear: they can marry Reginald to Frederica. Mrs. Vernon has detected Frederica's attraction to Reginald, although Reginald does not reciprocate. She thinks Frederica is not as dimwitted as many of Lady Susan's rumors made her out to be.

Lady Susan writes to Mrs. Johnson that she was right; Frederica ran away when she received her mother's letter about marrying Sir James. Lady Susan threatened her daughter and made her swear not to speak of it to her aunt or uncle. She can tell Frederica is falling in love with Reginald but she's secure about her hold on Reginald and his belief Frederica is a wretched girl. Her plans are still on track.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother about a surprise guest that showed up at their home uninvited-- Sir James. Frederica was shocked and distressed. Lady Susan confides in Mrs. Vernon that Sir James' arrival was unexpected, but she thinks he would be a good match for her daughter who has no other prospects to speak of, especially with her education going so poorly. She tells Mrs. Vernon that Frederica wants the match. Mrs. Vernon is stunned and congratulates her, but she and Mr. Vernon believe that Frederica's wishes are different than her mother's. Sir James invites himself to stay at their estate.

Frederica writes to Reginald De Courcy, apologizing for being forward and passing him a note but that she had no choice. She confesses she does not wish to marry Sir James and that her mother is forcing her. Reginald De Courcy is the only man who has her mother's ear and she prays he can convince her to put the marriage off.

Lady Susan writes to Mrs. Johnson, enraged at what her daughter tried to pull behind her back. Everything was going according to plan until Reginald surprised her with a letter her daughter had written him. He confronted her about forcing her daughter to marry against her will. Lady Susan feigned ignorance and they had a row. Reginald's opinions of Frederica and Lady Susan had flipped. She tried to charm him but he would not have it. She regrets his new poor opinion of her.



Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother to celebrate that Lady Susan has been vanquished. Reginald came to her and told her he would be leaving Churchill. A change had come over him and he was adamant that Frederica should be allowed to marry who she pleased. Mrs. Vernon could tell he had had a fight with Lady Susan. While she was upset to see her brother go, she rejoiced that Frederica would be at peace.

In another letter to her mother, Mrs. Vernon writes she celebrated too soon. Frederica and she had a heart-to-heart where the girl confessed her mother made her promise not to reveal the truth to her aunt and uncle. Mrs. Vernon gently chastised her and told Frederica to always be honest with her. They were surprised when Reginald came out of Lady Susan's room and announced he had misunderstood the situation and misjudged Lady Susan. She also did not want to deprive Mrs. Vernon of her brother and so explained herself. Lady Susan cried and claimed no knowledge of Frederica's displeasure with Sir James. Mrs. Vernon does not believe a word, furious her brother could be manipulated again so effectively. Sir James is sent away, sparing Frederica, but Mrs. Vernon thinks the danger of Reginald marrying Lady Susan is higher than ever.

Analysis

In understanding the novel, it is important to take into account the Victorian setting and how the novel reaffirms the value of the era. This section of the novel presents two distinctly different takes on motherhood: Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon. Both are figures of motherhood to Frederica, and while Lady Susan is her biological mother, Mrs. Vernon is much more of a mother to the girl in any real sense of the word. Mrs. Vernon grows to love and care for Frederica, genuinely looking out for her wellbeing and future whereas Lady Susan only uses Frederica to suit her own ends. Mrs. Vernon writes that Frederica, "has had a wretched education and dreadful example of levity in her mother; but yet I can pronounce her disposition to be excellent, and her natural abilities very good" (1253). Mrs. Vernon aspires to marry Frederica to Reginald because Mrs. Vernon does not care about the girl's superficial accomplishments, but the happiness she can give to Reginald.

Lady Susan, by contrast, regards Frederica's value only her in ability to navigate society. She writes, "artlessness will never do in love matters, and that girl [Frederica] is a born simpleton (...) She is in high favour with her aunt altogether-- because she is so little like myself of course" (1254). Lady Susan disdains Frederica for the same traits that Mrs. Vernon values: an honest nature. Victorian society is a game for Lady Susan; she enjoys strategizing and manipulating men into acting according to her desires. Since Frederica is "artless" in that regard, Lady Susan does not believe her daughter has any real worth. Reputation is the only currency Lady Susan traffics in; because Frederica lacks in that department, her value as a person is low in Lady Susan's view. The only people Lady Susan enjoys are Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Manwaring, characters who are proven to be deceptive and unscrupulous. Her lack of basic empathy renders her an understandably terrible mother. Mrs. Vernon embodies the wholesome Victorian values of good motherhood: she is doting, kind, a fair disciplinarian, and interested in her daughter's marriage.



Last to note, Frederica is everything Lady Susan hates about herself. Her daughter is the result of a dead marriage, and from the very opening, Lady Susan is doing everything in her power to get rid of her daughter. She only takes an interest in Frederica's affairs when it could help her achieve her own ends- marrying her off to Sir James to secure a financial future. Lady Susan makes no mention of her late husband or daughter unless forced to. They are baggage to her she would rather forget as she traipses through life like a Victorian bachelorette half her age. Frederica reminds Lady Susan that she is a mother, and older than other bachelorettes or coquettes. Lady Susan's rejection of Frederica can be seen as a rejection of her own age and its responsibilities.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lady Susan despise her daughter?

Discussion Question 2

How does the novel reaffirm Victorian values?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do Lady Susan and her daughter navigate the world differently?

Vocabulary

solicitude, contenance, exultation, ostentatious, penitent, untractable, disposition, prospect, obstinacy, perverseness, lament, expedient, elopement, prepossessing, levity, sensible, timidity, overcome, throughly, negligent



Letters 25 - 33

Summary

In a letter from Lady Susan to Mrs. Johnson, Lady Susan praises how she dealt with her problem and details what happened with Reginald from her perspective. She convinced him everything was a misunderstanding and bluffed, claiming she should leave instead of him. She berates his insolent spirit and takes satisfaction in taming him. She tells Mrs. Johnson she has various schemes and has not decided whether to marry him or tease him forever. She still intends to force Frederica to marry Sir James. Lady Susan will be taking a vacation from Churchill to meet her friend Mrs. Johnson in London.

Mrs. Johnson writes back to tell Lady Susan to come, but to leave Frederica behind because she drags Lady Susan down. She informs Lady Susan that Mr. Manwaring is still obsessed with her and desires to see her. The women contrive to meet together while Mr. Johnson, who forbids Lady Susan's presence, is off in the country.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother that Lady Susan has left, but they managed to keep Frederica in Churchill. Reginald is distraught with Lady Susan gone. Mrs. Vernon fears Reginald will travel to London and try to marry Lady Susan. She resigns herself to this sad fate and feels powerless to stop it.

Mrs. Johnson writes to Lady Susan telling her she cannot come stay with her because Mr. Johnson will be staying in town after all because of the gout. She managed to procure apartments for Lady Susan and plans to meet her in secret. Lady Susan responds by sharing in their mutual hatred for Mrs. Johnson's husband, wishing he would go be sick in the country. Lady Susan says she met with Mr. Manwaring in London the night before and was even tempted to marry him. She convinced Mr. Manwaring that Reginald was just a friend while she plans to figure out what to do about them both. She admits she prefers Manwaring's manliness to Reginald's softness. Reginald wants to meet Lady Susan in London but she plans to put him off.

Lady Susan gives Reginald an excuse about why she cannot see him in London, writing that people might get the wrong idea if they are seen together. She lies and tells him she longs to be with him, but it would be better to put off meeting because she's still a recent widow.

Lady Susan later writes to Mrs. Johnson, angry that Reginald showed up at her apartments in London despite her letter. She insults him at length, but she's also pleased about how devoted he is to her. She makes Reginald visit Mrs. Johnson while she sees Mr. Manwaring. Mrs. Johnson writes back to Lady Susan expressing agony about a piece of bad news. While Reginald was at her estate, Mrs. Manwaring called on her looking for her husband. Reginald got the full story from Mrs. Manwaring about Lady Susan trying to break up their marriage. Mr. Johnson gave Reginald a long speech cautioning him not to marry Lady Susan. Mrs. Johnson writes it all could have been



avoided if she had been at home but she had only stepped out. Lady Susan is vexed and regrets how unfortunate it was that Mrs. Johnson was away from home at the exact hour Mrs. Manwaring appeared. She forgives her friend and feels confident she can win Reginald back easily.

Analysis

This section demonstrates how Lady Susan's power lies in her control of her reputation. As noted above, it's her currency that gets her into closed doors. This section sees Lady Susan lose her standing with Reginald twice, and her skill at salvaging her reputation though it seems unlikely. She sets out to preserve her good name with Reginald because it is directly tied to her ability to control him. Lady Susan writes, "Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves and the opinion of the world" (1251). There is a humorous irony in Lady Susan's words because her reputation is so horrible with most people, but it is not so bad with those she can still sink her claws into. The men in her life hold her in the highest regard.

Lady Susan looks down on Reginald for the same reasons she can make him useful to her. She makes many references to taming him throughout the book. She writes, "I shall ever despise the man who can be gratified by the passion, which he never wished to inspire, nor solicited the avowal of" (1258). Lady Susan exploits people's gullibility and thinks less of them for it. Lady Susan has more respect for people who dislike her because it means they are not tractable and can think for themselves. Although she may claim to disrespect men like Reginald, her need for his approval says otherwise about her character. She sets out to fight to restore her reputation in his eyes twice in this section. For all her nastiness, Lady Susan craves to be liked even by those she looks down on. It drives from her power to dominate them socially and the ego trip that comes from conquering those predisposed to disliking her.

Lady Susan shows herself to be a malignant narcissist whose skilled handling of social mores and ability to read other people falls short when it comes to her own self-awareness. Her blind spots are on full display in this section. After Reginald finds out the truth about Frederica and turns against Lady Susan, she writes, "How dared he believe what she told him in my disfavour!" (1258). Lady Susan is offended when he believes the truth over her, believing loyalty to her matters more than what the actual truth is. To Lady Susan, truth is beside the point; she believes her version of events and the hours she's put into taming Reginald should earn his trust. When confronted with the truth, she reacts how someone should react when Lady has lied, like it is some horrible injustice. The novel again shows how the miscarriage of a society that leans too much on reputation and social custom. A sociopath like Lady Susan can bastardize the system while innocent bystanders like Frederica can fall victim to it.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lady Susan care about her reputation with some people but not others?



Discussion Question 2

Why does Lady Susan dislike Reginald for the same reasons she can control him?

Discussion Question 3

Why is Lady Susan so surprised Reginald turns against her?

Vocabulary

insolent, disfavour, condescension, pensiveness, summons, lively, intercourse, variations, deigning, reconciliation, reconciling, dissipation, biased, attribute, inclination, incumbent, quarrel, indispensably, imprudence, compensate



Letters 34 - Epilogue

Summary

Reginald writes to Lady Susan bidding her goodbye. He tells her that he has it from indisputable authority that the rumors about her are true. He says all he needs to tell her to make her understand is: "Langford", the home of the Manwarings. He admits he loved her but will not give her the satisfaction of his anguish. Lady Susan responds that she is astonished. The word "Langford" means nothing to her. She tells him she explained everything to him well enough. Mrs. Manwaring is jealous, Lady Susan claims, and bids Reginald come meet her so she can straighten everything out. The thought of losing him destroys her.

Reginald writes back, resenting her writing to him at all. He re-iterates how every rumor he's heard about her must be true. Her perverse abilities were a spell that deceived him. He maligns her for robbing the Manwarings of their peace and continuing to correspond with Mr. Manwaring. He feels foolish for ever having loved her. Lady Susan writes a curt letter back to Reginald explaining she understands. She hopes he finds happiness in obeying his parents' wishes. She says she will never recover from her disappointment.

Mrs. Johnson writes to Lady Susan, upset that Lady Susan lost her hold on Reginald. She tells Lady Susan that Mr. Johnson has forbidden her further correspondence with Lady Susan and they cannot write to each other anymore. She ends by sharing gossip that the Manwarings are parting. Mrs. Manwaring intends to marry Sir James.

Lady Susan writes back to her friend, saying she understands they must part. She claims she has nothing to be upset about; Mr. Manwaring is her creature and she despises Reginald anyway. She plans to drag Frederica from Churchill and complete her daughter's marriage to Sir James to spite Mrs. Vernon for all her meddling.

In a letter to her daughter, Lady De Courcy is joyous about Reginald's return and his split from Lady Susan. She has not pried for particulars because he is still so disheartened. She invites her daughter to come and share in their happiness, which has been long delayed. Mrs. Vernon hopes to marry Frederica soon.

Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother and expresses her surprise at Reginald and Lady Susan's split. She accepts her mother's invitation with pleasure and wishes she could bring along Frederica, but Lady Susan came to take her away. Frederica was broken-hearted to leave them and they promised to write each other every day. Lady Susan claimed her reason for taking Frederica away was because she did not want to part with her daughter for long. She made no mention of her fight with Reginald when Mrs. Vernon grilled her on it. Mrs. Vernon does not believe they have much chance of matching Frederica to Reginald now.



The rest of the story is concluded in an epilogue by a nameless narrator. Mrs. Vernon began to receive letters from Frederica that were written in Lady Susan's hand. Mrs. Vernon endeavored to do everything in her power to legally take Frederica under own care and rescue her from her mother. The Vernons met with Lady Susan and Frederica in London, where Frederica's unease and Lady Susan's overt manipulations only confirmed their suspicions she meant to marry her daughter to Sir James. Mrs. Vernon tries to coax Lady Susan into letting Frederica return to Churchill with them. Lady Susan politely declines at first, until the threat of an influenza outbreak in London gives her a reason to allow Frederica leave. Lady Susan later announces her own marriage to Sir James.

Reginald slowly recovered from his past with Lady Susan, enough so to be convinced by his family members into seeing Frederica in a romantic light. The narrator estimates they could be engaged within a year. The narrator speculates on whether Lady Susan found happiness in her second choice, knowing no one will ever know because she's a liar. The epilogue ends with the narrator pitying Sir James and Miss Manwaring, who was cheated out of a husband by a woman ten years older.

Analysis

The ending to the novel offers a reaffirmation of Victorian values. The main female characters are married off or close to it. What is interesting to note is that Miss Manwaring is seen as the most pitiable character by the nameless narrator, specifically because she is not married. It does not matter that her marriage to Sir James would have been miserable; the tragedy is that she remains unmarried whatsoever. It comes down once again to keeping up appearances. An unwed marriageable woman is the true sad story, according to the era's values.

The final sections shows how lies are necessary to navigate Victorian society, with its emphasis on polite superficiality. Many characters besides Lady Susan can be seen to lie in the novel. Mrs. Johnson's departure from her home when Mrs. Manwaring surprised Reginald and destroyed Lady Susan's plans is too perfectly time to be an accident. Mrs. Johnson sought out Lady Susan's ruin. It speaks to her true opinion of Lady Susan; Lady Susan woman is perhaps a source of amusement to her, but that is all. Mrs. Johnson takes no real pleasure in her lasting friendship. This would also be in keeping with the manipulative side and lack of regard Mrs. Johnson has shown towards her own husband. Her sudden decision to cut off Lady Susan from her life also provides proof of her true feelings. Like much about what is said in the novel, each character lies and shows only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to their actual motivations.

Poetic justice is served at the end; every character gets what he or she deserves. Lady Susan and Sir James deserve each other. Both are unscrupulous and cruel people. The promise of Reginald and Frederica's marriage also teases a happy ending. Earlier, Mrs. Vernon writes to her mother that, "Lady Susan is vanquished" (1260). Her use of terminology reinforces the idea that society is a chess match which needs to be won. Lady Susan, for all her skilled stratagems, is outmaneuvered in the end. She loses both



Mr. Manwaring and her daughter's hand to Sir James. The novel suggests that while the world is susceptible to Lady Susan's behavior, it often does not pay.

The hastily thrown together epilogue shows that this was an early, unfinished work by Austen. There is a *deus ex machina* (a narrative device where the conflict is quickly resolved by an outside force) in the form of the influenza. Rather than the characters outwitting each other, the influenza gives a quick and easy reason for Frederica to return to Churchill and escape her mother's machinations.

Discussion Question 1

Does Lady Susan get poetic justice? Is this a traditional happy ending?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the ending distinctly Victorian?

Discussion Question 3

Is it problematic that every female character's interests mainly lie in marriage or is the novel is purely a product of its time?

Vocabulary

bid, indisputable, indulgence, mortifying, stagger, conjecture, bewildered, discredit, potent, jest, abhor, subdued, fortnight, filial, grieved, partake, rupture, impaired, matrimony, hasten,



Characters

Lady Susan

Lady Susan is the eponymous character. She is one of the main characters in an ensemble and half of the story is told from her perspective. Lady Susan's actions propel the plot when she invites herself to her ex-brother-in-law's estate where she manipulates his relation Reginald De Courcy into falling in love with her. Lady Susan is a Machiavellian character, which is a literary character with no conscience who schemes and uses others to achieve their own ends. Lady Susan's sociopathy manifests itself through her exploitation of men thanks to her looks and strong grasp of Victorian era social graces. The main issue of Lady Susan's character is how preoccupied she is with her reputation and keeping up appearances when paradoxically hers is so terrible. Through Lady Susan, the novel presents one of its arguments about how Victorian Era's social dynamics are vulnerable to hypocrisy. Lady Susan is almost the personification of hypocrisy, and while she is the most malicious character in the novel, what separates her the most is her success at being a hypocrite in a world of hypocrites.

Lady Susan only thinks about how other people in relation to what they can give her. She is a selfish character with very little redeeming qualities, yet with many of Austen's characters, she is a brilliant wit. Lady Susan would be unable to effectively manipulate those around her if she was not so clever. Lady Susan writes, "I have never yet found the advice of a sister could prevent a young man's being in love if he so chose it" (1244). This speaks to Lady Susan's understanding of attraction. She knows that love and lust often win out against reason; she uses this knowledge to lure men away from their wives, betrothed, or even sisters despite how these men have been warned about Lady Susan. For Lady Susan, subterfuge is about her own ego as much as it is about social mobility. She writes, "there is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority" (1241).

Lady Susan wishes to be a bachelorette and coquette her whole life. Lady Susan neglects her daughter, relegating Frederica to boarding school and pretending she does not exist while Lady Susan is free to pursue men. Her terrible job as a mother shows that she wishes she was still young and unchained. There is no proof she loves Frederica; she only uses her as a marriage pawn to get her way. Lady Susan's only friend is someone who is arguably worse than her, Mrs. Johnson, who secretly wishes her husband would succumb to an illness and free her from marriage. It is a testament to Lady Susan's character that Mrs. Johnson is the only person she professes to love throughout the whole book.



Mrs. Vernon

Catherine Vernon is the wife of Lady Susan's ex-brother-in-law, Mr. Vernon. Mrs. Vernon is the voice of reason in the story. She sees through Lady Susan's machinations from the start and warns her family members against her. She soured against Lady Susan long ago after Lady Susan tried to prevent her marriage to Mrs. Vernon. Mrs. Vernon is not a resentful character, she is only wise to Lady Susan's true character. Her warnings to her family members about Lady Susan go unheeded, causing Mrs. Vernon distress as she tries to expose Lady Susan and stop her before she manipulates her brother Reginald into marriage.

Like her well-heeled contemporaries, Mrs. Vernon is beholden to Victorian custom, which prevents her from explicitly rebuffing Lady Susan just because she wants to get rid of her. Mrs. Vernon relates her disgust and fear of Lady Susan to her mother while playing polite host to Lady Susan during the day. Mrs. Vernon is two-faced like Lady Susan; the difference is that Mrs. Vernon's hypocrisy stems from her concern for others while Lady Susan strives to use people. Her hypocrisy is also tempered because her hatred for Lady Susan is well-deserved; Austen does not intend Mrs. Vernon as a contemptible figure, merely a good person whose flaws are of a mundane nature. Mrs. Vernon does not care that her brother marries someone of good station, she only cares that her brother ends up happy. Mrs. Vernon is a sympathetic character because this care also extends to Lady Susan's daughter Frederica and she is the first mother figure to show the girl any real love.

Mrs. Vernon also contrasts with Lady Susan by providing a good model of motherhood. She embodies all the characteristics a Victorian mother should have; she is doting and cares about her daughter settling in the world. Above all, she wants Frederica to be happy. Unlike Lady Susan, Mrs. Vernon does not care that Frederica is without worldly achievement; she values the girl based on her worth as a human being, which is what a mother ought to do.

Reginald De Courcy

Reginald De Courcy is Mrs. Vernon's brother and the object of Lady Susan's romantic manipulations. Reginald is warned about Lady Susan's scandalous reputation by his sister and friends, but he proves to be somewhat naive and falls for Lady Susan anyway. He embodies one of the novel's themes of love vs. reason and Lady Susan's contention that a man cannot be warned away from love despite the advice of a sister. Reginald is willing to believe Lady Susan's lies because his attraction to her is so strong. He also provides a good example of how people are willing to believe slander about a person before they have even met them. Reginald swears off petty gossip after meeting Lady Susan yet still believes her claims about Frederica. Reginald's constant wavering in his affections and beliefs demonstrates the difficulties of reconciling fact and fiction. He is unable to help himself from loving Lady Susan. He lies to his parents about his feeling for her. What is interesting to note is that Reginald possesses many qualities that would



make him a catch by common standards-- he is handsome, rich, kind, and cultured-- but Lady Susan cannot respect him for the same reasons she can manipulate him: he is malleable.

Frederica

Frederica is Lady Susan's daughter. After the death of her father, Frederica is sent off to a boarding school but runs away when Lady Susan tries to force her to marry Sir James. Frederica comes to live with the Vernons where she falls in love with Reginald De Courcy although her mother threatens her to keep quiet about her prospective marriage to Sir James. Frederica's silence can be seen as a metaphor for the disenfranchisement of young women in the Victorian Era. Easily the most vulnerable character in the novel, Frederica's fate is what is at stake for the majority of the novel's conflict. Although many think her a dullard and misbehaved young woman before meeting her, Frederica proves to be a kind and clever girl when given a degree of motherly affection that was previously barred to her. Frederica is an example of how slander can oftentimes be misplaced.

Lady De Courcy

Lady De Courcy is Reginald's and Mrs. Vernon's mother. She is the recipient of all of Mrs. Vernon's letters. Lady De Courcy and Mrs. Vernon share a mutual fear of Lady Susan stealing away Reginald. While an upstanding matriarchal figure, Lady De Courcy embodies the necessity of lying in their upper class social sphere. There are many subtle allusions to mother and daughter lying to each other about small matters to maintain propriety and keep the peace. Lady De Courcy obviously gives Mrs. Vernon's letters to her husband even though Mrs. Vernon asks her not to worry him and lies about it. Her daughter similarly lies to her about not being able to attend Christmas. The dynamics of their white lies provide a window into how lying was necessary to avoid social unpleasantness, which is the worst scenario in their era.

Sir James

Sir James is a posh suitor that Lady Susan sets up with her daughter after stealing him away from the young Miss Manwaring. Depicted as a mean-spirited fool, Sir James blindly does anything Lady Susan requests, even agreeing to marry Frederica. He eventually marries Lady Susan, a fate that the unnamed narrator pities him for at the end of the novel. Sir James provides unintentional antagonism in the novel through his potential betrothal to Frederica. His selfish maneuverings- including inviting himself to stay at Churchill- further show how social customs are exploited by the unscrupulous.



Mr. Manwaring

Mr. Manwaring is the scandalous love interest of Lady Susan's. Lady Susan seduced Mr. Manwaring away from his wife while she was a guest at their estate, which fueled many rumors about them. Mr. Manwaring represents the effect Lady Susan has on men. His name literally reads like "Man Warring" to illustrate his inner struggle. Mr. Manwaring is depicted as fiercely jealous of Lady Susan's others beaux. He is the only male Lady Susan finds herself attracted to; it is no coincidence that Mr. Manwaring is a duplicitous figure himself.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson is Lady Susan's friend and the recipient of all her letters. She is a wicked woman who takes pleasure in Lady Susan's schemes. Mrs. Johnson also secretly hopes her husband will fall ill, allowing her more social freedom. Mrs. Johnson is supposed to be Lady Susan's only friend, but since their friendship is founded on manipulation and deceit, Mrs. Johnson does not turn out to be a true friend. The novel suggests Mrs. Johnson betrays Lady Susan by revealing her plans to Mrs. Manwaring and orchestrating Lady Susan's downfall, showing how no real love can exist for those who behave as these women do.

Unnamed narrator

The unnamed narrator appears at the end of the novel to sum up the events in the epilogue. Possibly Austen herself, the unnamed narrator succinctly explains the outcomes of every character. The unnamed narrator is marked by being the first entity with near-omniscience unlike every character, whose perspectives is limited by their letters. The presence of the narrator shows how Lady Susan was an unfinished work, requiring a quick wrap up.

Mr. Vernon

Mr. Vernon is a major character in the novel but the novel shows none of his perspective. In true meta fashion, the unnamed narrator jokes how Mr. Vernon exists only to facilitate the motivations of other characters. Mr. Vernon is characterized by his kind and trusting nature, wanting to believe the best in Lady Susan in spite of his wife's misgivings. There is much to suggest that Mr. Vernon is not unlike Reginald; both men followed their hearts when there was opposition against their romantic choices. Mr. Vernon showcases the novel's themes of love vs. reason and the necessity of keeping up appearances.



Symbols and Symbolism

Letters

The novel is conveyed in a series of letters, which is its main structure and also represents the characters' inability to communicate in the open. The public forum of Victorian society is a place marked by much hypocrisy and reliance on appearances. People cannot say what they think or feel. Private letters are a wire into the characters' true motivations. While it is entertaining, Austen is also commenting on and lampooning the necessity of lying. Even the most sympathetic characters are not genuine, meaning no one can be completely genuine in such a world that prizes superficial harmony.

Frederica's Silence

Frederica's silence is a symbol for how children—specifically Victorian girls—are given little agency and the unhappiness it can cause. Lady Susan commands Frederica to stay quiet about her betrothal to Sir James and Frederica suffers in silence. Frederica offers a cautionary tale about the dangers of growing up with a bad mother according to Victorian standards. Lady Susan's affect on her daughter is like an abuser and victim; Frederica's silence is a cry for help when she has no voice. She finds expression only in a letter to Reginald, proof that characters can only truly speak through writing.

Reginald's Struggle

Reginald's tug-of-war between his familial obligations and his love for Lady Susan acts as a symbol for one of the novel's main themes: the struggle between love and reason. Lady Susan informs Mrs. Johnson that no advice from a sister can influence a man in matters of love. Most of the novel seems to offer points in Lady Susan's argument; Reginald is charmed and won over by Lady Susan in spite of his family's warnings. Reginald's inner conflict can be seen as a microcosm for how love— or attraction— often trumps reason and better judgment.

Churchill Estate

Churchill is the main arena the novel takes place in, posing as separate symbols that reflect different things according to the characters. Churchill is a place to be exploited for Lady Susan; for Frederica, Churchill is the home she never had. Since Churchill is the seat of Victorian propriety, Lady Susan is able to gain entrance because of unspoken social conventions. Where the letters show stratagems taking place in the dark, Churchill is the exposed chess board where every word and action is scrutinized publicly. Frederica sees none of that; being a kind and sincere person, she cherishes Churchill for the Vernons and sees it as a place of love and affection.



Langford and the Manwarings

Langford is a word synonymous with Lady Susan's many falsehoods. The novel's backstory takes place in the Langford estate owned by the Manwarings, where Lady Susan seduced both Mr. Manwaring and Sir James away from the older and younger lady Manwarings. Reginald sums up his hatred for Lady Susan in the single word "Langford" and it is a metonym for Lady Susan's manipulations that catch up to her. Langford shows how the past comes back to haunt Lady Susan no matter how much of a cunning schemer she is.

Marriage as Pawn

Marriage is the pinnacle of all social stratagems in the novel; it represents the final move of upward mobility rather than an act of love. In true Austen fashion, most of the female main characters are invested in their marriage. Mrs. Vernon is interested in uniting two people who would bring each other true happiness; Lady Susan only cares about making the decision that will bring her the most power. Lady Susan uses Sir James as a means to an end, hoping to secure a financial future by marrying him off to Frederica. Lady Susan's implied unhappiness at the end of the novel argues how using marriage purely for personal gain is always doomed.

Slander

The characters provide insight into how difficult it is to distinguish fact from slander because of personal bias. Reginald wants to think the best of Lady Susan and the worst of Frederica, so he does and ignores all evidence he's wrong. Many of the characters hold prejudiced ideas of each other even before meeting and communicate these prejudices as if they were fact. Reginald and Mrs. Vernon are surprised when their negative opinions turn out to be wrong. Through the De Courcys, the novel shows how difficult it is to navigate truth and lies when it comes to other people.

London

In archetypal town and country contrast, London is a place of vice where Churchill is pastoral purity. Lady Susan meets Mr. Manwaring for an implied affair in London. It is the site of her worst indiscretions with men and the place where she and Mrs. Johnson intend to descend into debauchery. London is conflated with moral impurity and sin. The influenza outbreak in London at the end of the novel serves to show how dirty it is, spiritually-speaking.



Influenza

While influenza represents the novel's dirty depiction of London, it is also a Deus Ex Machina employed by Austen to wrap up the events. A Deus Ex Machina is a literary contrivance that going back to Greek plays, meaning any event that easily solve all the novel's conflict through an external source. The Influenza is communicated in a short epilogue that shows that Lady Susan is unfinished work. The sudden inclusion of influenza acts both as a symbol and a literary device.

Mrs. Johnson

Mrs. Johnson is a character in the novel, but she also symbolizes Lady Susan's only human connections. Mrs. Johnson is the only character Lady Susan professes to love throughout the book. Mrs. Johnson shows herself to be a callous and conniving woman; it speaks to Lady Susan's sociopathic tendencies that this is the only person she relates to. But Mrs. Johnson abandons Lady Susan at the first opportune moment, even possibly having orchestrated her friend's ruin. Mrs. Johnson represents how those who do not truly love others cannot form any lasting connection in the world.



Settings

Churchill

The novel's main events take place at the Churchill estate, the home of the Vernons. Churchill represents an idealized Victorian pastoral whereas London is decadent. It is an affluent and lush estate where the upper crust gather and most characters are trying to gain admittance into Churchill. Lady Susan conning her way into Churchill is the inciting incident of the tale. Churchill stands for a type of lifestyle that all characters are aspiring towards, that is, a successful one by Victorian standards. Churchill is also the open arena of the story's main power struggles, where everyone makes a formal show of propriety in keeping with manners.

London

Whereas Churchill represents an idealized Victorian home life, London is the polar opposite; it is a den of iniquity and vice. London is the place where all characters escape to do perform their secretive and scandalous acts. A hub of industrialization in the Victorian era, London's changing face was feared by traditionalists, and so stands in for a setting of vice for Austen. The dichotomy between London and Churchill is emphasized by how Frederica returns to Churchill for a happy ending while Lady Susan stays in London and suffers a potentially bad ending.

Langford

Langford is the Manwaring estate and the site where Lady Susan first made a major transgression by seducing the men away from their women. Langford represents a major breach of propriety; Lady Susan's incredible ingratitude as a guest is a major faux-pas in Victorian times- as it is in modern times too. Langford functions as a warning to the other characters in the novel before Lady Susan arrives in Churchill.

Vernon Castle

Vernon Castle is property owned by Lady Susan that she denied to her brother-in-law, Mr. Vernon, after her husband's death. The existence of Vernon Castle underscores the scale of Lady Susan's shamelessness. She expects to be welcomed into Churchill after denying her brother-in-law his own inheritance. While ostensibly yet another strike in the Lady-Susan-is-a-terrible person category, Vernon Castle represents more. It shows how Lady Susan expects to be forgiven for her past infractions while she holds onto grudges. Lady Susan is stunned when she discovers Mrs. Vernon is still upset with her about Vernon Castle.



Frederica's Boarding School

Frederica's Boarding School is an unseen location in the novel. That is an appropriate choice by Austen because it is a reminder of how Frederica is abandoned by her mother. By not placing any events in the novel inside the boarding school, the reader understands how Frederica must feel: she is marginalized to a footnote. The Boarding School is a prison of sorts for Frederica. Lady Susan stashes her there to forget she has a daughter altogether.



Themes and Motifs

The Dangers of Prejudice

For every character in the novel, the main power struggle can be traced to the theme of grappling with the nature of truth. Everyone is in the process of decoding rumors and lies to achieve their own ends. Mrs. Vernon seeks to expose Lady Susan by proving the allegations against her are true; Reginald De Courcy is torn between his love for Lady Susan and the truth about her character; Lady Susan seeks to obfuscate the truth as much as possible so she may win the heart of Reginald for her own egotistical pleasure and so she can marry off Frederica to secure a financial future. The truth is layered in complex Victorian dynamics of social interaction and the various letters which form the novel's structure. The letters are then coded in levels of subtext and lies.

The novel argues how the truth is often fluid and cannot be pinned down easily. Despite being warned about Lady Susan's character, Reginald is enchanted by her. He casts away all his previous hatred for her and embraces a new truth: the rumors against Lady Susan were exaggerations and lies. He writes that his experience "may also convince us how little the general report of anyone ought to be credited, since no character, however upright, can escape the malevolence of slander" (1248). He regrets taking hearsay about Lady Susan to heart before meeting her- though it happens to be true and Lady Susan is the one manipulating him. The truth is almost arbitrary; Reginald is always ready to believe one narrative without much evidence besides one person's account. The novel does not condemn him for it, but suggests it is impossible to abstain from prejudice. People must make judgments for oneself.

Frederica and Lady Susan offer two juxtapositions about the dangers of prejudice because both suffer from slander. In Lady Susan's case, the rumors happen to be well-founded; she did what she was accused of (manipulating the men away from the female Manwarings). Frederica is slandered by her mother and portrayed as a misbehaving and mean-spirited child. Characters with good intentions are misled; even Mrs. Vernon believes the claims without any evidence. Lady Susan's manipulations make Reginald abhor Frederica after he recently decried the dangers of believing in slander. The novel claims rumors are slippery beasts; they can be well-founded or without merit. The truth must be divined for oneself.

The Power of Reputation

Lady Susan understands how her reputation acts a currency. Lady Susan works hard to secure her reputation with Reginald. It is an ego game for her, but also more than that; with Lady Susan in Reginald's good graces, she leaves the door open to manipulating him into marriage. Lady Susan proves to be a master manipulator. Her success shows how the deceitful can openly exploit fissures that exist in the Victorian era's social framework. In a society that relies so much on the appearances of being good,



genuinely being good can be overlooked. Nowhere does that contrast ring truer than with Frederica and Lady Susan. Others are powerless to act against Lady Susan because it would be improper to do so. The De Courcys are forced to watch from the sidelines in horror as Lady Susan potentially schemes her way into their family. Society becomes a chess match of sorts, with Mrs. Vernon's words "Lady Susan has been vanquished" as proof.

Lady Susan embodies a hilarious irony: she cares very much about her reputation, which is at once horrible with most people but sterling with the right people. Lady Susan writes, "Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves and the opinion of the world" (1251). No doubt Austen means this passage to comically show Lady Susan's lack of self-awareness yet it also captures Lady Susan's brilliance. Lady Susan cultivates favorable relationships with the right people- Reginald and other men- because it gives her levers of power to exercise later. Reputation grants her access to a Victorian woman's traditional means of power: marriage. Knowing she could never secure a new husband with her poor reputation, she focuses on turning specific men onto her lies at the cost of ruining her reputation with the world at large. When she has exhausted her ability to manipulate someone, Lady Susan no longer cares about her reputation with her former target. This is shown by her curt final letter to Reginald. Once she realized he was a lost cause, she no longer had any interest in spending time grooming him.

For Lady Susan, the manipulation of reputation is also an ego game. She writes, "I shall ever despise the man who can be gratified by the passion, which he never wished to inspire, nor solicited the avowal of" (1258). Lady Susan enjoys the thrill of occupying Reginald's good graces while disliking him because he fell for her. Her concern with reputation represents a paradox: while she does not care about the opinions of those who do not offer her some use, she cares about the collective opinion of society. By securing a suitable husband, she wins the approval of society at large, which is to say, she wins a reputation. Despite her sociopathic ways and professing not to care about other's true options, she cares very much.

Hypocrisy

Through Lady Susan's exploitations, the novel criticizes the Victorian era's reliance on stuffy social custom. The Churchill estate acts as a microcosm for any upper crust English family; it abides by certain unspoken principles and codes of conduct meant to give a superficial appearance of propriety. These unspoken codes are often hypocritical, shown by Lady Susan's successful Machiavellian schemes. Despite virtually every character hating Lady Susan, she is able to navigate the world by relying on her knowledge of propriety. She gains entrance to Churchill by saying and doing the right things. It is not enough for Mrs. Vernon to dislike Lady Susan and forbid her from coming to their house, there must be a specific reason to deny her entrance. Not allowing family to stay indefinitely is simply not done. By paying lip service to being a better aunt, she gives the appearance of a well-meaning and socially respectable figure who cannot be maligned without evidence to the contrary.



For all the negative things said about other characters in the book, none of it is said in the open, which underscores the hypocritical nature of Victorian Society. Austen is lampooning her world as much as she is criticizing it. Everywhere there are characters who are breaking social custom in private; Mrs. Johnson, far from being the doting wife she appears in public, wishes her husband was sick to benefit her; Lady Susan secretly hates her extended family and Reginald while feigning the opposite in public. Even the novel's most sympathetic characters, Mrs. Vernon and Frederica, can only express themselves in private through letters. Their opinions are often harsh and the opposite of what they say in public.

The novel's reliance on letters shows the necessity of speaking behind backs in their world. Frederica's entire suffering in the novel stems from her inability to publicly express the truth that she does not want to marry Sir James. Frederica can only confess her true fears to Reginald in the form of a letter. Speaking out of line is forbidden. Hypocrisy and scheming becomes necessary to give voice to the truth.

Characters are often lying in their letters in subtle ways. Lady De Courcy just so happens to leave the letter out for her husband to find; Mrs. Johnson just so happens to be out of the house at the exact moment Mrs. Manwaring appears and ruins all of Lady Susan's plans. An argument can be made that this is all legitimate coincidence, but more realistically, characters lied to achieve their own agendas. It reinforces the novel's contention that white lies form the fabric of their society.

Love vs reason

One of the novel's famous aphorisms captures a distinctly Austen theme. Lady Susan writes, "I have never yet found the advice of a sister could prevent a young man's being in love if he so chose it" (1244). Despite truth, logic, and loyalty, men fall over themselves for Lady Susan's affection. Reginald provides the most potent example. He is warned about Lady Susan's disreputable character early on and braces himself to meet "the most accomplished coquette in England" (1238). He falls for Lady Susan's looks and charms, soon abandoning his previous mission statement of despising her. He switches teams from his sister's over to Lady Susan's, as Lady Susan predicted. Though Reginald is arguably quite naive for believing Lady Susan's explanations, Reginald is not simply dumb—he wants to believe the claims against Lady Susan are untrue. He unconsciously makes exceptions for her and strives to see her in the best light because his attraction to her is so strong. It is seen multiple times; Lady Susan accomplishes the impossible and manages to convince Reginald not to believe evidence against her twice over. It is not until the end of the novel that reason wins out against what his heart desires and he sees Lady Susan for the succubus she is. The novel suggests how men and women are willfully blind when it comes to matters of the heart.

Mr. Manwaring and Sir James are the other counterparts representing this theme. As noted, Mr. Manwaring's name literally sounds like Man-Warring. He is waging a battle within himself for Lady Susan's affections. He is willing to destroy his own marriage to



have her. Lady Susan writes, “He is distracted by jealousy, which I am not sorry for, as I know no better support of love” (1251). The enticing power of seduction can wreak havoc when used indiscriminately. Lady Susan's coquetry is frowned upon because it is effective.

Sir James is also Lady Susan's toy, to the point he accepts to marry Lady Susan's daughter if it means he gets to be near her. A picture arises of men who are either ignorant or willfully blind when it comes to love. The truth is obvious to all those on the outside; the De Courcys fear their son will fall for Lady Susan's ruse even though he insists they are only friends. In a later letter to Lady Susan, he admits having loved her. Reginald put aside thoughts of propriety and family loyalty to pursue Lady Susan, as his family feared he would.

The theme is also captured in the novel's backstory with the Vernons. Mr. Vernon, one of the novel's most tractable character, is uncharacteristically inured to Lady Susan's manipulations against Catherine Vernon before they married. Lady Susan tied to destroy their marriage but Mr. Vernon was set on marrying her. The novel contends that love will always fly in the face of reason.

Motherhood

The novel offers two separate versions of motherhood in the form of Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon. Both act as mother figures to Frederica; Lady Susan may be Frederica's biological mother but only Mrs. Vernon is a real mother to the girl and shows her love.

Lady Susan sees Frederica for her value as a social pawn while Mrs. Vernon values Frederica for her worth as a person. Lady Susan's sociopathic tendencies manifest themselves as a mother by her desire to use Frederica to her own ends. Frederica is more a nuisance to her and she only takes notice in her life when she plans to marry Frederica to Sir James. Lady Susan values manipulation or “artfulness” before all things, so it makes sense that a sincerely honest girl like Frederica would disappoint her. She writes, “artlessness will never do in love matters, and that girl [Frederica] is a born simpleton. She is in high favour with her aunt altogether-- because she is so little like myself of course” (1254). Lady Susan regards Frederica's worth as a failed coquette, so Frederica is low in her mother's esteem.

Frederica also reminds Lady Susan that she is a mother at all. Lady Susan would love to play the coy bachelorette and tease men the rest of her life, but that is an impossibility. Frederica is proof of Lady Susan's age, relatively late by Victorian standards, and so it angers Lady Susan. She pretends Frederica is not real because it also allows her to pretend she is not really a mother.

Mrs. Vernon sees Frederica from a mother's point of view: with genuine empathy and love. She also sees the girl in terms of her marriageable worth. This does not come from a place of malice or using her; women were defined by their marriage status in the sexist and repressive Victorian era. To Mrs. Vernon, it does not matter to her that



Frederica is without accomplishment. Frederica is a kind and pretty young girl, evidenced by Mrs. Vernon's change of heart about her and how Frederica's little cousins adore her.

Both Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon play the part of mother as match-maker, but only Mrs. Vernon's motivations are just. She wants Frederica to marry for happiness, a common concern for the traditional Victorian mother. The novel posits that love, affection, and discipline are the necessary ingredients to raise a daughter well. Mrs. Vernon embodies these inherently Victorian traits. When she exercises them in Frederica, the girl's life improves and she finds happiness. The ending of the novel reaffirms traditional ideas of motherhood. Reginald finds a suitable match in Frederica thanks to Mrs. Vernon's motherly concern.

Styles

Point of View

Lady Susan is told through the point of view of many characters through a series of letters. Most of the novel's letters are from Lady Susan and Mrs. Vernon, writing to a friend and family respectively. Lady Susan's main letters to Mrs. Johnson depict the main character as a Machiavellian figure whose true thoughts and feelings do not reflect her public actions. Lady Susan is a true sociopathic character who views others as objects and uses them as means to an end. Her point of view contrasted with Mrs. Vernon's shows how the dishonest are able to manipulate the social conventions of the world around them to achieve their own selfish ends.

By offering contrast in these points of views, Austen is able to offer a send-up of a repressive and fundamentally hypocritical society. Although Lady Susan is by far the most malicious and deceitful of the whole cast, no character is wholly exempt for the label of hypocrite. The various points of view work to show how the characters inhabit a world where true communication is difficult, if not downright impossible. All motivations are coded in layers of subtext and hidden meaning that must be guessed at, even for the reader. When the De Courcys write to their son Reginald imploring him not to marry Lady Susan, he writes that they are only friends. The reader only learns that is untrue when Reginald later confesses his love for Lady Susan. Each character's point of view is only glimpsed at instead of being exposed by an omniscient narrator. The limited point of view makes for compelling reading; the work becomes more of a play than a novel because stream of consciousness is the only insight into what makes each character tick.

Language and Meaning

Most of the novel's character speak in a distinctly Jane Austen manner and her trademark wit and insight is on full display. Similar to the type of opening line that makes *Pride and Prejudice* so famous, Lady Susan's has many pithy bits of insight like when she writes, "I have never yet found the advice of a sister could prevent a young man's being in love if he so chose it" (1244). Many of the characters, who all have distinctive voices, also stop to wax philosophical on the nature of Victorian society. Austen's voice shines through each figure that enters the tale.

Lady Susan's brilliant grasp of language is what allows her to say the right things and maintain her social survival while acting unethically. She manages to convince Mr. Vernon that she loves her family and daughter by saying what a mother should say. She makes Reginald fall in love with her by saying what a lover should say. The politics of language are one of the novel's chief concerns; determining the truth behind language is a major investigative effort. In a world that allows very little social transgression, lying takes on new complexities and subtext. Figuring out which characters are lying and how



they are going about lying so effectively is a big source of entertainment for the reader. The novel suggests that the silver-tongued are the ones control the world. Even with a terrible reputation and plagued by scandal, there is no stopping a person without morals if they have the gift of gab.

Structure

The novel's epistolary structure offers specific entertainment value. Letters do not offer complete pictures of events, as they are purely dialogue and limited to one person's subjective experience. Rather than writing the events from the perspective of a third person omniscient narrator, the events are written rather like snapshots of the novel's story. It is left up to the reader to connect the dots and divine the truth. Austen's decision to write an epistolary novel gives a brand of storytelling that makes for compelling reading because answers are not immediately available.

The structure makes it easier to jump forward to later events in the story. In the past, letters were written to include major information dumps because they took so long to reach their recipients. Each letter in the story then offers a major turn of events. Lady Susan writes about her desire to visit Churchill and the next letter shows her reaction after arriving there. The structure allows for a fast-paced novel.

The epilogue at the end of the novel proves how Lady Susan was an unfinished work. The main conflict is wrapped up like an afterthought along with the inclusion of the influenza as a Deus Ex Machina. Even in the final lines, the new narrator comments how no one knows how Lady Susan feels about how things turned out. The epistolary structures offers tip-of-the-iceberg glimpses into character's psyches that are limited even to the end.



Quotes

Were there another place in England open to me, I would prefer it. Charles Vernon is my aversion, and I am afraid of his wife.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 2)

Importance: This quote immediately establishes that Lady Susan is a scheming hypocrite.

I love to meet the most accomplished coquette in England.

-- Reginald (Letter 4)

Importance: This quote shows how Reginald was warned about Lady Susan early on, yet he still falls for her.

There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 7)

Importance: This quote allows a glimpse into Lady Susan's twisted psychology.

This project will serve at least to amuse me, and prevent my feeling so acutely this dreadful separation from you and all whom I love.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 7)

Importance: This quote provides the motivation behind Lady Susan's plot: it is ego-driven.

It may also convince us how little the general report of anyone ought to be credited, since no character, however upright, can escape the malevolence of slander.

-- Reginald (Letter 14)

Importance: This quote captures one of the novel's main themes about determining the truth in slander. It also shows how Reginald continues to fall for this same problem even when he's made aware of it.

He is distracted by jealousy, which I am not sorry for, as I know no better support of love.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 16)

Importance: This gives a glimpse into Lady Susan's mentally unhealthy view of relationships and people. She conflates love and jealousy, believing them to be the same.

She has had a wretched education and dreadful example of levity in her mother; but yet I can pronounce her disposition to be excellent, and her natural abilities very good.



-- Mrs. Vernon (Letter 18)

Importance: This quote shows how Mrs. Vernon cares for Frederica like a mother and values her as a person, not an object.

Artlessness will never do in love matters, and that girl [Frederica] is a born simpleton.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 19)

Importance: This quote shows how Lady Susan believes a woman's worth is only equal to her ability to manipulate men and exploit high society.

Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves and the opinion of the world.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 16)

Importance: This quote is ironic because Lady Susan has a terrible reputation. It also serves to illustrate how Lady Susan uses her reputation as a currency.

I shall ever despise the man who can be gratified by the passion, which he never wished to inspire, nor solicited the avowal of.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 22)

Importance: This quote shows how twisted Lady Susan is; she hates Reginald for the same reason she has him under her thrall.

I have never yet found the advice of a sister could prevent a young man's being in love if he so chose it.

-- Lady Susan (Letter 10)

Importance: This witticism captures one of the novel's theme of love vs. reason.

Lady Susan is vanquished.

-- Mrs. Vernon (Letter 23)

Importance: This letter from Mrs. Vernon to her mother demonstrates how social dynamics are akin to a game of strategy in Victorian England.