

MINUTES  
of the meeting of  
The Novel Club of Cleveland  
May 1, 2018

Novel: *Lady Susan*, by Jane Austen

Hosts: Robert Brody, Louise Fraizer, Jennie Kaffen

Guests: Rob and Victoria Ware, Kent Smith

New members: Jill Korbin and Tricia Smith

Treasury report: There is a balance of \$1,363.43, post the annual meeting expenses of \$509.

A donation for book distribution to children was discussed as a worthy allocation of some the Club's Treasury surplus. This initiative will be researched and reintroduced at a later time.

The main literary events of the evening were begun with Anne Ogan's biographical paper on Jane Austen. Anne's approach was very thorough, providing details of Jane's family, her life both at home and at school, her relationships with her siblings, parents, cousins, and friends. Despite the differences between the curricula offered to male and female students, Jane was encouraged to read as much as were her brothers, and thus made noted contributions to the literary and dramatic arts flourishing in her family culture. The essay developed Austen's love life and marriage prospects at length, an interesting narrative, given the collective focus on that institution in her novels. Finally, Ann took up Austen's publishing history, some aspects of which – such as anonymous publication – were typical of writing women of her time.

Jennie Kaffen's critical essay was also well researched. Her synopsis of the narrative filled in intriguing and extensive characterologic detail. Her critical perspective, too, delved into the nature of the female characters (since the male characters were flat, somewhat dull, and unremarkable). Allowing for Austen's precocity in writing this epistolary novel, Jennie raised the question of the appropriateness of the form for *Lady Susan*.

Club members responded to a number of astute critical issues that Jennie, having concluded her essay, then raised. Some found the letter form to enhance Austen's story, and some found it only clumsily handled by the (very) young writer. Examples of contemporary epistolary novels were invoked in an attempt to probe the suitability of the form in the novel under discussion. A

critical vantage point around her youth at the time of this work's composition began to form in the discussion. Directions, however, began to diverge with the next discussion question, which provoked examination of the character of the wicked Lady Susan. Some found her an effective vehicle of Austen's satiric intentions, others found her behavior over the top and saw her, therefore, as an unbelievable as a human figure. Some of the Club members pursued the broader social contexts of the narrative's setting as a justification of Lady Susan's manipulative schemes; others saw her bad behavior as stemming from her black heart, regardless of the social position in which she found herself as a widow.

Conversation turned to the novel's abrupt ending. Most readers found this somewhat satisfying, either because Lady Susan is going to be the wife of a dolt – her just desserts – or because it provided a perfect rationale for Austen's use of the epistolary form, which, when the characters no longer have a need to write letters to one another, becomes irrelevant. End of story.

Should we keep this book in the Austen cannon? There was little agreement on this, our last discussion point of the evening.

Respectfully submitted,

Joyce Kessler