

Lady Susan



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen was the seventh child of a British parish rector. Though her parents were members of the English gentry, they remained relatively poor. Modest to a fault about the value of her work, Jane Austen nevertheless produced some of the enduring masterpieces of English literature, including the novels [Pride and Prejudice](#), [Sense and Sensibility](#), [Emma](#), and [Persuasion](#). Her novels were published anonymously until after her death, when her authorship became known. While it was not unheard of for women to publish under their own names in Austen's lifetime, it was still a rarity. Despite the fact that her books focus on the intricate rituals of courtship and marriage among the British middle class, Austen herself remained single throughout her life, preferring the life of a writer over that of a wife and hostess.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Most of Austen's work, including *Lady Susan*, focused on courtship and marriage. During Austen's lifetime, marriage was increasingly crucial for women due to England's transition to an individualist social economy. Women had few independent means of economic or social advancement—in *Lady Susan*, this explains Lady Susan's desire to marry off Frederica, her dependence on the hospitality of the Mainwaring and Vernon families, and her decision to remarry at the novella's end. Additionally, 18th century English society was also heavily structured, and good manners were expected within the upper class. *Lady Susan's* epistolary form demonstrates that people could share their true feelings through letters but were often polite to each other in person.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jane Austen's work is often understood as part of the rise of the realist novel, as she grounds her characters in psychological realism. Later realist authors indebted to Austen include George Eliot and Thomas Hardy. However, *Lady Susan* is also an epistolary novel, told almost entirely through letters. In this, it's most similar to novels like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) or Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778)—*Evelina*, in particular, satirized a hypocritical society, a mission Austen would later adopt. However, while Richardson is known to be one of Austen's influences (he helped to make marriage a legitimate literary theme in fiction), *Pamela* is a "conduct novel," which rewards virtue and morality. *Lady Susan*, on the other hand, is filled with bad behavior that goes unpunished, making it

different from the works of Austen's predecessors and different from her own novels. *Lady Susan* (the novella's titular character and antagonist) is cunning, actively cruel, and seductive; in Austen's other work, this would have earned her a severe punishment. For instance, in [Mansfield Park](#), Maria Bertram, a married woman, has an affair with another man, and as punishment, she's exiled from society. *Lady Susan* is lightly punished in comparison, and for this reason, *Lady Susan* occupies a unique position within Austen's body of work and within eighteenth-century literature more broadly.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Lady Susan*
- **When Written:** 1793-1795
- **Where Written:** Hampshire, England
- **When Published:** 1871 (posthumous publication)
- **Literary Period:** Classicism, Romanticism
- **Genre:** Novella, Epistolary novel
- **Setting:** A wealthy estate (Churchill) and a townhouse in London
- **Climax:** Reginald learns that Lady Susan is having an affair with Mr. Mainwaring
- **Antagonist:** Lady Susan
- **Point of View:** Epistolary (first person)

EXTRA CREDIT

Lost Letters. In 1843, decades after Jane Austen's death, her sister Cassandra burned most of her correspondence. As a result, relatively little is known about Austen's personal life.

Posthumous Publication. *Lady Susan* is one of five Austen novels to be published after her death in 1817. Of these posthumous publications, only three were completed (*Lady Susan*, [Persuasion](#), and [Northanger Abbey](#)), while two were unfinished (*The Watsons*, *Sandition*).



PLOT SUMMARY

In a **letter**, the poor, recently widowed Lady Susan Vernon invites herself to stay at Churchill, the estate of her brother-in-law, Charles Vernon, and her sister-in-law, Catherine Vernon. She reveals in a different letter to her friend, Alicia Johnson, that this isn't by choice—she was previously staying with a married man, Mr. Manwaring, and his wife, Mrs. Manwaring. While she was there, she seduced Mr. Manwaring and a man named Sir James Martin, intending to secure Sir James as a

husband for her daughter, Frederica. However, Sir James was already engaged to Mr. Manwaring's sister, Miss Manwaring. In the wake of the chaos she caused, Lady Susan had to leave, and she now plans to drop Frederica off at boarding school en route to Churchill. Meanwhile, corresponding with her mother Lady De Courcy and brother Reginald De Courcy, Catherine notes that Lady Susan has a bad reputation—only Reginald, hoping to be amused, is excited about her visit. Six years before, Lady Susan tried to prevent Charles from marrying Catherine, and Catherine hasn't forgiven her.

When Lady Susan arrives, her behavior doesn't match up with her reputation, and she's able to charm Charles—though Catherine recognizes that Lady Susan has a talent for lying. In a letter to Alicia, Lady Susan reveals that she plans to force Frederica to marry Sir James against her will—boarding school is just a temporary punishment. Meanwhile, Reginald begins to change his opinion of Lady Susan, prolonging his stay to spend time with her; while Lady Susan has no plans to marry him and is still toying with Manwaring from afar, she enjoys tormenting Catherine by flirting with Reginald. Catherine, believing that Reginald might actually be in love with Lady Susan, shares her concerns with Lady De Courcy—but her letter finds its way to her father, Sir Reginald De Courcy. Sir Reginald writes to Reginald, disapproving of Lady Susan, both because she would make Reginald unhappy and because her reputation would damage the family. Reginald responds that he won't marry her, but that her reputation is undeserved—Catherine, however, still believes that the match will happen one day.

Catherine also reveals that Frederica has run away from boarding school, and Frederica soon arrives at Churchill. By observing Lady Susan with Frederica, Catherine concludes that Lady Susan doesn't love her daughter—but Reginald, still infatuated with Lady Susan, blames Frederica for everything. Meanwhile, Frederica grows enamored with Reginald, and Catherine approves of the match because it would separate Reginald from Lady Susan. However, Sir James soon arrives at Churchill, to the surprise of both the Vernons and Lady Susan. Frederica (who despises Sir James) is alarmed, but Lady Susan tries to convince Catherine that she planned it all along, and that Sir James and Frederica are happily engaged. Out of desperation, Frederica secretly gives Reginald a letter, in which she begs him to convince Lady Susan to break her engagement. Reginald attempts to do so and becomes disillusioned with Lady Susan because of her unkindness to Frederica.

Catherine then writes to her mother to tell her that Reginald plans to leave Churchill, which is a relief—not long after, however, Lady Susan convinces him to stay by pretending that she'll leave instead. Lady Susan tells Alicia that she's furious with Reginald and might marry him just to punish him; for now, however, she's going to London to see Alicia. Alicia warns Lady Susan that Mr. Manwaring is still infatuated with her; if she wants to marry Reginald, she'll have to get him out of the way.

Furthermore, Alicia's husband, Mr. Johnson, will be in town at the same time—he hates Lady Susan, so the two will have to avoid him in order to enact their schemes. Lady Susan, who's begun spending time with Mr. Manwaring again, tries to convince Reginald—to whom she is now engaged—to stay away from London temporarily, claiming that she doesn't want to upset his family with their engagement. In reality, she hopes to delay their marriage until after Sir Reginald is dead, because then the two will inherit Sir Reginald's money and be financially independent.

Undeterred, Reginald comes to London anyway. His visit has disastrous consequences for Lady Susan, as he runs into the jealous Mrs. Manwaring at the Johnsons' home—Mr. Johnson is her guardian, and she came to beg for his interference in Lady Susan's affair with Mr. Manwaring. Reginald then learns all about the affair from Mr. Johnson, and he writes to Lady Susan to break their engagement. This time, Lady Susan is unable to change his mind. Alicia advises Lady Susan to marry Sir James instead and tells her that, due to Mr. Johnson's interference, she can no longer correspond with Lady Susan.

An unnamed narrator reveals that, while Lady Susan initially persisted in forcing a marriage between Frederica and Sir James, she eventually changed her mind and returned Frederica to Churchill. Lady Susan then married Sir James herself, and after a year, Reginald's family persuaded him into loving and marrying Frederica. Ultimately, the narrator does not pity Lady Susan and instead pities Sir James and Miss Manwaring, who lost Sir James to Lady Susan.



CHARACTERS

Lady Susan – Lady Susan is an impoverished widow and mother to Frederica Vernon. She instigates the novella's events by inviting herself to stay with her brother-in-law, Charles Vernon, and his wife, Catherine Vernon. Her ulterior motive for this visit reveals her selfish nature: she was previously staying with a married man, Mr. Manwaring, and seduced both Mr. Manwaring and his friend Sir James Martin, who was engaged to Mr. Manwaring's sister, Miss Manwaring (Lady Susan intended to force Frederica to marry Sir James). Lady Susan is a skilled manipulator—because she's beautiful, intelligent, and outwardly polite, she's able to convince others of her innocence, though her true character is revealed in her **letters** to her friend and co-conspirator Alicia Johnson. Lady Susan's two-facedness is particularly clear in her relationship with Catherine's brother Reginald De Courcy: while Reginald initially distrusted Lady Susan, he soon falls in love with her and begins to parrot her lies. The two eventually become engaged, but after Reginald learns of her affair with Mr. Manwaring, he breaks off the engagement, and Lady Susan marries Sir James instead. Throughout the novella, Lady Susan's motivations are unclear; her late husband, whom she disliked, was bankrupt

when he died, meaning that she's in need of money—but her actions never indicate that she's mercenary. For instance, her insistence that Frederica marry Sir James doesn't seem solely motivated by money—Frederica later develops a crush on Reginald, and if money were all Lady Susan wanted, she would accept that match as a substitute. Instead, she seems to simply enjoy controlling others, especially because her power as a poor widow in 19th-century society is otherwise limited. For instance, she tells Alicia that she flirts with Reginald not because she likes him, but because she enjoys how she completely changed his opinion of her. Similarly, she insists on Frederica's marriage mostly to punish Frederica. At the end of the novella, Lady Susan hasn't changed significantly—though she's married to Sir James, he's easily manipulated, meaning that Lady Susan's schemes will likely continue.

Catherine Vernon – Catherine is the wife of Lady Susan's brother-in-law, Charles Vernon; she's Sir Reginald and Lady De Courcy's daughter and Reginald's sister. Catherine is a practical woman whose main focus in the novella is preventing Reginald from marrying Lady Susan. Lady Susan has a bad reputation, but Catherine has her own reasons for disliking her: six years prior to the start of the novella, Lady Susan tried to convince Charles not to marry Catherine. Apart from Lady Susan's daughter, Frederica Vernon, Catherine is the only central character who doesn't fall for Lady Susan's lies. In **letters** to her mother, Catherine laments Reginald's infatuation with Lady Susan and, true to her logical and clear-headed nature, tries to put a stop to it. First, she tells her mother to call Reginald home on false pretenses. When this doesn't work, she hopes to help Frederica, who is in love with Reginald, attract his attention. Though Catherine is largely polite to Lady Susan, as “common decency” necessitates, she does eventually confront her about her cruelty toward Frederica, and she's disgusted by Lady Susan's continued manipulation. Though both Catherine and Lady Susan have little real power in society because women in their time (the 19th century) generally had fewer rights and opportunities than men, Lady Susan is more skilled than Catherine at wielding what little power she has. At the end of the novella, Reginald ends his engagement to Lady Susan not because of Catherine's interference, but because he randomly learned about Lady Susan's affair with Mr. Manwaring from Mr. Johnson.

Reginald De Courcy – Reginald De Courcy is Sir Reginald and Lady De Courcy's son and Catherine Vernon's brother. He comes to visit Catherine and her husband, Charles Vernon, at the same time Lady Susan does, hoping to be amused by Lady Susan's antics. Instead, he quickly falls for Lady Susan's lies and becomes infatuated with her—while he was certain of her wicked nature prior to his visit, her beauty and intelligence (as well as her skilled manipulation) convince him that her bad reputation is nothing but “slanderous tales.” Though Reginald initially appears to be an intelligent, if fun-loving character, he's

quickly revealed to be gullible and easily influenced. Lady Susan, for her part, flirts with and eventually becomes engaged to Reginald not because she loves him, but because she wants to punish him for his initial low opinion of her, as well as for doubting her off and on throughout the story. But as Reginald falls in love with Lady Susan, Lady Susan's daughter, Frederica, falls in love with Reginald—however, Reginald only takes notice of Frederica after she asks for his help in breaking her engagement to Sir James Martin. Reginald's kindness and sympathy toward Frederica briefly disillusion him about Lady Susan's character, but he doesn't break off his engagement with her until the end of the novella, when he learns of her affair with Mr. Manwaring during a chance encounter with Mr. Johnson. A year later, his family pressures Reginald into a marriage with Frederica, which suggests that he continues to be easily influenced, even after his experience with Lady Susan.

Frederica Vernon – Frederica is Lady Susan's meek, submissive daughter. Lady Susan drops her off at boarding school prior to the start of the novella, but midway through, she runs away and ends up staying with Lady Susan at the Vernons' estate. Prior to meeting Frederica, Charles Vernon and Catherine Vernon are under the impression that she's an ill-behaved, unintelligent girl—but after she arrives, they realize that she's just “timid” and afraid of her mother, who speaks ill of her to others and attempts to micromanage her life. In fact, Catherine believes that Frederica is “very pretty” in her own right and might appear so to others if her mother weren't such an overwhelming presence. As it stands, however, Lady Susan's control over the passive Frederica is absolute: she hopes to force Frederica to marry Sir James Martin, whom Frederica despises, and she sent her to boarding school as a temporary punishment for refusing. After Sir James arrives unexpectedly at the Vernons', Frederica appeals to Catherine's brother, Reginald De Courcy, who is in love with Lady Susan, asking him to break her engagement to Sir James. Frederica has a crush on Reginald, who previously ignored her, and he becomes temporarily sympathetic to her plight after her plea for help. Because Frederica is so afraid of Lady Susan, her appeal demonstrates that she may be courageous enough to eventually break free of her mother's clutches. Throughout the novella, however, characters use her as a pawn—Catherine even plots to use Frederica's crush on Reginald to break up Reginald and Lady Susan's relationship. Eventually, Lady Susan relinquishes her hold on Frederica when she decides to marry Sir James herself, and Frederica eventually marries Reginald (after his family convinces him to do so). Her passivity apparently continues even without her mother's presence, though her moral character is rewarded with a reasonably happy marriage.

Alicia Johnson – Alicia Johnson is Lady Susan's confidante and co-conspirator; she lives in London and is married to the old and ill Mr. Johnson. Lady Susan's **letters** to Alicia reveal her

true character to readers, as she openly admits her cruel schemes to her friend but hides them from her family in person. And Alicia is cruel herself: her husband hates Lady Susan and prevents them from seeing each other, and as a result, the two women hope for his ill health and death. Alicia is eventually involved in Reginald De Courcy's breakup with Lady Susan; Reginald learns of Lady Susan's affair with Mr. Manwaring after arriving at Alicia's London home. At the end of the novel, Mr. Johnson forces Alicia to cut off contact with Lady Susan, threatening to make her move to the countryside if she refuses. This loss of a fellow schemer is part of Lady Susan's light punishment for her actions. However, the pair's letters remain cheerful to the last, suggesting that the bond between Alicia and Lady Susan was never particularly deep or important to either of them.

Sir James Martin – Sir James Martin is a rich, but “contemptibly weak” man who met Lady Susan while she was staying with Mr. Manwaring and his family. At the time, he was engaged to Miss Manwaring, but he was soon seduced by Lady Susan, who hoped to secure him as a husband for her daughter, Frederica. Lady Susan and Frederica both dislike Sir James; in a **letter** to Reginald De Courcy, Frederica calls Sir James “silly and impertinent and disagreeable,” and she strives throughout the novella to end their engagement. Interestingly, Sir James seems to want to marry Frederica primarily because of her relationship to Lady Susan; as Lady Susan's friend Alicia tells her, Sir James would gladly marry either of them. Eventually, this is exactly what happens: after her breakup with Reginald, Lady Susan marries Sir James (against the wishes of Miss Manwaring, who continues to try to get her fiancé back). At the novella's conclusion, the narrator asks readers to pity Sir James—though Lady Susan's marriage will certainly be unhappy, Sir James is gullible enough that she can easily manipulate him.

Mr. Manwaring – Prior to the events of the novella, Lady Susan was staying with the married Mr. Manwaring, his wife Mrs. Manwaring, and their family at their home. While she was there, she seduced Mr. Manwaring, causing enough chaos that she had to leave abruptly. However, Mr. Manwaring—who is both unfaithful and jealous—continues to pursue her from afar, and when Lady Susan returns to London after her stay with Charles Vernon and Catherine Vernon, Mr. Manwaring finds her there. Because Lady Susan is planning to marry her current paramour, Reginald De Courcy, she has to find a way to get rid of Mr. Manwaring. But Lady Susan seems to genuinely like him: she negatively compares Reginald to him and says that if Mr. Manwaring were able to marry her, she would agree to it. Reginald eventually leaves Lady Susan after he learns of her affair with Mr. Manwaring.

Sir Reginald De Courcy – Sir Reginald De Courcy is Catherine Vernon and Reginald De Courcy's father and Lady De Courcy's husband; he's a quick-tempered, reactive man, but he's also

easily persuaded by others. After he accidentally learns about Reginald's attachment to Lady Susan, he writes his son a strongly-worded **letter** objecting to the match—because it would make Reginald unhappy, because Lady Susan is penniless, and because the family's good name would be at stake due to Lady Susan's bad reputation. Reginald responds, saying that he has no intention of marrying Lady Susan. Catherine knows this to be untrue, but Sir Reginald believes it, suggesting that he's easily influenced.

Lady De Courcy – Lady De Courcy is Catherine Vernon and Reginald De Courcy's mother and Sir Reginald De Courcy's wife; throughout the novella, she is Catherine's most frequent correspondent, and she learns of Lady Susan's various schemes via **letters**. She worries about her son and initially hopes to keep his attachment to Lady Susan a secret from Sir Reginald; she and Catherine plot to break the two up themselves, but ultimately the breakup happens due to Reginald's chance encounter with Mrs. Manwaring. This implies that Lady De Courcy and Catherine had minimal power over the novella's events, despite their efforts to influence people.

Mr. Johnson – Mr. Johnson is Alicia Johnson's husband. Mr. Johnson has gout, and Alicia and Lady Susan frequently hope for his declining health and eventual death; for his part, he hates Lady Susan and often tries to force Alicia to end their friendship. Mr. Johnson is also Mrs. Manwaring's guardian, but he cut her off after she married Mr. Manwaring. At the end of the novella, Mrs. Manwaring comes to the Johnsons' home in search of her husband, who is having an affair with Lady Susan. Because of this visit, Reginald De Courcy (Lady Susan's fiancé) learns about the affair from Mr. Johnson and breaks off his engagement to Lady Susan. After this, Mr. Johnson convinces Alicia to cut off contact with Lady Susan by threatening to force Alicia to move with him to the countryside.

Mrs. Manwaring – Mrs. Manwaring is Mr. Manwaring's wife; her husband is having an affair with Lady Susan. Mrs. Manwaring is very jealous, though she's powerless to stop the affair from happening. At the end of the novella, she visits the home of her guardian, Mr. Johnson, hoping to find Mr. Manwaring there. This visit alerts Reginald De Courcy to Lady Susan's infidelity and causes him to break off their engagement.

Miss Manwaring – Miss Manwaring is Mr. Manwaring's sister. She was previously engaged to Sir James Martin, but this engagement ended because Lady Susan seduced Sir James, hoping to secure him as a husband for her daughter, Frederica Vernon. Miss Manwaring continues to try to get Sir James back—at the end of the novella, she returns to London in search of Sir James, only to find that Lady Susan has already married him herself.

Charles Vernon Charles is Lady Susan's brother-in-law (the older brother of her late husband) and Catherine Vernon's husband. Prior to the events of the novella, Lady Susan tried to

prevent Charles from marrying Catherine—and while Catherine still resents her for this, Charles seems to have forgiven her. As a result, when Lady Susan invites herself to visit the Vernons at their lavish estate, Churchill, Charles is much more open-minded and accepting of her than Catherine is. In fact, he comes off as downright gullible, giving Lady Susan money and allowing her to stay with them despite her reputation as a liar and manipulator. Charles's rather foolhardy acceptance of Lady Susan into his home is what allows the events of the story to unfold: when Catherine's brother Reginald comes to visit the Vernons as well, Lady Susan is able to seduce him (all the while having an ongoing affair with Mr. Manwaring). And while the Vernons seemingly have a happy marriage, it's telling that Catherine is never able to directly confide in Charles about her suspicions of Lady Susan—likely because, in the polite society of the novella, women are held to a higher standard of propriety and discretion than men are. Though Charles doesn't play a particularly active role in the novella, his naïvely rosy view of Lady Susan is what sets the story in motion and enables her web of lies.

gender and financial status—what little power she has comes from others. As Lady Susan reveals in a **letter** to Alicia, she decides to visit her brother-in-law, Charles, because it's her "last resource": when her husband was alive, they sold their estate, and there's little money left. She's happy that Charles is gullible, but he has all the power in this dynamic, so he could force her to leave at any time. Furthermore, while Lady Susan's daughter, Frederica, is submissive, Frederica is mostly afraid that Lady Susan will force her to marry the "contemptibly weak" Sir James—which Lady Susan does plan to do. This means that Lady Susan's power over Frederica depends on her manipulation of Sir James; Lady Susan is "sure of" his cluelessness, but she still needs his cooperation. In some cases, Lady Susan isn't able to manipulate situations directly, which shows that she lacks any real power. In order to sustain her affair with Mr. Manwaring, Lady Susan needs Alicia to ensure that her husband, Mr. Johnson, isn't around to interfere. Alicia already resents her husband, but Lady Susan must feed into that resentment to get the outcome she wants—again, she depends on other people to achieve her aims and feel powerful.

Furthermore, Lady Susan doesn't even seem to have a concrete motivation for seeking power over others—she acts out of boredom, frustration, and a desire to prove that she's in control, even if she really isn't. Her affair with Mr. Manwaring is a perfect example: early on, Catherine's brother, Reginald, describes the affair as giving Lady Susan the "gratification of making a whole family miserable." He's probably right—Lady Susan had nothing else to gain, since Mr. Manwaring can't marry her because he already has a wife. Lady Susan later decides to marry Reginald, again with no obvious motive; while the marriage would help her financially, she'd depend on Reginald's father for money, meaning that this arrangement wouldn't give her any real agency. She persists in the scheme because she's angry at Reginald for being kind to Frederica, and she wants to spend their marriage punishing him. Above all, she seemingly just wants to convince Reginald (and other people) that she has power over him. But this is largely illusory, since, as a man, Reginald will always have more legal rights and social influence than Lady Susan does—regardless of Lady Susan's ability to manipulate him within their relationship.

While Lady Susan's inferior social status as a woman is the reason why she has no actual power (she merely has the *illusion* of power), she utilizes and benefits from the limitations imposed on other women—in fact, her ability to manipulate exists in part *because* of these limitations. Ironically, stereotypical expectations of women in 18th-century Britain—that they're natural conversationalists, and that they should be attractive to men—are what gives Lady Susan the power to control others. Reginald is seduced by her beauty, and even her sister-in-law, Catherine, admits that Lady Susan is uniquely "brillia[nt]" and later guesses that Lady Susan's "command of language" is what allows her to lie convincingly.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



GENDER, POWER, AND MANIPULATION

Lady Susan's titular character, Lady Susan Vernon—an aging but attractive widow—is clever and cruel. She decides to visit her brother-in-law,

Charles, and his wife, Catherine, because she's been kicked out of her previous residence: she was staying with a married man, Mr. Manwaring, and his wife and family. After seducing Mr. Manwaring and his friend, Sir James Martin (who was engaged to Mr. Manwaring's sister, Miss Manwaring) Lady Susan left the estate. Upon arriving at the Vernons', Lady Susan continues to engage in schemes that give her a sense of power over other people, all the while making those people miserable. But her cruelty is seemingly motiveless, which seems to suggest that Lady Susan is bored and frustrated rather than truly vindictive. And as a woman in 18th-century Britain with fewer rights and opportunities than men, her apparent power over others is largely illusory—in reality, she depends on the very people she manipulates and takes advantage of. By presenting Lady Susan as a monstrous female character who is still powerless, the novella suggests that Lady Susan's villainy is actually the result of the social limitations placed on women at this time.

Although Lady Susan tells her friend Alicia Johnson that she's "independent," she's actually in a dependent position due to her

Lady Susan eventually confirms to Alicia that she's good at manipulating language because her prescribed role as a woman in society means that most of her time is spent conversing. Catherine is the person who best understands Lady Susan's deceit, since she spends time with her in person. However, "common decency" dictates that she can't warn Reginald about Lady Susan directly. Instead, Sir Reginald, their father, writes to Reginald and openly disapproves of Lady Susan—but this disapproval would mean more coming from Catherine, who has met and observed her. Because Catherine is a woman, however, it's not her place to say anything, and her limitations leave Reginald vulnerable to Lady Susan's manipulation.

While Lady Susan is undeniably cruel, she isn't harshly punished for her cruelty. At the end of the story, Lady Susan's engagement to Reginald falls through, Mr. Johnson forces Alicia to stop contacting her, and she decides to marry Sir James. Though none of this was what Lady Susan planned, she isn't losing anything particularly meaningful: she never truly loved Reginald, and her friendship with Alicia was shallow. It's unclear as to whether "Lady Susan was or was not happy," and it's implied that readers should pity Sir James more than Lady Susan, since he's easily manipulated—Lady Susan could do worse than a rich, gullible husband. Lady Susan's rather favorable outcome suggests that author Jane Austen doesn't condemn her—even though she doesn't approve of Lady Susan's actions, she seems to sympathize with the root of her frustration at being financially and socially dependent on others. And although Lady Susan's schemes will likely continue, it seems that she'll never have any real power of her own.



PUBLIC APPEARANCE VS. PRIVATE REALITY

Lady Susan is an epistolary novel, meaning that—apart from its conclusion—the story is told entirely through **letters**. Characters often reveal their true feelings and intentions to their recipient; for instance, readers are aware of Lady Susan's lies and schemes due to the cruel letters she sends to her friend Alicia, and readers understand Catherine Vernon's hatred of Lady Susan because of Catherine's letters to her mother. However, characters hide these feelings from others, and act outwardly polite in person because social etiquette in 18th-century Britain demanded this. The separation between public and private life grows more problematic as the novella progresses, since no one is able to voice their true feelings, which allows Lady Susan to easily manipulate situations. By demonstrating this failure of communication and its repercussions, the novella suggests that polite society's strict social code has dire consequences—often, the gulf between people's public and private lives is what allows lies to fester.

Throughout the novella, few characters can voice their true feelings—the epistolary form is the only reason readers know

these feelings at all. Though Catherine doesn't want to host Lady Susan at the Vernons' estate, she and her husband, Charles, are obligated to do so. This is, in part, because Lady Susan has made an effort to be outwardly polite to them, even though she once tried to stop Charles from marrying Catherine. At this point in the story, readers are aware of Lady Susan's cruelty, but the rules of society dictate that because she repented for her actions, Catherine must receive her warmly. Catherine's letters to her mother, Lady De Courcy, are the only evidence of her continued dislike. After Catherine's brother, Reginald, grows infatuated with Lady Susan, Catherine wants to force him to leave their estate so that he can't propose. But "common decency" prevents her from saying this—instead, she asks her mother to help trick Reginald into leaving using "any plausible pretence." But Catherine's roundabout method fails: even though Catherine and her parents agree that they should take action to prevent Reginald's marriage to Catherine, their collective will can't overpower society's rules of "common decency." Even when characters understand one another's feelings, they're required to speak in code. At one point, Catherine speaks with Lady Susan's daughter, Frederica, about Reginald—though both characters have reason to dislike Lady Susan, Catherine must "recollect" herself before saying anything negative about her in front of Frederica. There's little reason for this—Frederica is powerless, and likely wouldn't tattle on Catherine—but Catherine's politeness seems instinctual, suggesting that the society of the novella demands decorum even when it doesn't make logical sense.

Because characters are required to be outwardly polite, the story's most significant developments happen through letters and probably couldn't have happened in person. After Sir James arrives at the Vernons' estate, Frederica takes action—her mother wants her to marry Sir James, but Frederica despises him. Because Lady Susan doesn't listen to her, Frederica instead appeals to Reginald to stop the engagement. But although the two are staying in the same house, Frederica does so via letter (she hands him a note as the two walk past each other). Afterward, Frederica tells Catherine that she needed to gather her "courage" just to hand a note to Reginald; more than likely, the rules of polite society would have prevented her from appealing to him in person. At the end of the novella, Reginald breaks up with Lady Susan, having learned of her affair with Mr. Manwaring. This breakup also happens via letter, even though Reginald and Lady Susan are both in London when he writes to her. If Reginald had not relied on letters, the breakup might never have happened—earlier in the story, he attempted to leave Lady Susan after learning of her cruelty to Frederica. But he spoke to her in person before leaving, and after exiting Lady Susan's "dressing-room," told Catherine that he had misunderstood the situation. In person, Lady Susan is able to distort the truth by upholding a public persona that's very different from who she really is; in a letter, however, Reginald can hold his own.

However, letters don't always reveal the truth—even they can be a vehicle for manipulation, which suggests that lies can and will fester without in-person honesty. When Lady Susan leaves for London, she plans to string Reginald along until his father dies and the two can be financially independent. In order to make this happen, she writes a letter to Reginald that reveals truth to the reader but conceals truth from Reginald. Readers learn for the first time that Lady Susan and Reginald are officially engaged—something that Catherine only suspects. But readers also learn that Lady Susan is lying to Reginald: her reason for the delayed marriage (that their union would upset Reginald's family) is false. Lady Susan is unable to convince Reginald to stay away from London, but the fact that he comes to see her proves that he believes her performance of selflessness. Because Lady Susan is a skilled manipulator in person, her lies even find their way into the otherwise-truthful letters of others. The most obvious example is Reginald's letter to his father, which parrots Lady Susan's falsehoods—but even Catherine, who despises Lady Susan, spreads her lies in letters. For instance, Lady Susan is surprised by Sir James's arrival at the Vernons—but in a conversation with Catherine, she makes it seem like Frederica and Sir James are happily engaged, and like she planned his arrival. In a letter to her mother, Catherine doesn't dismiss Lady Susan's claim, instead saying that “she cannot help suspecting the truth of everything [Lady Susan] says.” But she also quotes Lady Susan's dialogue verbatim, meaning that, even if she “suspects” that it's all lies, she's still spreading those lies to her mother. Thus, while letters seem to be a space for honesty, honesty can be distorted as long as society demands politeness over truth.



LOVE AND TRANSACTION

The characters in *Lady Susan* experience and act on various kinds of love, both romantic and familial.

Characters' relationships with one another are what drive the story, which centers around Lady Susan's potential engagement to Reginald De Courcy and her schemes involving her daughter, Frederica. But in each significant relationship—between lovers, parents and children, or siblings—at least one character always hopes to gain something. By presenting several different relationships between people who should love each other unconditionally, and by instead demonstrating that ulterior motives underlie those relationships, the novella suggests that in 18th-century Britain's polite society, love is always transactional.

True to her selfish nature, Lady Susan always aims to benefit from love. While she strings along three men—Reginald, Mr. Manwaring, and Sir James—over the course of the story, her interest in them always depends on their devotion to her. She takes pleasure in “subdu[ing] Reginald,” who previously disliked her; brags about how Mr. Manwaring is “devoted” and “distracted by jealousy”; and hopes to coerce Sir James into a

marriage with her daughter, Frederica. Sir James presumably agrees to because of his infatuation with Lady Susan (Lady Susan's friend, Alicia, tells her that Sir James would “marry either” Frederica or Lady Susan). Lady Susan's interest in Reginald immediately fades after he tries to leave her, concerned about her treatment of Frederica. She quickly changes his mind and forces him back into “devot[ion],” but she “cannot forgive him” and debates whether she should punish him by breaking up with him or by marrying him and “teazing him for ever.” Because Reginald isn't unconditionally devoted to her, Lady Susan dismisses his love—still, she aims to benefit from it by exacting revenge on him, thereby proving that she can control him. Lady Susan's inability to love without ulterior motive also applies to her relationship with Frederica. It's obvious that Lady Susan doesn't care about Frederica; she refers to her as a “stupid girl” and a “little devil,” and she constantly tries to limit her freedom. But she still tries to benefit from the relationship: her attempt to force Frederica to marry the wealthy Sir James would help Lady Susan's financial situation. It would also prove that Lady Susan has power over Frederica, who subverts her mother's authority by running away from boarding school and by asking Reginald to help her break her engagement to Sir James. All of Lady Susan's supposedly loving relationships are transactional—not even her daughter is exempt.

Unfortunately, Lady Susan's transactional view of love isn't unique—even the best examples of love in the novella come with a cost. Catherine Vernon, Lady Susan's sister-in-law, appears to feel genuine affection for her brother, Reginald—as do Reginald and Catherine's parents. The family's attempts to stop Reginald from marrying Lady Susan should seemingly be motivated by that love—but in reality, Catherine's indirect attempts to stop the engagement, as well as her father's more direct attempts, have just as much to do with their disapproval of Lady Susan as with Reginald's happiness. Though Catherine is genuinely concerned about Reginald, her father, Sir Reginald, tells his son that everything would be “at stake” in a marriage to Lady Susan: “[his] happiness, that of [his] parents, and the credit of [his] name.” In other words, while the family might care about Reginald, they're also concerned with Lady Susan's impact on their financial and social status, since Lady Susan is a penniless widow with a bad reputation. At first glance, Frederica appears to love Reginald without an ulterior motive, since Frederica's infatuation doesn't benefit her—in fact, it actually hurts her, because Lady Susan wants her to marry Sir James, and she herself is romantically involved with Reginald. But even though Frederica doesn't have an ulterior motive, others adopt ulterior motives on her behalf. For instance, Catherine approves of Frederica's crush on Reginald not because the match would make Frederica or Reginald happy, but because it would “detach [Reginald] from [Frederica's] mother”—in other words, their marriage would break up the engagement between Lady Susan and Reginald. This means that, while the marriage might

not directly benefit Frederica, it would certainly benefit others. Most importantly, because Reginald hardly notices Frederica, she'd need Catherine's help to secure him—so Frederica would (and later does) benefit from Catherine's ulterior motive.

Because love in the novella is always transactional, all of its characters view others' feelings as malleable. This is what enables Lady Susan to quickly shift Sir James' attentions from Frederica to herself—allowing her to marry him at the end of the novella—and it's what enables Reginald's family to eventually “talk,” “flatter,” and “finesse” him into marrying Frederica. This decidedly unromantic ending implies that, in the world of *Lady Susan*, there's no example of pure, constant love—everyone always hopes to selfishly benefit in some way.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



LETTERS

Lady Susan is an epistolary novella (meaning that the story is told almost entirely through letters between characters), and these letters represent the characters' inability to be their authentic selves within polite society. In 18th-century Britain, where the book is set, upper-class people like the Vernons and the De Courcys were governed by strict rules of etiquette (manners) that required them to be polite. For this reason, the characters can't reveal their true feels and motivations—for instance, Catherine often writes to her mother, Lady De Courcy, about her brother Reginald and his attachment to Lady Susan. Though Catherine must be outwardly polite to Lady Susan, she writes at length about her manipulative nature, something she can never discuss openly. Even notorious liar Lady Susan uses letters to express herself honestly, writing to her best friend, Alicia Johnson, about her plans to make the Vernon family miserable. Granted, Lady Susan doesn't *always* come clean about her true motivations, but her letters do reveal her cruelty, which she hides from others when communicating with them face to face. In this way, letters represent the social constraints of polite society and the characters' inability to openly express their true selves—for better or worse.





QUOTES


Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon* published in 1975.

Letters 1–10 Quotes

☞ But I was determined to be discreet, to bear in mind my being only four months a widow, and to be as quiet as possible,—and I have been so; my dear creature, I have admitted no one's attentions but Manwaring's, I have avoided all general flirtation whatever, I have distinguished no creature besides of all the numbers resorting hither, except Sir James Martin, on whom I bestowed a little notice in order to detach him from Miss Manwaring. But if the world could know my motive *there*, they would honour me. I have been called an unkind mother, but it was the sacred impulse of maternal affection, it was the advantage of my daughter that led me on; and if that daughter were not the greatest simpleton on earth, I might have been rewarded for my exertions as I ought.—Sir James did make proposals to me for Frederica—but Frederica, who was born to be the torment of my life, chose to set herself so violently against the match, that I thought it better to lay aside the scheme for the present.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Miss Manwaring, Sir James Martin, Mr. Manwaring, Frederica Vernon, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of a letter from Lady Susan to her friend Alicia Johnson. Lady Susan is about to visit her in-laws by necessity; as she tells Alicia, she was previously staying with a married man, Mr. Manwaring, and his family—but she was forced to leave the estate after seducing both Mr. Manwaring and his friend Sir James. The letter, which serves as the reader's introduction to Lady Susan's true nature, hilariously reveals how destructive she can be—she ironically thinks she's been “discreet,” even while flirting with two men who should be off-limits, and even after leaving their estate in chaos. Meanwhile, her husband has only been gone “four months,” suggesting that she wasn't exactly distraught by his death.



Indeed, the letter suggests that Lady Susan might not actually care about anyone but herself. While her seduction of Sir James was apparently for her daughter, Frederica's, benefit—he would make a wealthy husband—his wealth would also “reward” Lady Susan, who has no source of income as a widow. Meanwhile, if Lady Susan was truly motivated by “maternal affection,” she would accept her

daughter's "violent" dislike of Sir James and call off the plan. Instead, she's only backed off "for the present," and she seems angry at Frederica for ruining all that hard work.

This passage also demonstrates that, while Lady Susan lies openly to everyone in the novella, she's able to reveal her cruelest thoughts and desires in letters to Alicia. Outwardly, she acts demure, because the etiquette governing 18th-century polite society required politeness—in fact, Lady Susan's politeness enables her to lie more effectively. But throughout the novella, letters emerge as an outlet for truth, revealing to readers what characters can't or won't say out loud.

●● I congratulate you and Mr Vernon on being about to receive into your family, the most accomplished coquette in England. As a very distinguished flirt, I have always been taught to consider her; but it has lately fallen in my way to hear some particulars of her conduct at Langford, which prove that she does not confine herself to that sort of honest flirtation which satisfies most people, but aspires to the more delicious gratification of making a whole family miserable. By her behaviour to Mr Manwaring, she gave jealousy and wretchedness to his wife, and by her attentions to a young man previously attached to Mr Manwaring's sister, deprived an amiable girl of her lover.

Related Characters: Reginald De Courcy (speaker), Sir James Martin, Miss Manwaring, Mrs. Manwaring, Mr. Manwaring, Catherine Vernon, Lady Susan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a letter from Reginald De Courcy to his sister, Catherine, sent just before Lady Susan's arrival at the Vernons' estate. Reginald reveals what he's learned about Lady Susan: she was previously staying at the Manwarings' estate, Langford, and managed to seduce both the married Mr. Manwaring and his friend, Sir James Martin. At the time, Sir James was engaged to Mr. Manwaring's sister, so Lady Susan's actions impacted everyone in the household.

While others might be horrified by her brazenness—or at least sympathetic to the Manwaring family—Reginald seems mostly amused. He relays events in a lighthearted tone, "congratulat[ing]" the Vernons on their terrible relation.



Though he imagines how awful the Manwarings must feel—the "jealousy" of Mrs. Manwaring, for instance—he focuses most of his attention on Lady Susan. His disinterest in Lady Susan's alleged victims and his fascination with the "coquette" herself hints at Reginald's early obsession with Lady Susan, which will only grow over the course of the novella. It's safe to assume, in fact, that Reginald's amusement with Lady Susan in the abstract made him more vulnerable to her manipulation later on.


Reginald's vulnerability may also stem from cockiness, since he likely believes that he understands Lady Susan; in this passage, he guesses at her motivations for her cruel actions. Because she flirted with two men who should have been off-limits, she was able to make "a whole family miserable"—if she'd only seduced Mr. Manwaring, his sister wouldn't have been involved. Although Reginald doesn't know the real reason Lady Susan seduced Sir James (she wanted to secure him as a husband for her daughter), his guess isn't totally off-base. If all Lady Susan wanted was a rich husband for her daughter, she didn't need to seduce someone who was already engaged, and she certainly didn't need to do it with his fiancée living in the same house. Lady Susan's actions had no obvious motive—it's entirely possible that she seduced both men just to prove that she could.

In fact, Reginald's description of Lady Susan mainly demonstrates how powerful she appears to be: he describes her as an active agent of destruction, "giving" jealousy to Mrs. Manwaring and "depriv[ing]" Mr. Manwaring's sister. But it's worth noting that Lady Susan's power still comes from the men she seduces—they have the power to accept her attentions or shun them, and *their* decisions are the ones that impact their families.

●● I was certainly not disposed to admire her, though always hearing she was beautiful; but I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of symmetry, brilliancy and grace. Her address to me was so gentle, frank and even affectionate, that if I had not known how much she has always disliked me for marrying Mr Vernon, and that we had never met before, I should have imagined her an attached friend. One is apt I believe to connect assurance of manner with coquetry, and to expect that an impudent address will necessarily attend an impudent mind; at least I was myself prepared for an improper degree of confidence in Lady Susan; but her countenance is absolutely sweet, and her voice and manner winningly mild. [...] She is clever and agreeable, has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, and talks very well, with a happy command of language, which is too often used I believe to make black appear white.

Related Characters: Catherine Vernon (speaker), Charles Vernon, Lady Susan, Reginald De Courcy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of a letter from Catherine to Reginald, takes place after Lady Susan's arrival at the Vernons' estate (but before Reginald's arrival). Catherine has plenty of reasons to dislike Lady Susan: they've all heard nasty rumors about her behavior, and Lady Susan tried to stop Catherine's husband, Charles, from marrying her six years ago. As a result, Catherine's letter proves how alluring Lady Susan actually is. She's not only beautiful but also charming and polite—even Catherine, who has more reason than anyone else to distrust her, can *almost* “imagine her an attached friend” in their very first meeting.

Interestingly, the reason Lady Susan is so alluring is because she doesn't try to be, and because she plays by the rules of polite society. Catherine was expecting Lady Susan to seem “imprudent”—impolite, unladylike, even attention-seeking. Instead, Lady Susan seems to be making an effort *not* to gain anyone's attention, acting outwardly “mild.” In her humbleness, Lady Susan is exactly what a woman of her era (the 18th century) should be; Catherine correctly assumes that, while women are relatively powerless in society, Lady Susan's willingness to abide by society's rules actually gives her power. After all, a “command of language” and “knowledge of the world” would have been common attributes for women, who were responsible for hosting social gatherings—it just so happens that Lady Susan uses that linguistic skill to lie.

Of course, readers already know from Lady Susan's own letters that she's faking her polite demeanor—she secretly dislikes Catherine, and she's only staying with the Vernons because she has to. While Catherine is still trying to figure her sister-in-law out, this passage serves as a peek behind the curtain for those in the know, demonstrating the strategies Lady Susan uses to manipulate others.

Now however, we begin to mend; our party is enlarged by Mrs Vernon's brother, a handsome young man, who promises me some amusement. There is something about him that rather interests me, a sort of sauciness, of familiarity which I shall teach him to correct. He is lively and seems clever, and when I have inspired him with greater respect for me than his sister's kind offices have implanted, he may be an agreeable flirt. There is exquisite pleasure in subduing an insolent spirit, in making a person pre-determined to dislike, acknowledge one's superiority. I have disconcerted him already by my calm reserve; and it shall be my endeavour to humble the pride of these self-important De Courcys still lower, to convince Mrs Vernon that her sisterly cautions have been bestowed in vain, and to persuade Reginald that she has scandalously belied me.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Catherine Vernon, Reginald De Courcy, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a letter from Lady Susan to her friend, Alicia Johnson, which she sends after Reginald arrives at the Vernons' estate. Lady Susan's amusement at Reginald's “sauciness” mirrors Reginald's earlier amusement at Lady Susan's actions; initially, he wanted to meet her because she was so notorious, and he probably thought it would be funny. Here, Lady Susan describes her plan to turn the tables on him—Reginald is acting flirtatious because he knows Lady Susan's bad reputation, but he's underestimated her. She believes that she can “subdue” him and force him to respect her—even though his flirtation proves that, right now, he doesn't.

Because Lady Susan is notoriously manipulative, it's worth questioning whether she's honest with Alicia about her motives. Lady Susan claims that she wants to flirt with Reginald to humble his family, to embarrass Catherine, and to convince Reginald that his sister is wrong about her. That may all be true, but these motivations are interestingly linked: Lady Susan seems primarily concerned about how others perceive her. She's clearly annoyed that the “self important” De Courcys believe they're better than her, that Catherine thinks Reginald would listen to her warnings about Lady Susan, and that Reginald believes she'd be charmed by his disrespectful flirtation. Connecting those dots, readers can infer that Lady Susan's decision to seize power by seducing Reginald comes from feeling disrespected—even powerless.



Fittingly, Lady Susan plans to overpower Reginald by *appearing* powerless; she's already confused him by ignoring


his flirtation and acting “calm” and “reserve[d].” Lady Susan may be frustrated by her limitations as a woman, but she uses these limitations against others, which enables her to feel more in control of situations than she actually is. After all, she needs to secure Reginald’s affection in order to embarrass him and his family—whatever power she gains will exist only because of him.

Letters 11–20 Quotes

☝ I wish you could get Reginald home again, under any plausible pretence. He is not at all disposed to leave us, and I have given him as many hints of my father’s precarious state of health, as common decency will allow me to do in my own house.

Related Characters: Catherine Vernon (speaker), Lady Susan, Reginald De Courcy, Lady De Courcy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of a letter from Catherine to her mother, Lady De Courcy, follows Reginald’s decision to remain at the Vernons’ estate—presumably to spend more time with Lady Susan. Catherine, who is afraid of Lady Susan’s influence over her brother, wants him to leave for his own good, but this letter reveals that she can’t confront him directly. “Common decency” dictates that she has to circle around the subject—their father *is* sick, but that’s not the real reason they want Reginald to return home. And if Lady De Courcy wrote to Reginald, she’d be similarly unable to just say what she wants to say—Catherine wants her to invent a “plausible pretence,” or believable lie, that would force Reginald’s hand.

Catherine is an observant, thoughtful character: she watches Lady Susan carefully and understands her manipulative nature. If she were able to speak openly with Reginald, she might be able to convince him that Lady Susan is up to no good. If that failed, she could simply kick him out of her house, forcing him to give up the toxic friendship. But the rules of polite society prevent Catherine from doing either—since she’s a woman, such conversation would be considered impolite, and only her husband could kick Reginald out. She’s powerless to help Reginald, even though she can see he’s in trouble—and if their mother wrote to

him, her hints would probably fail too.

☝ You must be sensible that as an only son, and the representative of an ancient family, your conduct in life is most interesting to your connections. In the very important concern of marriage especially, there is everything at stake; your own happiness, that of your parents, and the credit of your name. I do not suppose that you would deliberately form an absolute engagement of that nature without acquainting your mother and myself, or at least without being convinced that we should approve of your choice; but I cannot help fearing that you may be drawn in, by the lady who has lately attached you, to a marriage, which the whole of your family, far and near, must highly reprobate.

Related Characters: Sir Reginald De Courcy (speaker), Lady Susan, Lady De Courcy, Reginald De Courcy

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a letter from Reginald and Catherine’s father, Sir Reginald, to Reginald. Sir Reginald heard about his son’s attachment to Lady Susan by chance—originally, Catherine and her mother wanted to keep that information a secret, but he read one of Catherine’s letters and learned the truth. His letter to Reginald is a warning that, if Reginald marries Lady Susan, the entire family will disapprove.

Although Sir Reginald is concerned about his son’s “happiness,” his letter proves that his love for Reginald comes second to his concern about the family’s reputation. If Reginald married Lady Susan, he would be risking the disapproval of both his family “far and near” and the disapproval of society, which seems to be the cause for Sir Reginald’s “fear[s].” He likely cares about Reginald and believes that he’d be genuinely unhappy with Lady Susan as a wife, but he breezes past this argument and instead fixates on Reginald’s duties. While the De Courcys might love one another, that love apparently doesn’t make a compelling case—even Sir Reginald and Lady De Courcy’s disapproval isn’t Sir Reginald’s primary argument, since he repeatedly mentions extended family members.

This passage also demonstrates the difference between men’s and women’s roles in polite society. Catherine would probably love to share her disapproval of Lady Susan with

Reginald, but she isn't able to do so because it's not her place as a woman. She and her mother were, prior to Sir Reginald's discovery, trying to figure out a sneaky way to trick Reginald into coming home. Sir Reginald, on the other hand, can be open about his disapproval and fears—though this isn't effective, and Reginald is later able to dismiss his arguments easily. But it's worth questioning whether Catherine might have been more effective, if given the opportunity—she's met and observed Lady Susan, after all.

For the reader, this letter proves that Lady Susan's plan is working perfectly. Sir Reginald and Reginald are both unaware that (at this point in the novella) Lady Susan doesn't want to marry Reginald and instead just wants to worry and embarrass the De Courcy family. Though the letter won't reach Lady Susan, Sir Reginald's panic proves that she's succeeded. In fact, Sir Reginald seems to view Lady Susan as an all-powerful temptress, able to "draw" Reginald in and "attach" him singlehandedly.

admire beauty. In fact, the reason she's so good at manipulating others is because society gives her infinite opportunities to "exercise" her talent, or practice. At the Vernons' estate, she does nothing but talk, which means she does nothing but lie.

Though Lady Susan is willfully cruel, this passage implies that her cruelty is at least partially the fault of the expectations placed on women in 18th-century Britain (where the novella is set). Lady Susan is obviously bored; as a woman, she's never able to do anything but "convers[e]." Meanwhile, society values surface appearances, which makes it easy for Lady Susan to gain the upper hand—if others didn't focus on her beauty or her eloquence, they might see how manipulative she really is. Ironically, her limitations as a woman give her the ability to gain some power over others and to spin situations in her favor. Frederica, who is "shy," can't do the same—even if she tells her uncle the truth, it won't sound "as good" as Lady Susan's lies.



Frederica is too shy, I think, and too much in awe of me, to tell tales; but if the mildness of her uncle *should* get anything from her, I am not afraid. I trust I shall be able to make my story as good as hers. If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence. Consideration and esteem as surely follow command of language, as admiration waits on beauty. And here I have opportunity enough for the exercise of my talent, as the chief of my time is spent in conversation.

I cannot help fancying that she is growing partial to my brother. I so very often see her eyes fixed on his face with a remarkable expression of pensive admiration! He is certainly very handsome—and yet more—there is an openness in his manner that must be highly prepossessing, and I am sure she feels it so.

[...]

I want to make *him* sensible of all this, for we know the power of gratitude on such a heart as his; and could Frederica's artless affection detach him from her mother, we might bless the day which brought her to Churchill.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Sir James Martin, Charles Vernon, Frederica Vernon, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a letter from Lady Susan to Alicia. Lady Susan's daughter, Frederica, has run away from boarding school, and she's worried that Frederica will now have to come to the Vernons' estate. If so, she might tell the Vernons that Lady Susan is trying to force her to marry Sir James, which would make Lady Susan look bad. However, Lady Susan knows that even if her daughter told the truth, she (Lady Susan) could emerge unscathed, since she's an excellent liar.

In this passage, Lady Susan demonstrates her keen understanding of societal norms. She knows, for instance, that people admire smooth talkers just as much as they

Related Characters: Catherine Vernon (speaker), Frederica Vernon, Reginald De Courcy, Lady Susan, Lady De Courcy

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 30-31

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of a letter from Catherine to her mother, Lady De Courcy, takes place after Lady Susan's daughter Frederica has arrived at the Vernons' estate. Catherine observes that Frederica is falling in love with Reginald, and the thought appeals to her: if Reginald married Frederica, it would spell the end of his relationship with Lady Susan.

Although Catherine views Frederica as Reginald's way out of a doomed relationship with Lady Susan, Lady Susan is



apparently a determining factor in Frederica's crush—ironically suggesting that Lady Susan would puppeteer even her own downfall. Catherine's mention of Reginald's "openness" seems significant; Lady Susan is, after all, highly guarded and manipulative. Reginald is exactly the opposite, which is probably why Frederica is attracted to him. This might not be the case if she weren't so distrustful of others as a result of her upbringing; in other words, her relationship with Lady Susan might ensure her attraction to Reginald.


This passage also demonstrates Catherine's manipulative side. She genuinely likes Frederica, but she has an ulterior motive for her affection: if she tells Reginald about Frederica's crush, it might separate him from Lady Susan. Notably, she doesn't necessarily think Reginald could love Frederica back and instead just hopes he'd be "grateful" for the attention. This doesn't seem to be a solid foundation for a marriage, which could hurt Frederica in the long run. But Catherine isn't thinking about Frederica's happiness—in fact, the reason she'd be grateful Frederica was "brought to Churchill" is if the "artless," or innocent, girl became a way to foil Lady Susan. Catherine often complains that Lady Susan doesn't care about Frederica, but in this passage, she doesn't appear very different—both women want to use Frederica, and both are unconcerned about what would make her happy.

☛ 'I am not apt to deal in professions, my dear Mrs Vernon, and I never had the convenient talent of affecting sensations foreign to my heart; and therefore I trust you will believe me when I declare that much as I had heard in your praise before I knew you, I had no idea that I should ever love you as I now do; and must farther say that your friendship towards me is more particularly gratifying, because I have reason to believe that some attempts were made to prejudice you against me. I only wish that They – whoever they are – to whom I am indebted for such kind intentions, could see the terms on which we now are together, and understand the real affection we feel for each other! But I will not detain you any longer. God bless you, for your goodness to me and my girl, and continue to you all your present happiness.'

What can one say of such a woman, my dear mother? –such earnestness, such solemnity of expression! and yet I cannot help suspecting the truth of everything she says.

Related Characters: Lady Susan, Catherine Vernon (speaker), Frederica Vernon, Lady De Courcy

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 35-36

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, which is part of a letter from Catherine to her mother, takes place after Sir James's arrival at Churchill. Lady Susan has just revealed to Catherine that Frederica and Sir James are engaged, and goes on to express her affection for Catherine, which she claims is more meaningful because, six years ago, she heard something negative about Catherine and tried to convince Charles not to marry her.

At this point in the novella, readers know that everything Lady Susan says is a lie—she deeply dislikes Catherine and wants to make her unhappy. But interestingly, this big lie about her affection for Catherine is made up of both smaller lies as well as truths. Lady Susan is obviously great at "professions," or big speeches, but it's true that she can't "affect," or mimic, love—in fact, she may never have experienced genuine love. It's also possible that Lady Susan did hear good things about Catherine before meeting her, but it's a lie that anyone "prejudice[d]" her against Catherine; she tried to break Catherine and Charles up for her own benefit. However, she may have done so in part *because* she heard such good things—perhaps she worried that Catherine would have too much power over her in the Vernon household. The reader is left to wonder how much of Lady Susan's speech is true, putting them in the same uncertain position as Catherine.

Lady Susan's claim that she loves Catherine also demonstrates how little she values love—if Catherine ended up trusting her, Catherine's affection would just be another tool to make the De Courcy family miserable. Lady Susan doesn't want to be Catherine's friend because she likes Catherine; she does, however, see how valuable an ally Catherine could be.


Catherine knows by now to distrust "everything [Lady Susan] says." But strangely, she still repeats Lady Susan's words verbatim to her mother, spreading her lies secondhand. Even if Catherine is suspicious of Lady Susan, and even if she tells her mother the truth about Lady Susan in her letters, Lady Susan's lies still find their way into those letters. Letters, which in the novella are an outlet for characters to tell the truths they can't say out loud, aren't immune to manipulation.

Letters 21–30 Quotes

☞ I hope you will excuse this liberty, I am forced upon it by the greatest distress, or I should be ashamed to trouble you. I am very miserable about Sir James Martin, and have no other way in the world of helping myself but by writing to you, for I am forbidden ever speaking to my uncle or aunt on the subject; and this being the case, I am afraid my applying to you will appear no better than equivocation, and as if I attended only to the letter and not the spirit of Mama's commands, but if you do not take my part, and persuade her to break it off, I shall be half-distracted, for I cannot bear him. No human being but *you* could have any chance of prevailing with her. [...] I do not know how to apologize enough for this letter, I know it is taking so great a liberty, I am aware how dreadfully angry it will make Mama, but I must run the risk.

Related Characters: Frederica Vernon (speaker), Catherine Vernon, Sir James Martin, Charles Vernon, Lady Susan, Reginald De Courcy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a letter from Frederica to Reginald, written after Sir James unexpectedly arrives at the Vernons' estate. Frederica and Reginald are both living at the estate, so she doesn't mail this letter—instead, she hands it to him in passing. She begs him to convince Lady Susan to allow her to dissolve her engagement to Sir James; she can't speak to Charles or Catherine about it, and she thinks only Reginald has any power to “persuade” Lady Susan anyway. It's inappropriate to even ask, but Frederica doesn't think she has a choice.

Though Frederica never says so, she has a crush on Reginald, which might explain why she goes to him for help. On the one hand, she's right that he and Lady Susan are very close; on the other, she of all people should guess that Reginald can't “prevail” with Lady Susan, and that Lady Susan doesn't really care about him at all. Frederica's genuine love for Reginald apparently blinds her to the fact that Lady Susan feels no genuine love for anyone. Admittedly, Frederica's appeal does end up working, since Reginald convinces Lady Susan to send Sir James away. However, Lady Susan only does so in order to gain Reginald's trust back, because she's decided to marry him after all. She therefore sets aside her plans for Frederica

temporarily—by helping Frederica, Reginald only secured a doomed marriage for himself.


However, this letter also sparks genuine affection for Frederica on Reginald's part. Earlier, Catherine assumed that he might be grateful for Frederica's crush—his positive reaction to this letter proves he's at least grateful for the girl's faith in him. Because the letter is all about Frederica's “distress,” the lengths she went through to share this distress with Reginald, and her certainty that he alone can help her, it clearly appeals to Reginald's vanity. His affection for Frederica is therefore unromantic and has very little to do with her as a person—this isn't a happy love story, but rather a transaction. Whether she intended it or not, Frederica's powerlessness will allow Reginald to feel powerful.

But regardless of romance, the fact that this crucial interaction between Frederica and Reginald happens via letter proves the importance of letter-writing within the novella: characters are able to be truthful in writing, whereas they might not necessarily be able to in polite society. If even writing this letter frightens Frederica—it means taking a “liberty” and angering Lady Susan—she would never have been able to ask Reginald for help in person. Letters are a unique space for truth, and they apparently diminish Lady Susan's limitless power; Frederica's written appeal to Reginald was the one loophole she could think of.

☞ I have for some time been more particularly resolved on the match, from seeing the rapid increase of her affection for Reginald, and from not feeling perfectly secure that a knowledge of *that* affection might not in the end awaken a return. Contemptible, as a regard founded only on compassion, must make them both, in my eyes, I felt by no means assured that such might not be the consequence. It is true that Reginald had not in any degree grown cool towards me; but yet he had lately mentioned Frederica spontaneously and unnecessarily, and once said something in praise of her person.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Reginald De Courcy, Frederica Vernon, Sir James Martin, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of a letter from Lady Susan to Alicia in which Lady Susan explains that Frederica wrote to Reginald, hoping he could persuade Lady Susan to call off Frederica's engagement to Sir James Martin. This obviously annoyed Lady Susan, and she has no plans to allow it. Frederica has always had a crush on Reginald, which Lady Susan knew, but now she worries Reginald could return Frederica's feelings someday—all the more reason to force her daughter to marry Sir James.

Lady Susan's anger in this passage is somewhat confusing; in previous letters to Alicia, she explained that she wanted Frederica to marry Sir James for his wealth. She also vehemently denied any desire to marry Reginald herself, claiming she was only toying with him to annoy his family. If Lady Susan just wanted Frederica to marry rich, and if she genuinely didn't care about Reginald, she'd be happy with Frederica's crush and Reginald's reciprocation; he's just as wealthy, and Frederica would actually go through with the marriage.

Thus, Lady Susan's anger suggests that either she does genuinely care about Reginald and is jealous, or that she simply wants to prove she has power over them both. The truth is probably some combination of the two, but Lady Susan doesn't admit to either. While she's openly cruel in her letters to Alicia, her motives are always somewhat hidden, implying that there's a limit to how honest her letters can be.


This passage also demonstrates Lady Susan's bleak view of love. Humorously, she notes that she couldn't respect a relationship "founded only on compassion"—this backwards thinking makes sense, given how manipulative Lady Susan is. All of *her* relationships benefit her in some way, so she can't understand genuine, selfless love. However, she's wrong that Frederica and Reginald's relationship would be totally pure. Catherine is constantly talking Frederica up to Reginald, hoping he'll fall for her and dump Lady Susan, and Reginald only noticed Frederica because she flattered him, claiming he was the only one who could help her. Frederica's love for Reginald may be "founded [...] on compassion," but their marriage certainly wouldn't be.

☞ At that moment how great was my astonishment at seeing Reginald come out of Lady Susan's dressing room. My heart misgave me instantly. His confusion on seeing me was very evident. Frederica immediately disappeared. 'Are you going?' said I. 'You will find Mr Vernon in his own room.' 'No, Catherine," replied he. 'I am *not* going. Will you let me speak to you a moment?'

We went into my room. 'I find,' continued he, his confusion increasing as he spoke, 'that I have been acting with my usual foolish impetuosity. [...] Frederica does not know her mother—Lady Susan means nothing but her good—but she will not make a friend of her. Lady Susan therefore does not always know what will make her daughter happy. Besides I could have no right to interfere—Miss Vernon was mistaken in applying to me.' [...] I made no remarks however, for words would have been vain.

Related Characters: Catherine Vernon (speaker), Frederica Vernon, Charles Vernon, Lady Susan, Reginald De Courcy, Lady De Courcy

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, part of a letter from Catherine to her mother, takes place after Reginald decides to leave Churchill, having received Frederica's letter. However, one conversation with Lady Susan in her dressing room changes his mind, and he explains his mistaken assumptions to Catherine.

This passage demonstrates that, while certain truths can be told in letters, they don't hold up in person—in this case, Lady Susan is able to manipulate Reginald as soon as he comes to see her in her dressing room, even though Frederica told him the truth about her forced engagement in writing. Reginald is "confus[ed]" after talking to Lady Susan, but still parrots her words. Her lie, it seems, is that she and Frederica aren't close enough to understand each other—this distance, instead of being the *result* of Lady Susan's actions, is the *cause* of Lady Susan's actions. It's a falsehood that contains a grain of truth, so readers can safely assume it comes from Lady Susan.



Reginald's belief that Frederica "was mistaken" in coming to him for help confirms that his logic is Lady Susan's invention. Reginald previously saw nothing wrong with the appeal, and in fact carried out Frederica's wishes to the letter—in a single conversation, Lady Susan was able to convince him

not only that she wasn't in the wrong, but that he and Frederica were. It's more obvious than ever that she completely dominates polite society, because in person, no one can ever say what they really think.

This is proven by Catherine's lack of response to his speech. Her belief that her words would have "been vain" might be true, but she probably *couldn't* have said anything regardless—it wouldn't be her place to do so, even if it would help Reginald. Polite society's rules are backwards: Lady Susan can openly tell lies, but Catherine and Frederica can't openly tell the truth without consequences.

●● Oh! How delightful it was, to watch the variations of his countenance while I spoke, to see the struggle between returning tenderness and the remains of displeasure. There is something agreeable in feelings so easily worked on. Not that I would envy him their possession, nor would for the world have such myself, but they are very convenient when one wishes to influence the passions of another. And yet this Reginald, whom a very few words from me softened at once into the utmost submission, and rendered more tractable, more attached, more devoted than ever, would have left me in the first angry swelling of his proud heart, without deigning to seek an explanation! Humbled as he now is, I cannot forgive him such an instance of pride; and am doubtful whether I ought not to punish him, by dismissing him at once after this our reconciliation, or by marrying and teasing him for ever.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Sir James Martin, Frederica Vernon, Reginald De Courcy, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation—part of a letter from Lady Susan to Alicia—takes place after Lady Susan has convinced Reginald to remain at Churchill. Originally, he believed Lady Susan was forcing Frederica to marry Sir James; Lady Susan convinces him otherwise, and tells him that she'll leave Churchill instead, since his family needs him. Her flattery has its intended effect: Reginald decides to stay, again devoted to her.

This passage demonstrates that one of the things Lady Susan likes about Reginald is his weakness. He's an open book—his "countenance," or facial expressions, reveals his

every emotion. Meanwhile, those emotions can be "worked on," or manipulated. Lady Susan seems to enjoy Reginald's weakness because it makes her seem stronger—she directly compares his "tractab[ility]," or ability to be manipulated, to her lack thereof. But the comparison isn't really a fair one: as is the case throughout the novella, Lady Susan is powerful only when the men around her are powerless. Her power over Reginald means power over his family, but Reginald still dictates that power. For instance, if he broke up with her, she'd no longer have any control over the De Courcys. It makes sense, therefore, that she'd enjoy watching him "submit" to her in real time.

Lady Susan's bleak view of love is also on full display here. Reginald is "devoted" to her, yes, but his devotion has limits; he wouldn't love Lady Susan if he believed she was cruel to others. In an ordinary relationship, those boundaries would be a good thing. For Lady Susan, however, Reginald's "pride" requires too much sacrifice on her part—love should benefit her, not demand things of her.

However, Lady Susan's decision to potentially marry Reginald as a punishment doesn't make total sense. She's been adamant throughout the novella that marriage wasn't in the cards for her, and Reginald is so in love that even an unhappy marriage probably wouldn't seem like a punishment to him. Besides, Lady Susan would need to keep him at least marginally happy if she wanted to control his finances. It's obvious that Lady Susan has ulterior motives that she isn't sharing with Alicia—more than likely, her financial situation has grown more unstable. Alternatively, Lady Susan might have been planning to marry Reginald all along and just wanted to seem more independent and freer than she really is.

●● For an hour or two, I was even staggered in my resolution of marrying him—and though this was too idle and nonsensical an idea to remain long on my mind, I do not feel very eager for the conclusion of my marriage, or look forward with much impatience to the time when Reginald according to our agreement is to be in town. I shall probably put off his arrival, under some pretence or other. He must not come till Manwaring is gone. I am still doubtful at times, as to marriage. 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.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Catherine Vernon, Sir Reginald De Courcy, Mr. Manwaring, Reginald De Courcy, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of a letter from Lady Susan to Alicia. Lady Susan has just arrived in London, and although she's engaged to Reginald, she hopes to delay their marriage until Sir Reginald dies—the two would then be financially independent. In the meantime, her affair with Mr. Manwaring continues.

In this passage, Lady Susan works through her conflicted feelings about marrying Reginald. On the one hand, she claims that *not* marrying Reginald is a “nonsensical” idea, presumably for financial reasons. On the other hand, she believes a marriage to Reginald while his father is still alive would hinder her “freedom,” even though it would actually increase her financial freedom—right now, she's poor and has no property of her own.

Currently, Lady Susan seems to believe that her simultaneous affairs make her free. But while it's true that she couldn't sustain a relationship with Mr. Manwaring if she married Reginald, she's still dependent on his desire for her. In this passage, she mentions that Mr. Manwaring and Reginald can't meet, which demonstrates how precarious this dependence actually is. Besides, if Lady Susan was truly “free,” she wouldn't need to marry Reginald at all; her belief that a marriage to Reginald would tie her down demonstrates a kind of willful delusion about her current vulnerable circumstances.



Meanwhile, Lady Susan's logic is flawed: even if she married Reginald after his father died, she would *still* be dependent on him. She seems to believe that, while Sir Reginald can't be controlled, Reginald can be. Still, any control she'd have over Reginald's finances would still require going through Reginald. Lady Susan views relationships as transactional, but she wants that transaction to be one-sided; in other words, she doesn't want to sacrifice anything to marry Reginald. But this is ultimately impossible: Lady Susan would always sacrifice her freedom in a marriage, and that freedom barely exists, even now.


In fact, Lady Susan isn't so different from the powerless Catherine, who also wanted to trick Reginald using a “pretence.” Lady Susan's identical wording suggests that both she and Catherine are equally powerless and equally dependent on the gullibility of men.

Letters 31–41 Quotes

💬 Why would you write to me? Why do you require particulars? But since it must be so, I am obliged to declare that all the accounts of your misconduct during the life and since the death of Mr Vernon which had reached me in common with the world in general, and gained my entire belief before I saw you, but which you by the exertion of your perverted abilities had made me resolve to disallow, have been unanswerably proved to me. Nay, more, I am assured that a connection, of which I had never before entertained a thought, has for some time existed, and still continues to exist between you and the man, whose family you robbed of its peace, in return for the hospitality with which you were received into it! That you have corresponded with him ever since your leaving Langford—not with his wife—but with him—and that he now visits you every day. Can you, dare you deny it?

Related Characters: Reginald De Courcy (speaker), Mrs. Manwaring, Mr. Manwaring, Lady Susan

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is part of a letter from Reginald to Lady Susan—Reginald has just learned about Lady Susan's affair with Mr. Manwaring and recently wrote to break off their engagement, alluding to the affair but never explicitly mentioning it. Lady Susan replied to his letter, feigning confusion and asking him to visit her; this final missive lays out the case against Lady Susan.

Crucially, nothing Reginald mentions here is new information to him, though he claims he had “never before entertained a thought” of Lady Susan's alleged affair. As he explains, he and the “world in general” knew about Lady Susan's bad behavior long ago, but she convinced him the rumors weren't true. Still, when Reginald believed that the rumors *were* true, he came to Churchill specifically to meet Lady Susan, hoping to be amused by such a notorious character. His current shock at the exact same allegations—that Lady Susan had an affair with Mr. Manwaring, and that their affair continued—seems hypocritical. In particular, his dismay at the Manwarings' lack of “peace” rings false; he was amused by their plight earlier in the novella and amused at the idea that a single woman caused it. Presumably, he's upset *now* because he fell in love with Lady Susan, and because he's entangled in

her antics. But he sought out that very entanglement when he visited Churchill and flirted with Lady Susan—so even if he blames her, he's not totally innocent.

Similarly, Reginald acts as though Lady Susan has much more power than she actually does. He claims that she "made [him]" dismiss the rumors about her and frames the affair with Mr. Manwaring as Lady Susan's singlehanded villainy—she "robbed" the Manwaring family of their peace, but Mr. Manwaring was presumably passive. Of course, Lady Susan doesn't actually have absolute power over men; Reginald chose to believe her, and Mr. Manwaring chose to betray his wife. The power she has is power that Reginald and Manwaring endow her with, even if all three believe that she's in control.

This letter also demonstrates the divide between letters and in-person interaction, or characters' private and public lives. In person, Lady Susan might be able to refute Reginald's claims—he acknowledges her "perverted abilities," which made him dismiss the same rumors earlier in the novella. In a letter, however, the truth dominates: she can't "dare [...] deny" the allegations because she isn't physically present, and her lies don't convince Reginald on paper.

☛ My dear Alicia,

I yield to the necessity which parts us. Under circumstances you could not act otherwise. Our friendship cannot be impaired by it; and in happier times, when your situation is as independent as mine, it will unite us again in the same intimacy as ever. For this I shall impatiently wait; and meanwhile can safely assure you that I never was more at ease, or better satisfied with myself and everything about me, than at the present hour. Your husband I abhor—Reginald I despise—and I am secure of never seeing either again. Have I not reason to rejoice? Manwaring is more devoted to me than ever; and were we at liberty, I doubt if I could resist even matrimony offered by *him*. This event, if his wife live with you, it may be in your power to hasten.

Related Characters: Lady Susan (speaker), Mrs. Manwaring, Mr. Manwaring, Reginald De Courcy, Mr. Johnson, Alicia Johnson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation, part of a letter from Lady Susan to Alicia,

comes after Alicia tells Lady Susan that they can no longer correspond. Her husband, Mr. Johnson, threatened to send her to the countryside if she didn't break off all contact with her friend. Lady Susan, meanwhile, has lost her fiancé due to Mr. Johnson's interference.

Though Lady Susan claims to be "at ease," this letter proves otherwise. Her central claim is that she's "independent," while others are shackled: Alicia is tied down by Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Manwaring is tied down by his wife. Lady Susan's decision to "yield" Alicia to Mr. Johnson makes it seem like she's in control of the situation—she's able to sit back and "wait" for Alicia to catch up to her own independence. In reality, Lady Susan is far from independent—she still has no financial security, which Reginald would have provided. Meanwhile, the main reason she "abhor[s]" Mr. Johnson is because he told Reginald about her affair with Mr. Manwaring, and the main reason she "despise[s]" Reginald is that he broke off their engagement. If she were truly independent and satisfied, these circumstances wouldn't irk her; she's clearly upset, even as she claims to "rejoice."

This secret anger emerges again at her mention of Manwaring's wife. Lady Susan tells Alicia that, when Mrs. Manwaring comes to live with the Johnsons, Alicia should "hasten" her death, which would enable Mr. Manwaring to marry Lady Susan. Whether or not Lady Susan realizes it, this would make her dependent on Mrs. Manwaring, or at least on Mrs. Manwaring's health. This also demonstrates that Lady Susan doesn't actually want to remain unmarried—whether subconsciously or consciously, she knows that she's in a precarious social and financial position.

Conclusion Quotes

☛ Frederica was therefore fixed in the family of her uncle and aunt till such time as Reginald De Courcy could be talked, flattered, and finessed into an affection for her—which, allowing leisure for the conquest of his attachment to her mother, for his abjuring all future attachments and detesting the sex, might be reasonably looked for in the course of a twelvemonth. Three months might have done it in general, but Reginald's feelings were no less lasting than lively.

Related Characters: Lady De Courcy, Catherine Vernon, Lady Susan, Reginald De Courcy, Frederica Vernon

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of the novella's conclusion—Lady Susan has just married Sir James, and Frederica is living with the Vernon family. This passage depicts Frederica's rather unromantic romance: she loves Reginald, but Reginald's family must bully him into marrying her.

It's worth noting that Catherine and her mother, Lady De Courcy, always wanted Frederica and Reginald to marry, because it would separate Reginald and Lady Susan. That reason no longer applies, since Reginald broke up with Lady Susan on his own. However, the De Courcy family's insistence that he marry Frederica—their “flatter[y]” and “finesse”—suggests that the foundation of their relationship is still a kind of transaction. The De Courcys like Frederica and want her to be part of their family; however, they never would have noticed her if she weren't Lady Susan's daughter, and if she hadn't loved Reginald when he was entangled with Lady Susan. Their interference on her behalf is therefore still connected to Lady Susan, even if Lady Susan isn't directly involved. For instance, a marriage between Frederica and Reginald would certainly upset Lady Susan, which would amuse the De Courcys. There seems to be no such thing as a pure, uncontaminated love in the world of the novella—the family's motives might be genuine, but their actions have complicated consequences. In fact, their “flattery” of Reginald isn't so different from Lady Susan's manipulation.

The marriage between Frederica and Reginald is especially unromantic because Reginald genuinely loved Lady Susan—his broken heart “last[ed]” a whole year, and he was hurt enough to insist that he would never become “attach[ed]” again. Throughout the novella, characters make a point of discussing Lady Susan's coercion of Reginald; the fact that he wasn't just bamboozled but actually loved her makes his shift to her daughter even bleaker. While Frederica might really love Reginald, his love for her can't be separated from his love for her mother. Even worse, it's founded on “flattery,” not real affection.

Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second choice – I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question? The world must judge from probability. She had nothing against her, but her husband, and her conscience.

Sir James may seem to have drawn a harder lot than mere folly merited. I therefore leave him to all the pity that anybody can give him.

Related Characters: Frederica Vernon, Sir James Martin, Lady Susan

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This quotation is part of the novella's conclusion: after Reginald breaks up with her, Lady Susan marries Sir James instead of forcing Frederica to do so. Because the story's conclusion is written in the third person, readers are never given a reason for this marriage; presumably, Lady Susan realized that she needed financial security more than she needed to make Frederica miserable.

Lady Susan's punishment for her dastardly deeds is to marry a man she never liked—however, in this passage, the unnamed narrator seems to let her off the hook. While Lady Susan may or may not be “happy”—she'd lie about it either way—she's certainly not worse off than she was at the novella's start. Still, the narrator gives two reasons why she might be unhappy: her husband is a fool, and her conscience might someday work against her. But Sir James' “folly” actually benefits Lady Susan, who can easily manipulate him (and therefore control his finances). And Lady Susan has never demonstrated that she has much of a conscience—she's never apologized or claimed to feel guilty over her cruelty to others. The fact that the narrator “pit[ies]” Sir James seems to confirm that Lady Susan won in the end: Sir James the one with a conniving wife, a fate he didn't really deserve.

In the novella's conclusion, Lady Susan is punished, but this passage makes a point of showing that this punishment doesn't necessarily affect her. With this, Austen seems to show some sympathy for Lady Susan, leaving her to continue her schemes uninterrupted.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LETTERS 1–10

Letter I. Lady Susan writes to her brother-in-law Charles, asking if she can take him up on a previous invitation to stay at his estate, Churchill. While the friends she's currently visiting are delightful and want her to stay, they're a little too social for her taste. Besides, she's excited to meet Charles's wife and grow close with his children, especially since she's about to be separated from her own daughter, whom she's sending to boarding school. Lady Susan hopes that Charles will let her come—it would be incredibly painful to her if he refused.

Letter II. Lady Susan tells her friend Alicia that, despite how lovely the past few months have been, she must leave the estate where she's currently staying—unfortunately, the women there have taken issue with her. Recently widowed, Lady Susan tried to keep her affair with the estate's owner, Mr. Manwaring, discreet. She hasn't been involved with anyone but him, except that she flirted "a little" with Sir James Martin in order to estrange him from his fiancée. But her motives were good: in spite of those who call her a bad mother, she was only trying to set Sir James up with her daughter, Frederica. This would have worked, if Frederica wasn't so stupid.

Lady Susan seems to be a constant visitor to other people's estates. If she actually wanted to avoid socializing, she would presumably just return to her own home—but it's possible that she doesn't have a home of her own. This would explain why she's accepting an old invitation that she'd presumably already refused, and why she seems so desperate, claiming that Charles' refusal would hurt her. This could also be why Lady Susan is sending Frederica to boarding school instead of allowing her to remain home. Lady Susan probably isn't very close to her brother-in-law's family if she's never met his wife or children, which makes it even stranger that she's coming to visit them now.



This letter reveals that everything Lady Susan told Charles was a lie: she was actually forced to leave her friends' home because she seduced two men who should have been off-limits, which explains why she's fleeing to Churchill now. The humor of this passage comes from both its sharp contrast to Lady Susan's previous letter, and from the way Lady Susan understates her own dastardly deeds: clearly, she thinks the women in the Manwaring household are overreacting. After all, she tried to keep her affair with Mr. Manwaring hush-hush, and she only flirted slightly with Sir James. Lady Susan also doesn't seem to care that her husband recently died—she's not exactly grieving the loss, since she's already flirting with multiple men. In fact, family seems to matter very little to Lady Susan: she has an odd idea of motherly love, as she was trying to seduce Sir James on behalf of her daughter. This is an uncomfortable and manipulative dynamic, and what's more, Lady Susan doesn't even seem to care about her daughter. Though she was acting in Frederica's name, she probably didn't have her best interests at heart.



Sir James did propose to marry Frederica, but the girl was vehemently opposed. And Lady Susan would have married this wealthy man herself were he not “contemptibly weak.” Now, Sir James has left the estate, and the women of the house are furious with Lady Susan—so furious that Mrs. Manwaring might have tried writing to her guardian, Mr. Johnson (who happens to be Alicia’s husband). It was smart of Mr. Johnson to break with Mrs. Manwaring when she got married, and Lady Susan asks Alicia to stoke that resentment. But now that the whole estate is in chaos, Lady Susan must leave.

Lady Susan hopes that Mr. Johnson isn’t still mad at her, since (despite his flaws) other people find him respectable. It’s awkward that he refuses to see her given how close she and Alicia are. Lady Susan is coming to Charles’s estate in London, which is her last resort—she doesn’t like Charles and she’s scared of his wife, but she has nowhere else to go.

Letter III. Catherine tells her mother, Lady De Courcy, that they unfortunately won’t be able to spend Christmas together, because Lady Susan plans to visit. Catherine is surprised, since she assumed that Lady Susan was happy staying with the Manwarings. While Catherine knew they’d eventually have to host her, she didn’t expect it to happen so soon. She has a grudge against Lady Susan because of her bad behavior when Catherine and Charles were first engaged; unfortunately, Charles is always overly kind to Lady Susan and accepted her profuse apologies. They had to help her out financially after her husband died, but Charles didn’t need to encourage Lady Susan to visit.

Although Sir James proposed to Frederica, it doesn’t seem like the marriage would be a love match—after all, Lady Susan was the one flirting with him, so he’s probably interested in her, not Frederica. But Lady Susan doesn’t seem to think love is important in a marriage; she dislikes Sir James but would still like to see her daughter married to him for financial reasons, even though Frederica is against it. This plan failed miserably, but Lady Susan got lucky—her reputation is safe only because Mrs. Manwaring can’t tell Mr. Johnson the truth about her. Everyone in the Manwaring household knows how cruel and manipulative Lady Susan is, but the conventions of polite society forbid them to effectively spread that information. Meanwhile, Lady Susan’s friendship with Alicia is quite beneficial: Alicia is able to ensure that Lady Susan’s bad behavior stays under wraps, just by supporting her husband’s grudges. It helps that Mr. Manwaring seemingly has a bad reputation of his own, since Mr. Johnson stopped speaking to Mrs. Manwaring after she married him.



Lady Susan is openly conniving and chaotic, as proven by her narrow escape from the Manwarings’—but this passage reveals that she also cares what people think about her. The fact that Mr. Johnson dislikes her makes her look bad in the eyes of polite society, which matters to her; clearly, there’s a difference between how she acts in private, or with close friends, and the face she puts on in public. Lady Susan also confirms that she has no home to return to, and she explains why she’s never visited Charles before: for some reason, she doesn’t want to meet Catherine. It’s possible, then, that she and Catherine have a negative history.



Not only is Lady Susan dropping by unexpectedly, but she’s disrupting the plans that Charles’s family already had, suggesting that the visit came totally out of the blue. Catherine already thinks it’s odd that Lady Susan is leaving the Manwarings’ household, which implies that she alone might be onto Lady Susan’s lies. She has a grudge against her already, since Lady Susan did something bad before Catherine married Charles—Charles, on the other hand, seems willing to let bygones be bygones, and to believe whatever Lady Susan tells him. The fact that he even encouraged her to visit suggests that she’s quite a skilled liar. She’s also poor—after her husband died, the family had to give her money, since as a woman she can’t make money of her own. Charles probably sees her as someone in need of pity, while Catherine remains suspicious.



Unlike Charles, Catherine isn't looking forward to Lady Susan's visit. While Charles believes Lady Susan's apologies, Catherine thinks that there might be more to the story. After all, Lady Susan is known to be attractive but manipulative, and she's even unkind to her own daughter.

Lady Susan's reputation precedes her: Catherine already knows that she lies frequently, and that she's unkind to Frederica. Readers are privy to both of these facts, so it's strange that Charles (the only one who's actually met Lady Susan) still thinks well of her. Obviously, Lady Susan can charm people when she's face to face with them, which may have something to do with how beautiful she is. Readers don't know whether or not Catherine has confided in Charles about her suspicions, but since he's still supportive of Lady Susan, it seems unlikely. Instead, Catherine can only vent her feelings in a letter to her mother.



Letter IV. Catherine's brother, Reginald, is amused that Lady Susan will be visiting. He's heard nasty rumors about her: she flirted with both Mr. Manwaring and Sir James while staying with them, proving that she was trying to disrupt the entire Manwaring family. Reginald is excited: he plans to visit in order to meet the woman who could seduce two attached men simultaneously. He's glad, however, that Lady Susan's daughter won't be joining them—according to his sources, Frederica is boring and proud, a sharp contrast to Lady Susan.

The fact that Reginald knows the truth about what happened at the Manwarings' and is merely amused by Lady Susan's actions suggests that, in some way, he's sympathetic to her—he clearly doesn't care about the feelings of the women in the Manwaring household. Because he now wants to meet Lady Susan, he might even be impressed by how destructive she is. Reginald doesn't know the real reason why Lady Susan seduced Sir James—or at least what Lady Susan claims is the real reason. But his observation that Lady Susan caused chaos, negatively impacting everyone in the Manwaring household, seems to excite him rather than put him off. Lady Susan probably didn't need to seduce the engaged Sir James to secure a wealthy husband for Frederica, and she definitely didn't need to do it while staying with the Manwaring family. Her motives, then, are unclear—it's possible that she did just want to prove that she could disrupt everyone's lives, and thus that she had power over them. However, while Reginald's gossip seems to be pretty solid, he may unknowingly be repeating Lady Susan's lies himself—Lady Susan doesn't like her daughter and could have told others that she's boring and prideful. Meanwhile, it's significant that stories of Lady Susan's misbehavior are spreading, even though readers know that she cares about her reputation. It's possible that she believes she can do damage control, even when everyone knows exactly what happened.



Letter V. Lady Susan writes to Alicia that she has arrived at Charles's estate, called Churchill. While Charles has treated her well so far, she's miffed by Catherine's coldness. Lady Susan wanted Catherine to be happy to see her, but Catherine still seems upset about Lady Susan's attempts to prevent her marriage—even though this happened six years ago. At the time, Lady Susan also stopped Charles from buying her husband's old estate when they were forced to sell it.

Lady Susan sometimes regrets this, but she was worried about her husband's dignity at the time, since he would have been selling the estate to his younger brother. Besides, Charles was about to get married and have children, so Lady Susan wouldn't have benefitted from the sale—if Charles had remained unmarried, Lady Susan and her husband could have lived with him.

Lady Susan's interference must have put a sour taste in Catherine's mouth. But she was never going to like Lady Susan, anyway, and at least Catherine's feelings haven't kept Charles from giving Lady Susan money. Charles is gullible and rich, but he has no idea where to spend his money. For this reason alone, Lady Susan is glad to be staying with him—and while she's here, she plans to change Catherine's negative opinion of her by befriending her children. In the meantime, she'll continue writing to Mr. Manwaring (in front of the Vernons, she pretends that his **letters** are from Mrs. Manwaring).

Lady Susan might be manipulative, but her understanding of human nature isn't flawless—she seems confused about why Catherine would be upset about a years-old incident. But because readers now know what that incident was, Catherine's rudeness makes perfect sense: Lady Susan tried to break up Catherine and Charles before they got married. Lady Susan seemingly cares very little for anyone, so she probably doesn't understand that Catherine loves Charles and would have been upset to part with him. In fact, Lady Susan only seems concerned with how people and events can benefit her. Catherine and Charles would have been happy to own Lady Susan's estate—even better, the estate would have remained in the family. Lady Susan claims that she was concerned about her husband's dignity, but her current flirtations prove that she didn't care much about her late husband at all.



Lady Susan's second reason for why she prevented the sale seems more likely: she wanted to live there with Charles, but he was getting married, so that wouldn't have been possible. This also explains why she would have tried to break Catherine and Charles up; if Charles was unmarried, she could have accessed his money as part of his household. Crucially, this passage reveals what the dynamic between Lady Susan and her late husband must have been: if she was able to convince him not to sell the estate to his younger brother, she must have been dominant over him, even though (as a woman in 18th-century society) she couldn't handle their affairs herself. The fact that they ended up broke therefore implies that Lady Susan was the one recklessly spending money.



It's possible that Lady Susan is right, and that Catherine would always have disliked her—Catherine is clearly a thoughtful person, whereas Lady Susan is shallow by comparison. Her friendship with Alicia, for instance, seems to be based on the fact that Lady Susan can use Alicia's marriage to Mr. Johnson as a strategic advantage. This perhaps suggests that Lady Susan doesn't form close relationships with other women unless they benefit her. Similarly, Lady Susan seems to primarily value Charles for his money: if he wasn't rich or easily manipulated, she probably wouldn't want to spend time with him. Meanwhile, her planned manipulation of Catherine feels particularly cruel—Lady Susan that the way to Catherine's heart is through her children, so she plans to ingratiate them with the love she doesn't show her own daughter. While she's being careful with Catherine, Lady Susan seems to be throwing caution to the wind in other ways—people like Reginald have heard the rumors about what happened at the Manwarings', but Lady Susan is still pretending to be on good terms with Mrs. Manwaring.



Letter VI. Catherine writes to Reginald with a full account of Lady Susan: she's beautiful, even more beautiful than they predicted she would be. Beyond that, she's also intelligent and graceful—she was so polite to Catherine, in fact, that Catherine almost forgot all their history. She was expecting Lady Susan to behave like a flirt, but she's just the opposite. Still, Catherine knows it's all fake, and that Lady Susan's good manners must be what allow her to lie effectively. She even came close to convincing Catherine that she cares about Frederica, although Catherine knows that's not true.

Since even Catherine nearly believes Lady Susan's act, it makes sense that Charles has bought into it completely: he believes that Lady Susan left the Manwarings' voluntarily, still grieving for her late husband. But Catherine knows that Lady Susan stayed at the Manwarings' far too long for that to be true, and she assumes that Lady Susan had to leave to save face. However, she also thinks that Reginald's gossip must have been wrong—Lady Susan couldn't have seduced Mr. Manwaring in addition to Sir James, since she regularly writes to Mrs. Manwaring.

Letter VII. Lady Susan tells Alicia that, while her friend's offer to spend time with Frederica is kind, she shouldn't bother—Frederica is stupid and has nothing of value to offer. Besides, any time they spent together would mean less time spent on Frederica's education, and because Lady Susan has no accomplishments, she wants Frederica to have at least a few. Still, Frederica shouldn't spend too much time on *that*, either—Lady Susan plans for her to marry Sir James within a year. She only sent Frederica to school to humiliate her, since she'll be one of the oldest students there.

Everyone knew Lady Susan would be beautiful, but what's surprising is that she isn't the open flirt that Catherine expected her to be. Instead, she behaves like a proper lady, to the point that even Catherine almost forgets everything Lady Susan has done. As Catherine observes, this makes Lady Susan an even more dangerous liar—her ladylike demeanor makes people more willing to listen to her lies. Clearly, the society of the novella focuses on women's surface-level appearances, which gives Lady Susan an advantage, because her authentic self is the exact opposite of what others perceive her to be. Her lie about loving Frederica is especially egregious, and it's surprising that Catherine believes it. However, it's possible that, because Catherine is a mother, she also wants Lady Susan to genuinely care about her daughter—it's a lie she'd be predisposed to believe.



Catherine is clearly a discerning character, able to logically separate lies from truth. The fact that she's a woman probably helps—Charles is likely swept up by Lady Susan's beauty and ladylike demeanor. Catherine, on the other hand, can put two and two together: if Lady Susan was still in mourning and wanted to avoid scandal, she wouldn't have stayed with the Manwaring family for so long in the first place. But even Catherine isn't immune to Lady Susan's manipulation: readers know that Lady Susan is lying about writing to Mrs. Manwaring, but Catherine believes her and therefore believes that she never had an affair with Mr. Manwaring. Worse, Catherine is spreading that lie to Reginald in her letter, even when she thinks she's telling him the whole truth about Lady Susan.



Lady Susan doesn't value Frederica at all, but she still wants her daughter to represent her well, for Lady Susan's own benefit. If Frederica had accomplishments (whether education or a talent of some kind), it would make Lady Susan look good by extension. But Lady Susan still hasn't given up on the plan to force Frederica to marry Sir James, even though she said earlier that Frederica was against it. Sending Frederica to boarding school was just a means for Lady Susan to get what she wants—if Frederica is embarrassed to be at school, she'll probably want to leave, even if that means marrying a man she hates.



In the meantime, Alicia just has to stop Sir James from marrying anyone else—this shouldn't be a problem, because Lady Susan is sure that he'll propose again. Overall, she's proud of how she's handled this situation: she didn't want to cruelly force Frederica into an unhappy marriage, so she's instead tricking her into believing it's her own idea, given how miserable she'll be at school.

The fact that Sir James would still be willing to marry Frederica, even after all the chaos at the Manwarings' house, proves that he is very gullible. Lady Susan and Alicia can easily control him together—though their power only comes from his obvious weakness. Furthermore, even though Lady Susan is cruel to her daughter and only values Frederica when she can benefit her, she still thinks that she's doing the right thing—instead of forcing a marriage between Frederica and Sir James, she'll just make Frederica think that it's her idea.



Staying at Churchill is still pretty dull, but now Lady Susan has some amusement: Catherine's brother Reginald has arrived. He's handsome and clever, but overly flirty—still, Lady Susan hopes that once she gets him on her side, he'll be fun to talk to. The main goal of this exercise will be to “subdue” Reginald, since he currently has a negative opinion of her—and when he changes his mind about her, it will have the added bonus of humbling his proud family and annoying Catherine. At the very least, Lady Susan will have a good time.

Reginald came to Churchill specifically to meet Lady Susan, and he's apparently also decided to flirt with her. He's probably doing this because he knows her bad reputation and thinks it would be funny—Lady Susan is, after all, known for her many affairs. Meanwhile, Lady Susan tells Alicia that she'll “subdue” Reginald mostly for fun, but this probably isn't the whole truth: her reference to Reginald's family, and to his flirtation, hints that she wants power over them because they've made her feel disrespected and powerless. It's worth noting that, socially and financially, Lady Susan is rather powerless: she's a widow and is seemingly broke with no source of income. Forcing Reginald to like her would be a way to channel her frustration about her own situation, especially because he thinks he has the upper hand.



Letter VIII. Catherine writes to her mother, Lady De Courcy, letting her know that Reginald won't be coming home because he plans to stay at Churchill to hunt with Charles. Catherine's mother shouldn't tell Catherine's father, Sir Reginald, but here's what actually happened: Lady Susan has changed Reginald's mind about her, which made him extend his stay.

Lady Susan's plan is working: she's managed to completely change Reginald's mind about her. This is particularly shocking because Reginald was the one who told Catherine about what happened at the Manwarings' estate—clearly, Lady Susan was able to spin all of those rumors to her advantage when talking to Reginald in person.



This manipulation disturbs Catherine. Reginald initially disliked Lady Susan and believed horrible rumors about her, so he thought he'd flirt with her for fun. But instead of reciprocating, she acted gracefully. Admittedly, if they didn't all know the truth about her, Catherine might have understood his enchantment. As it stands, though, Reginald now claims that all of Lady Susan's prior evils must have been youthful mistakes. Catherine thinks that Lady Susan is just toying with Reginald—and she's horrified that the normally sensible Reginald is falling for it.

Even Catherine, who believes the rumors, sees why Reginald is so obsessed with Lady Susan: she's an expert manipulator, acting like a proper lady when everyone expects her to be flirty and uncouth. Catherine claims that Lady Susan is just having fun—in other words, that she's not making a ploy to marry Reginald—but Catherine's desire to keep all this information a secret from her father suggests that she might be a little worried. After all, if she genuinely believes that this is all a joke to Lady Susan, she wouldn't care if her father knew—perhaps she knows that there's cause for concern.



Letter IX. Alicia writes to Lady Susan, enthusiastic about Reginald's arrival at Churchill; in fact, she thinks her friend should marry him. His father, Sir Reginald, is ill and will probably die soon. And although no man is in Lady Susan's league, Reginald is well-liked and might come close. Mr. Manwaring would obviously be jealous, but Lady Susan can't be expected to wait until he's free to remarry. In other news, Alicia has recently seen Sir James, whom she believes would marry either Frederica or Lady Susan in an instant. He even claimed that his engagement to Mr. Manwaring's sister was just a joke, and they both laughed at her expense.

This is the first time anyone has outwardly stated that Lady Susan has a chance of marrying Reginald. Lady Susan told Alicia that she was befriending him to mess with his family, and even Catherine thinks it's all just a game. But Alicia seems to think there would be value in a marriage—if Sir Reginald dies, Reginald would inherit all the family's money, since Catherine is a married woman and has no claim to it. Alicia also seems to think that Lady Susan could come to care about Reginald genuinely—but this demonstrates a misunderstanding of her friend's nature, since Lady Susan doesn't seem to be capable of genuine affection (the fact that she's left Mr. Manwaring hanging all this time is further proof of this). Meanwhile, Sir James's eagerness to marry either Frederica or Lady Susan indicates that he's really enamored with Lady Susan, who's calling all the shots—if he married Frederica, it would only be because Lady Susan wanted him to do so. He's so obsessed with her, in fact, that he's dismissive of Miss Manwaring, who was recently his fiancée. Lady Susan obviously holds power over him, though it doesn't seem like he's particularly difficult to influence.



Letter X. In response to Alicia, Lady Susan claims that she has no plans to marry Reginald. She doesn't need the money right now, and until Sir Reginald is dead, the marriage wouldn't benefit her. However, she thinks that she *could* marry him if she wanted—she's "triumph[ed]" over him completely, which even Catherine has noticed. Catherine is probably going to try to change Reginald's mind about her, but Lady Susan will block her attempts—she's having too much fun watching Reginald warm to her.

This passage proves that, while Lady Susan generally reveals her true nature in letters to Alicia, she doesn't always reveal her real motives—it's likely that Lady Susan is lying here about her financial situation. Catherine believes that Lady Susan broke—she and Charles had to give her money not too long ago—and even when her husband was alive, he and Lady Susan needed to sell their estate. Thus, Lady Susan is obviously faking an independence that she doesn't have—the fact that she's at Churchill at all proves that she does need to marry a rich man, since she literally has nowhere to go. But admitting that she needs Reginald would certainly diminish her "triumph"—in Lady Susan's mind, she's the one with all the power in their relationship. She even has power over Catherine, who has noticed their flirtation and is going to try to stop it. But because readers know that Lady Susan is lying, this game of cat-and-mouse feels hollow: Lady Susan is actually in a pretty dependent and vulnerable position, but she's pretending otherwise to save face.



Ironically, Lady Susan made Reginald like her by *not* flirting with him. Instead, she engaged him in serious conversation, and now she believes he's very much in love. Lady Susan's seduction was flawless; in fact, the only reason that Catherine sees through her is because of their prior history. But even if Lady Susan didn't care about Mr. Manwaring, she wouldn't want to marry Reginald, who could never compare—Reginald is nice enough, but the fact that he ever thought badly of Lady Susan is a mark against him. For now, she's just amusing herself; soon, she'll hint to Frederica that Sir James plans to propose again.

Lady Susan confirms here what Catherine has already observed: that she manipulated Reginald by acting contrary to what he expected of her. However, she's probably wrong that Catherine only sees through her because of their prior history—Lady Susan doesn't have a good track record with manipulating women, since Mrs. Manwaring and Miss Manwaring chased her out of their estate. Instead, her power seems to come from acting like the lady that men expect her to be, and then turning the tables on them. This passage also demonstrates that Lady Susan expects absolute devotion from the men who love her: even though Reginald has changed his mind about her, the fact that he disrespected her initially has diminished him in her eyes. It's possible that Lady Susan is obsessed with her plan to marry Frederica off because, if she doesn't marry rich, Lady Susan will have to marry someone like Reginald herself. This would force her to admit that she doesn't have as much power as she thinks she does.



LETTERS 11–20

Letter XI. Catherine writes to her mother, concerned about Reginald's fast friendship with Lady Susan. She still doesn't think that Lady Susan plans to marry Reginald, but it's alarming to watch their flirtation. Catherine wonders whether her mother can trick Reginald into coming home on some pretense—for her part, Catherine has tried to hint that their father, Sir Reginald, is sick, but this doesn't seem to have worked. Reginald is so infatuated with Lady Susan that he now defends her bad behavior, claiming that the rumors about her affair with Mr. Manwaring and flirtation with Sir James are lies.

Again, it's worth questioning whether Catherine really believes that Lady Susan won't marry Reginald—she's obviously more worried than she lets on, since she wants her mother to force Reginald to come home. However, she apparently can't just tell Reginald that Lady Susan is bad news. Because society demands that women be polite and agreeable, Catherine and Lady De Courcy are forced to circle around the actual issue. It's true that Sir Reginald is ill, but that has nothing to do with why Catherine wants Reginald gone—and if their mother wrote to him, she would need to invent a similarly fake reason. If Catherine told Reginald what she really thought of Lady Susan, she might be able to convince him—his current attitude toward Lady Susan is obviously delusional, especially because he believed all the rumors about her only recently. But Catherine can't say anything directly, so Reginald left vulnerable to more manipulation.



Letter XII. Catherine and Reginald's father, Sir Reginald, writes to his son, reminding him of his duty to his family. In marriage, everything is at stake for Reginald: his happiness, his parents' happiness, and the family's good name. He hopes that Reginald wouldn't propose to someone his parents didn't approve of, but he's grown concerned after hearing about Reginald's friendship with Lady Susan.

While Catherine and her mother can't discuss their fears about Lady Susan openly with Reginald—it's not their place as women—Sir Reginald can. However, Sir Reginald's fears seem to have more to do with the De Courcy family than with Reginald himself. Clearly, the De Courcys view marriage and love the same way Lady Susan does—as a transaction that needs to tangibly benefit Reginald and the De Courcy family. Even their familial love seems transactional, since Reginald's duty is to do right by his family rather than to do right by himself.



Lady Susan's age alone would make the match inappropriate (she's 12 years older than Reginald), but the reasons behind her bad reputation bear repeating. Sir Reginald reminds his son that Lady Susan neglected her late husband, flirted with other men, and spent extravagantly during her marriage. Charles presents her in a better light than she deserves—she *did* try to break up his engagement to Catherine, after all.

Sir Reginald is against the match with Lady Susan—it's possible she's even toying with Reginald out of vanity or attempting to change his especially bad opinion of her. But since she's poor, it's likelier that she wants to marry Reginald for money. Sir Reginald can't stop his son from marrying Lady Susan or inheriting Sir Reginald's wealth, but he would be ashamed of Reginald. He believes all the rumors about Lady Susan, and he knows that not long ago, Reginald did too. He wants Reginald to assure him that he won't get engaged to Lady Susan, or at least explain why he's changed his mind about her.

Letter XIII. Lady DeCourcy tells Catherine that she was sick when Catherine sent her last **letter**, so Sir Reginald read it to her and inadvertently learned about Reginald's relationship with Lady Susan. She was going to write to Reginald herself, because the news would have upset Sir Reginald, but it's too late—he sent a long letter to Reginald about his disapproval. Reginald replied, and Lady De Courcy now encloses his letter. Reginald's reassurances that he wouldn't marry Lady Susan calmed Sir Reginald, but Lady De Courcy remains unconvinced.

The objection to a match between Lady Susan and Reginald based on Lady Susan's age demonstrates the gendered double standards of 18th-century society. Frederica, a teenager, is poised to marry the adult Sir James—but because Lady Susan has 12 years on Reginald, she wouldn't be a suitable wife. Sir Reginald's other objections seem more valid; readers can finally confirm that Lady Susan was the one who drove her husband to bankruptcy, and that she never cared much about him, since she flirted with other men while they were married.



Catherine believes that Lady Susan is just messing with Reginald and has no intention of marrying him, and Sir Reginald entertains that possibility here. Readers know that this is Lady Susan's claim as well, but Sir Reginald's information directly contradicts Lady Susan's letters to Alicia. She told her friend that she didn't need money right now—but according to Sir Reginald, Lady Susan is broke, and Reginald would be a secure path to a small fortune. To make matters worse, Sir Reginald can't prevent his son from inheriting, even if he marries a woman whom the entire family objects to. Readers have no way of knowing Lady Susan's true intentions with Reginald; however, Sir Reginald seems to think that she holds all the cards in this situation, controlling Reginald's every thought. The problem is that nothing Sir Reginald tells his son is new information—Reginald knows all the rumors about Lady Susan, and he did believe them only recently. If he changed his mind, it's not because he wasn't informed—it's possible that he wants to believe Lady Susan more than he wants to know the truth.



Lady De Courcy's letter to Reginald surely would have been less direct than her husband's—she and Catherine were, after all, trying to come up with a lie that would get Reginald to come home instead of confronting him directly. Lady De Courcy's decision to keep the news about Reginald and Lady Susan a secret from her husband suggests that she's afraid of his reaction; his letter was, after all, clearly written in anger and panic. It's no wonder, then, that it wasn't effective—Sir Reginald obviously doesn't fully understand the situation, since he believed Reginald's denial so easily.



Letter XIV. Reginald replies to Sir Reginald, shocked by his long missive. He assumes that Sir Reginald got this information from Catherine, and he scolds her for worrying the family without any reason. It's an insult to Lady Susan to assume that she's out for marriage, and he knows that their age gap prevents it; he's just having fun talking with an intelligent woman. He thinks that Catherine is biased against Lady Susan because Lady Susan tried to prevent her marriage.

However, Reginald now understands that Lady Susan acted out of love for Charles: she heard a nasty rumor about Catherine, so she was looking out for his best interests. If someone as blameless as Catherine can be slandered in such a way, anyone can be—including and especially Lady Susan, who is out in society much more often.

Reginald blames himself for believing the rumors about Lady Susan's conduct at the Manwarings'. Mrs. Manwaring was jealous and invented the affair, and Mr. Manwaring's sister, Miss Manwaring, was on the hunt for a husband. She landed on Sir James before he fell for Lady Susan, which is hardly Lady Susan's fault. In fact, Lady Susan decided to leave the family so as not to disrupt their engagement. She was never an extravagant spender and is a great mother; Reginald only hopes that Frederica is worthy of her. Reginald admires Lady Susan, and he believes that Sir Reginald's fears about marriage are misplaced.

Unfortunately, the letter from Sir Reginald seems to have turned Reginald against Catherine. Catherine, presumably, never shared her feelings about Lady Susan with Reginald in person—now, even if she could do so, he probably wouldn't listen to anything she said, since he knows she went behind his back. Reginald's claim that it would be an insult to Lady Susan to assume she wanted to marry Reginald is a darkly humorous one—the truth, that Lady Susan supposedly wants to make Reginald's whole family miserable, seems far worse.



In this passage, readers learn the content of Lady Susan's lies: she told Reginald that she did try to break Charles and Catherine up, but that she was acting based on a rumor she'd heard about Catherine. It's an ingenious lie, since it connects so well to the current situation—as Reginald explains, Lady Susan hearing that rumor, which they know to be false, suggests that all rumors (including ones about Lady Susan herself) can be false. Meanwhile, the lie also implies that Lady Susan acted out of familial loyalty to Charles, which can only endear her to someone like Reginald, who is clearly close with his sister and parents



Lady Susan is obviously lying about her affair with Mr. Manwaring, but she doesn't deny that Sir James was attracted to her and broke off his engagement as a result. (Though she also doesn't mention that she flirted with him, or that she did so for Frederica's sake.) It's true that, in this situation, Lady Susan isn't entirely to blame—Miss Manwaring might very well have only wanted Sir James for his money and status, and Lady Susan didn't cause his fickleness. Once again, the fact that Sir Reginald used this rumor against Lady Susan suggests that others act like she has much more power than she actually does; even if she purposely tried to attract Sir James, he was free to break off his engagement if he wanted to, and his disloyalty reflects poorly on him as well. Meanwhile, Reginald's final claim that he won't marry Lady Susan rings humorously false—after all, he's just listed all the reasons she can do no wrong, and he seems to be entirely charmed by her.



Letter XV. Catherine tells her mother that she's glad Reginald's **letter** reassured Sir Reginald, but reading it only convinced her that Reginald doesn't plan to propose to Lady Susan now—not that he won't in the future. All of his impressions of her character come from Lady Susan herself. But Catherine does hope that she hasn't judged Lady Susan too harshly—Lady Susan is genuinely upset right now, as Frederica has run away from boarding school. Catherine attributes this to Frederica's "perverse" nature, which Lady Susan is always talking about. Charles has gone off to London to persuade the boarding school to keep Frederica, but if that doesn't work, she'll come to Churchill.

Catherine believes that Lady Susan is actually a little *too* upset about the situation, but she's nervous that she's misjudging her—Charles believes Lady Susan's distress is genuine. Lady Susan begged Catherine to be harsh on Frederica if she does come to Churchill, as Lady Susan is too often soft with her, and Catherine finds this believable. Reginald, meanwhile, is ridiculously upset at Frederica on Lady Susan's behalf, which Catherine believes is Lady Susan's doing.

It makes sense that Catherine is unconvinced by Reginald's letter—it was full of praise for Lady Susan, and it directly parroted her lies. Catherine also has the advantage of observing the two of them firsthand. This is something the De Courcys can't do, which is likely part of the reason Sir Reginald's warning was so ineffectual. While Reginald didn't openly lie in his letter to his father, he's definitely repeating Lady Susan's lies, which she convinced him of in person. The divide between her public persona and her private persona is starker than ever. Notably, Catherine is more openly worried about a marriage between Reginald and Lady Susan now than she ever was before. Even though she's obviously concerned, she also feels bad for Lady Susan, who seems upset about Frederica. Readers don't know whether this distress is genuine, or whether Frederica is actually to blame—Lady Susan has proven herself to be a domineering mother, but that doesn't mean Frederica isn't still "perverse" and obstinate. But it's strange that Catherine doesn't question Lady Susan's feelings, or her claims about Frederica, given how suspicious she always is of her. The truth will soon come to light, however, especially if Frederica comes to Churchill.



Charles has already proven himself to be a bad judge of character, given that he forgave Lady Susan for her interference in his engagement. But Catherine questions her own judgment about Lady Susan simply because her husband believes the lies. Of course, Charles can afford to be kind to Lady Susan in a way that Catherine can't, since he's a man—if he hadn't married Catherine, he would have found somebody else. The stakes were higher for Catherine, since marriage was vital for women in the 18th century. Meanwhile, readers know that Lady Susan is lying about being soft on Frederica; she's planning to force her into an unhappy marriage, and she forced her to go to boarding school. Again, Catherine seems to believe everything Lady Susan says about Frederica, which is strange—she probably assumes that maternal love is Lady Susan's redeeming quality, but Lady Susan actually views Frederica as a means to an end. Catherine and Reginald are now, bizarrely, in the same position: they both believe that Frederica is in the wrong. This alone should be a tip-off to Catherine that Lady Susan is lying, but she doesn't trust her own instincts.



Letter XVI. Lady Susan writes to Alicia, vexed at Frederica—after her daughter heard that Sir James would propose again, she probably went to elope with a family friend. However, Lady Susan still plans to force the marriage with Sir James. She hopes Frederica doesn't come to Churchill and that they can find another school for her—in the meantime, Lady Susan will spread lies about the situation. Luckily, she's a great liar, since most of her time is spent in conversation with others. Meanwhile, she's grown weary with Reginald, since he always wants the absolute truth; Lady Susan prefers Mr. Manwaring, who always believed her without question. In fact, he wants to visit Churchill, which Lady Susan forbade.

Lady Susan's letter still doesn't clarify for the reader what Frederica is like—even if she ran away to elope, she might have been doing so out of fear rather than out of obstinacy, and it's hard to take Lady Susan seriously when she claims that Frederica is in the wrong. After all, Lady Susan is planning to lie about the situation with Sir James if Frederica comes to Churchill, which suggests that Charles and Catherine would be sympathetic to Frederica's plight if they knew the truth. It also suggests that, if Frederica came to Churchill, others might come to like her—perhaps she isn't a clone of her mother after all. Lady Susan also confirms that the reason she's so good at manipulating others is that society gives her infinite time to practice—as a woman, all she ever does is sit around and talk, which gives her ample opportunity for lying. This passage also shows that Lady Susan doesn't value genuine love: if Reginald wants the truth about her, it means that he wants to love her for who she genuinely is, and he wouldn't be comfortable parroting her lies. Lady Susan prefers someone like Mr. Manwaring, who doesn't care about the truth. Their affair apparently continues right under Reginald's nose—Reginald might be obsessed with finding out the truth, but he isn't very good at it.



Letter XVII. Catherine writes to her mother, saying that Charles has returned with Frederica; her boarding school wouldn't allow her to stay. While Lady Susan was upset before, she greeted Frederica coldly and then led her out of the room. When Lady Susan came back without her daughter, she seemed upset again—this distressed Reginald, but it convinced Catherine that Lady Susan doesn't really care about Frederica.

Now that Catherine has observed Lady Susan and Frederica in person, she's able to realize her earlier mistake: Lady Susan doesn't care about Frederica. Lady Susan is so angry at her daughter, in fact, that she apparently forgets the act she's been putting on and behaves coldly toward Frederica instead of continuing to seem distressed. Reginald is probably more confused by this than anything else, which leaves him vulnerable to manipulation. Catherine, on the other hand, sees Lady Susan's behavior for the act it is.



While Catherine previously believed that Frederica was a wayward child, she appears merely shy and afraid of her mother. She's pretty, but she pales in comparison to Lady Susan, and Catherine believes that Lady Susan has shut down most communication between herself and Frederica. It's clear that Frederica hasn't had much of an education, but Reginald still believes that Lady Susan is a great mother. He thinks that Frederica ran away for no reason, and he won't even admit that she's pretty. Unfortunately, he seems to be parroting Lady Susan.

Letter XVII. Catherine writes again to her mother, glad that she was interested to hear more about Frederica. Catherine thinks that Frederica has become enamored with Reginald, both because he's handsome and because he has an "open" character. Catherine wants to let Reginald know about this crush, since he might be grateful for it; if so, Frederica might be a means of breaking up him and Lady Susan. Catherine's mother would probably like Frederica; she's young and uneducated, but she's kind and fond of reading. Catherine has gained her trust, and through their conversations, she has come to believe that if Lady Susan treated her daughter kindly, Frederica might make a better impression on others.

While Catherine is certainly biased against Lady Susan (for good reasons), readers can safely assume that her impression of Frederica is an accurate one, given her observant nature. Frederica is not, in fact, a miniature Lady Susan, but rather a submissive pawn of her mother's. Unfortunately, Catherine's direct comparison of mother and daughter makes Frederica appear lacking—it seems that Frederica and Lady Susan will always be linked in people's minds, since Lady Susan is such a dominating presence. This is the reason Reginald doesn't admit Frederica is pretty, and the reason he still believes that Frederica is monstrous; Lady Susan is able to easily overpower his impressions of Frederica, since her daughter can never compare to her mother. Even the fact that Frederica is uneducated can seem like her own fault—though, of course, Lady Susan would obviously be responsible for this. But Lady Susan is an effective liar in person, while Frederica apparently can't persuade anyone but Catherine to take her side.



It seems significant that Frederica has a crush on Reginald because of his "open" character—after all, his openness contrasts sharply with Lady Susan's guarded manipulation. It's possible, therefore, that Frederica likes Reginald because he's so different from Lady Susan—in other words, her relationship with Lady Susan might predispose her to like Reginald. This would mean that, if she and Reginald did get together, and if Reginald did break up with Lady Susan, Lady Susan would be indirectly responsible for it. In other words, Lady Susan would ironically have a hand in her own defeat. It would certainly be an unromantic marriage either way—Reginald being "grateful" for Frederica's attention is hardly a solid foundation for a love match, as it seems transactional. Meanwhile, Catherine herself is acting a lot like Lady Susan here—she doesn't seem concerned with what would make Frederica happy and merely wants to use Frederica against Lady Susan. Her comment that, if Lady Susan was nicer to Frederica, Frederica might come across better, is rather manipulative—after all, Catherine is being nice to Frederica in the hopes that the girl will soon come across better to Reginald. Both Catherine and Lady Susan want to use Frederica, and neither is acting out of genuine love for her.



Letter XIX. Lady Susan writes to Alicia that Frederica did, in fact, run away because of the hint that Sir James would propose. She sarcastically commends Frederica's blatant misbehavior, but she's upset that her daughter now has to stay at Churchill. Frederica seems to have a crush on Reginald, which also annoys Lady Susan; the girl is disobeying her mother, both by refusing Sir James and by falling for someone new. Luckily, Reginald doesn't even notice it, because Frederica is totally artless in her interactions with him—while the Vernons think she's beautiful, Reginald isn't affected.

Lady Susan doesn't say whether or not Frederica was also planning to elope after she ran away, which would suggest a lot more cunning on Frederica's part than Lady Susan gives her credit for. In fact, although Lady Susan is sarcastic about it, she seems almost impressed by Frederica's daring—it certainly doesn't align with the shy, meek girl Catherine described to Lady De Courcy. In fact, it implies that Frederica might really be more interesting than she appears when directly compared to her mother, which would explain why Lady Susan is concerned that she's come to stay at Churchill. This passage also demonstrates that Lady Susan hasn't been entirely honest with Alicia: Lady Susan claimed that she didn't want to marry Reginald, and that she wanted a good match for Frederica. If both of these things were true, she should have no issue with Frederica's crush on Reginald (he's just as wealthy as Sir James, after all). Either Lady Susan secretly does plan to marry Reginald herself, or she just wants to control the situation and is angry that Frederica is trying to take that away from her. Unfortunately, Reginald doesn't seem to care that Frederica likes him—genuine love has no effect on Reginald, since it's "artless." Reginald apparently responds better to Lady Susan's manipulation, which always demands something of him. Frederica, meanwhile, is sacrificing her mother's good will just to pine for Reginald, which proves that her feelings are strong.



Catherine is the only one who openly cares about Frederica, which makes sense to Lady Susan: Catherine loves to be strict and witty, and Frederica can never compete with her. Initially, Lady Susan didn't want them interacting, but she now believes that Frederica won't reveal anything to Catherine. Despite the change of plans, Lady Susan is more determined than ever to force her daughter to marry Sir James—she's just waiting to figure out how, since she won't bring him to Churchill, and she can't go to London at the moment.

This description of Catherine doesn't align with what readers know about her—Catherine never describes herself as particularly witty, nor has she ever compared herself to Frederica. However, Lady Susan isn't wrong that Catherine has ulterior motives for befriending Frederica: Catherine wants to break up Reginald and Lady Susan. Lady Susan's judgment of Catherine's character isn't totally off-base; it's even possible that Catherine does enjoy controlling Frederica and looking good in comparison to her. Even though Lady Susan senses Catherine's potential dominance over Frederica, she believes that she still has enough control over her daughter to ensure that Frederica won't say anything about the forced engagement. This passage reveals, however, that Lady Susan doesn't have much control over her present circumstances; she can't get Frederica and Sir James together without involving Catherine and Charles. Essentially, she's stuck waiting for the situation to change, unable to change it herself.



Letter XX. Catherine writes to her mother, saying that Sir James has come to Churchill. When he arrived, Frederica at first ran to Catherine in a panic. Then Reginald summoned her, seeming surprised by her distress. Catherine now realizes that Lady Susan's flirtation with Sir James must have been on Frederica's behalf, though Frederica clearly dislikes him. Lady Susan was polite, but it was obvious that she didn't want Sir James at Churchill, either; he kept mentioning that he'd seen Mrs. Johnson, and he addressed Lady Susan more often than her daughter.

Lady Susan then followed Catherine into her dressing room to speak to her privately. She claimed to have been surprised by Sir James's visit, but she insisted that he came out of desperate love for Frederica. Now that Frederica has set her mind against boarding school, Lady Susan believes that the wedding will likely happen soon—and she expressed her hope that Catherine and Charles would approve of the match. Appealing to Catherine's maternal side, Lady Susan said that someday it'll be her own daughter getting engaged. Catherine congratulated Lady Susan, who responded by declaring that she's come to love Catherine for her kindness to Frederica and apologizing that someone prejudged her against Catherine years ago. Catherine notes how earnest Lady Susan sounded, but she tells her mother that she distrusts everything Lady Susan says.

The fact that Frederica ran to Catherine for help initially suggests that Catherine is truly gaining ground over Lady Susan; Frederica now trusts her, which helps her in her plan to match up Frederica and Reginald. However, Catherine also realizes that the situation is more complicated than she previously believed, since Frederica is basically engaged—the truth about Lady Susan and Sir James is obvious now. It's also clear why Lady Susan didn't want Sir James to meet the Vernons: he's supposed to be engaged to Frederica, but he makes it apparent that he's really obsessed with Lady Susan, and that Lady Susan has encouraged that obsession. This reflects poorly on Lady Susan, and it complicates her lies about Frederica: she wanted Frederica to seem manipulative and willful, but instead, Lady Susan is the one who seems manipulative.



Lady Susan is clearly trying to spin the situation—Catherine has already observed that Sir James didn't seem to care about Frederica, so it doesn't make sense that he would come all the way to Churchill for her. It would certainly help Lady Susan if the wedding did happen soon, though, since the situation is getting out of her control. For instance, Lady Susan's appeal to Catherine's maternal side might have been more effective earlier in the novella, when Catherine still believed that Lady Susan was a good mother. Now, however, it just rings false, as does her gratitude for Catherine's kindness to Frederica—readers already know that this is a lie, since Lady Susan is only annoyed by their newfound friendship. However, Lady Susan is still an incredibly effective manipulator, so effective that Catherine doesn't immediately discount everything she says. In fact, she repeats Lady Susan's lies to her mother, even though she assumes that they're not true. Catherine always tells the truth in letters to Lady De Courcy, but she can't help but parrot Lady Susan's manipulation, thereby inadvertently spreading it.



Reginald, meanwhile, was astonished by Sir James's visit, as Sir James was so stupid, and Frederica was so upset. Lady Susan privately calmed Reginald down, but Catherine assumes that he's still baffled by the engagement, which reflects poorly on Lady Susan as a mother. Sir James invited himself to stay at Churchill, since he'll soon marry into the family—Catherine hopes that something can be done to prevent the wedding, since a girl with good enough taste to love Reginald shouldn't marry a man like Sir James.

Reginald has spent a large chunk of the novella claiming that Lady Susan is a good mother, so meeting Sir James is a wake-up call: it doesn't make sense that Frederica would want to marry Sir James, since she was so upset by the visit. It also doesn't make sense that Lady Susan would approve of the match, since Sir James is foolish. The only logical explanation, therefore, is that Lady Susan doesn't care about Frederica and is forcing her daughter into an unhappy marriage, probably for money. While Reginald doesn't quite reach this conclusion, readers can assume from Catherine's description that he's beginning to consider it. Readers can also assume that Lady Susan is going to push the engagement through quickly, since Sir James staying at Churchill was never part of her plan. It seems unlikely that Catherine will be able to put a stop to the marriage—she couldn't even advise her own brother against Lady Susan, and a woman at this time (the 18th century) wouldn't have the power to singlehandedly call off a wedding. Meanwhile, Catherine still seems to view Frederica through a transactional lens: she wants to help her not because she cares about her, but because of Frederica's crush on Reginald.



LETTERS 21–30

Letter XXI. Frederica writes to Reginald, apologizing for the liberty she's taking in doing so. She's upset about her engagement to Sir James, and she's forbidden to speak to Catherine or Charles about it. Writing to Reginald is probably no better, since she's taking advantage of a slight loophole, but she's desperate: she can't stand Sir James, and wants Reginald to convince Lady Susan to break off the engagement and send Sir James away. Only he might be able to make this happen. She promises that she's not fickle; she always disliked Sir James, and she'd rather “work for [her] bread” than marry him. She's aware that the **letter** will upset Lady Susan, but that's a risk she's willing to take.

Frederica is disobeying Lady Susan by confessing her unhappiness—but Lady Susan never forbade her from telling Reginald about this, which Frederica admits is a loophole. The fact that she conveys this information in a letter is another loophole, because in person, Frederica would find it difficult to communicate the same information. Frederica's willingness to use this loophole, even knowing that it would upset Lady Susan, proves how desperate she really is, since she of all people knows what Lady Susan is capable of. Her claim that she would rather “work for [her] bread” than marry Sir James seems fanciful—Frederica has never worked a day in her life—but it's possible that she believes she's telling the truth. She also seems to think that Lady Susan truly values Reginald, since she tells him that he alone can convince Lady Susan to call her plan off. Either Frederica sees something in their relationship that Catherine hasn't noticed—genuine affection, maybe—or Frederica still doesn't understand how little her mother cares about other people. Of course, it's also possible that Frederica thinks Lady Susan will back down if Reginald asks, solely to stay on Reginald's good side; maybe Frederica, like Catherine, believes that her mother will eventually marry Reginald. Another possibility is that Frederica may be craftier than she appears—even if she doesn't think Reginald is the only one who could help her, her desperate plea would appeal to his vanity and spur him to help.



Letter XXII. Lady Susan writes to Alicia, knowing that she'll sympathize with her annoyance. Sir James had the nerve to arrive at Churchill out of the blue, and to invite himself to stay. Lady Susan had no choice but to convince Catherine that Frederica and Sir James were happily engaged, and to threaten Frederica into silence. Lately, she's been more determined than ever to push this marriage through, since Frederica is falling deeper in love with Reginald, and Lady Susan thinks that someday, he could return her feelings. Lately, he's been speaking positively about Frederica, though he was also jealous of Sir James's attentions to Lady Susan. Lady Susan managed to convince him that Sir James was a good match, and Charles and Catherine can't think otherwise either, since Frederica is forbidden from speaking to them.

Lady Susan believed everything was going to plan, but this morning, Reginald arrived at Lady Susan's dressing-room to tell her that she should allow Frederica to break her engagement. When prompted, he admitted that Frederica told him about her distress—eventually, he revealed that he received a **letter** from her, and that he talked with her about that letter. Lady Susan is certain that Frederica must have confessed her love for Reginald, based on how he's speaking of her, and she's disgusted by his ability to be charmed by a crush that he didn't mean to cause.

Moreover, Lady Susan assumes that Reginald must not truly care about her, since he believed Frederica's story even after Lady Susan turned him against her. He was upset when he left her, but Lady Susan believes that he'll soon calm down—she's the one who will remain furious. She vows to punish Frederica, who caused all this trouble.

This passage confirms that Sir James's arrival was not part of Lady Susan's plan. It remains unclear whether Lady Susan was ever planning to tell Catherine and Charles about her daughter's engagement—it's possible she was going to wait until after the wedding, when no one would be able to interfere. Once again, her frustration about Reginald and Frederica is confusing. Earlier, Lady Susan was upset that Frederica had a crush on Reginald, even though a marriage to Reginald would be just as financially beneficial as a marriage to Sir James. At the time, it seemed that Lady Susan wanted to prevent a relationship between Frederica and Reginald in order to control them both more effectively. Now, it seems that Lady Susan may just be jealous; the reason she's upset isn't that Frederica loves Reginald, but that Reginald might someday love Frederica. It's possible that Lady Susan does truly care about Reginald, as Frederica seemed to suggest in her letter to him. This might explain why her observational skills are faltering; she believes she convinced Reginald that Sir James was a good match for Frederica, but Catherine implied earlier that Reginald didn't seem to think so.



Frederica's letter must have greatly affected Reginald; he's heard plenty of rumors about Lady Susan's cruelty, some from his own family. Nothing has gotten through to him before now, which implies that he finds Frederica's story credible. While Frederica confided in him via letter, they did have an in-person conversation, but only after Reginald read her words: the truth was therefore communicated in writing, since it might have been distorted in person. Readers have no way of knowing whether Frederica confessed her love for Reginald during this conversation, but it seems unlikely, given her meekness; in 18th-century Britain, it would have been improper for a woman to confess her feelings for a man without his encouragement.



Lady Susan's belief in this unlikely confession, as well as her disgust at her daughter's budding relationship, reflects her own view of love. She doesn't think Reginald would help Frederica unless she was offering him love in return, and she doesn't understand why Reginald would accept that love if he didn't want something from Frederica and didn't intentionally manipulate her. Lady Susan still believes that love means unconditional devotion; she's now angry that Reginald ever doubted her, and believes she'll remain angry at him indefinitely. This severe reaction may mean that she genuinely cares about him, but she likely also feels powerless: her control of Reginald was a way to control his family, and now she's temporarily lost that ability.



Letter XXIII. Catherine writes to her mother, giddy: she's sorry she ever worried her, because Reginald plans to return home. He warned Catherine not to allow Frederica to marry Sir James because Frederica would be unhappy—she deserved better, and Reginald didn't know what Lady Susan was thinking. Catherine, quite happy, then ran into an amused Lady Susan, who said she'd heard Reginald was leaving—she believed he'd soon change his mind. Catherine, however, doubts it: the two must have had a fight, and she was shocked by how calm Lady Susan appeared.

For the moment, it seems like Catherine has won, since Reginald's relationship with Lady Susan is over. Notably, however, this breakup wasn't the result of anything Catherine did—she was always powerless to help her brother, and this is presumably the first time they've openly discussed Lady Susan's cruelty as a mother. In fact, it was Frederica's admission of her own powerlessness that sent Reginald away, which may or may not have been a calculated move on Frederica's part. It's strange, therefore, that Reginald tasks Catherine with breaking off Frederica's engagement: there's nothing she can do about it, since she's unable to singlehandedly send Sir James away, and the gullible Charles is unlikely to do it either. As a result, Catherine's happiness seems premature, especially because Lady Susan is confident that she can change Reginald's mind. Catherine should know better than to underestimate Lady Susan, but for the moment, she's certain that the jig is up.



Letter XXIV. Catherine writes again to her mother, because everything she wrote just two hours ago longer applies: Reginald and Lady Susan have reconciled, and the only new development is that Sir James was asked to leave Churchill. Earlier that day, Catherine ran into a weeping Frederica, who blamed herself for Reginald's decision to leave. Catherine comforted her, saying that she was glad Reginald was leaving, since Sir Reginald wanted to see him at home.

Sure enough, Lady Susan was able to change Reginald's mind. It's certainly significant that Sir James has left Churchill—this may have been a concession Lady Susan made in order to keep Reginald around. Meanwhile, Lady Susan's in-person manipulation of Reginald is all the more impressive when juxtaposed with Catherine and Frederica's stilted conversation. Even though Catherine and Frederica both dislike Lady Susan, Catherine still feels the need to fudge the truth about why she wants Reginald to go; it's accurate enough that Sir Reginald wants to see his son, but Catherine and Sir Reginald are mostly concerned about getting Reginald away from Lady Susan's bad influence. Frederica seems shockingly unaware that they were worried about this, since she's so upset that Reginald is leaving—she's probably under the impression that she's breaking up the family.



Frederica went on to confess that she was forbidden to speak to Charles and Catherine about her engagement, so she wrote to Reginald. She at first thought that she wouldn't have the courage to give it to him—she passed him in the hallway and had to avoid eye contact as she gave him the **letter**. Catherine tells her that she should've come to her and Charles, and that Lady Susan was wrong to forbid it.

Lady Susan can lie in person, but Catherine and Frederica still can't tell each other the truth, which means that they can't effectively work together to oust Lady Susan. This passage also confirms that Frederica would never have been able to tell Reginald the truth about her engagement in person; she could barely do so in writing, and she had to force herself to give him the letter. Meanwhile, Catherine, like Lady Susan, acts as though she has more power than she really does; even if Frederica had come to her with the truth about Sir James, nothing would have changed. Catherine already suspected how unhappy Frederica was and never did anything about it.



At that moment, Reginald emerged from Lady Susan's dressing room, only to reveal that he wasn't going to leave after all. He misunderstood the situation; Frederica and Lady Susan aren't close, so she wasn't aware of how unhappy Frederica was. He was wrong to meddle, and Frederica was wrong to write to him. He then sent Catherine in to speak with Lady Susan—and Catherine, resigned and actually curious, agreed.

Lady Susan told Catherine that she'd been upset Reginald might leave Churchill on her account and cause the others distress. She had realized that Sir James was a bad match for Frederica, primarily because Frederica was so set against it, proving that she wasn't totally stupid. Unfortunately, she was spoiled when her father was alive. Catherine countered, saying that she was only uneducated, but Lady Susan grew upset at the perceived criticism of her late husband and pretended to cry, to Catherine's annoyance.

Lady Susan then revealed that Frederica wrote to Reginald, something that Catherine believes was warranted, since Lady Susan forbade her daughter to confide in the Vernons. Lady Susan is offended by this insinuation—she only wished to spare the Vernons inconvenience, since they couldn't have changed the situation. At the time, she believed that Frederica didn't have a real reason for disliking Sir James.

Lady Susan once again proves that she's an expert at manipulating Reginald in person. He believed Frederica's story on paper, but it wasn't strong enough to stand up to Lady Susan's lies when the two were face to face. This is lucky for Lady Susan, because her chosen lie is a weak one: if even Reginald noticed that Frederica didn't like Sir James, her own mother couldn't have been blindsided. Still, he not only believes Lady Susan's lie but also believes that he was wrong to help Frederica. Lady Susan changed his mind and flipped the situation around, so Reginald and Frederica appear to be the ones at fault—as an added bonus, this makes Frederica seem untrustworthy and therefore crushes Reginald's budding feelings for her. It makes sense that Catherine is resigned, and that she agrees to speak to Lady Susan: she can't compete with her any longer. It also makes sense that Lady Susan would ask to see her: her manipulation probably won't work on Catherine, but clearly, she's either willing to give it a shot or just excited to gloat.



Lady Susan's lies are almost comical: she wants nothing more than to cause the Vernon family distress, and she implies that if Frederica were stupider, she would have been a good match for Sir James. Readers don't know whether or not Frederica's father really did spoil her—Frederica's lack of education was likely Lady Susan's fault, but there's no way to confirm this. Lady Susan is, however, clearly faking distress about her late husband, whom she never respected in his lifetime (though she did want to maintain his pride, which is why she blocked the sale of their estate).



Lady Susan is trying to make Frederica's letter seem improper, which it technically is—Lady Susan did forbid her from sharing her feelings with the Vernons, and Frederica admits that the letter to Reginald was a loophole. Lady Susan is also right that the Vernons couldn't have changed the situation; Catherine guessed the truth about Frederica and Sir James, but she likely didn't even speak to Charles about it. It's also technically true that Frederica never gave a reason for disliking Sir James—presumably, he's stupid and ridiculous, but she doesn't outright say so. Lady Susan's lies are, therefore, mixed up with small amounts of truth; the truths don't matter in the face of the larger lie, but they do demonstrate how difficult it is to combat Lady Susan's manipulation. Even readers, who have access to her letters, can't entirely separate truth from fiction.



Lady Susan also claims that Frederica asking Reginald for help hurt her specifically—Catherine thinks this is a weak argument, since whether or not Frederica loves Reginald, her hatred of Sir James was the motivation. Ignoring this, Lady Susan explains that she and Reginald have patched things up: they're both passionate people, and he thought that Lady Susan was more at fault than she was.

Once Lady Susan realized that some of the blame was hers, she sought Reginald out again to reconcile. She then said she'd ask Sir James to leave Churchill. Catherine left the room, disgusted by Lady Susan's lies, and even by her ability to casually dismiss Sir James, who loves her. Catherine now knows that Reginald will never love Frederica: he may have a better opinion of her, but he'll marry Lady Susan soon. No one can prevent it.

Letter XXV. Lady Susan writes to Alicia, "triumphant." She can't believe that Reginald was actually going to leave her; she'd needed to stop him, since he's a wild card and might slander her to others. He came to see her eagerly, surprised to be asked; she observed that he seemed both to want her to change his mind, and afraid that she really would. She told him she would leave instead, since she was only causing distress, and that way the family could stay together—no one cared where she went, anyway, but everyone cared about Reginald. Observing Reginald, Lady Susan saw the way his feelings visibly changed, his vanity soothed. She's glad that some people are so easily manipulated, though she's grateful that she can't be.

Lady Susan seems to imply that she was jealous of Frederica's crush on Reginald, which Catherine thinks is nonsense. However, it's worth questioning why Lady Susan would admit this to Catherine, since it certainly makes her look vulnerable. After all, Lady Susan is likely jealous of Frederica for this reason. It's possible, however, that she still won't admit this to herself, since she wants to seem independent; after all, she's said nothing to Alicia about marrying Reginald so far.



Lady Susan, ironically, pretends that she and Reginald both accepted equal blame for the situation. Her transactional view of love would never allow something like this to happen without a reason; Lady Susan doesn't give anything up for the people she claims to love. Even her dismissal of Sir James seems strategic—clearly, she's up to something. Catherine can sense this too; for once, she doesn't question whether or not Lady Susan is telling the truth, though she still repeats Lady Susan's lies to her mother. She also accepts that Frederica's genuine love can't compete with Lady Susan's transactional love. This means that Catherine's own plan has failed—Frederica will not be the means of breaking up Reginald and Lady Susan.



Once again, Lady Susan demonstrates that she cares about her reputation in society, even though her behavior is outrageous, and everyone has heard the rumors about her. This makes less and less sense as the novella goes on. For instance, Lady Susan's strategy for manipulating Reginald was to prove the rumors wrong, which she couldn't have done if Reginald didn't initially believe them. Even though Lady Susan refuses to act as a proper lady, she still wants to seem like one—it's a strange paradox, and it implies that even Lady Susan isn't immune to society's expectations. Interestingly, this passage also demonstrates that Reginald might not totally disbelieve those rumors. Lady Susan observes that he wanted to be convinced of her innocence: Reginald must know the truth on some level, but he's choosing to ignore it. His moral character is clearly lacking; his love for Lady Susan blinds him to the unhappiness of others. Interestingly, Lady Susan's lie to Reginald—that she doesn't want to break up his family—mirrors Frederica's letter. Both women appeal to Reginald's vanity, and Frederica even implied to Catherine that she didn't want to cause a rift in the Vernon household. The difference is that Frederica is likely genuine, while Lady Susan is using genuine love as a mask for transactional love. But if Lady Susan does care about Reginald, this passage reveals why: the fact that he's so easily manipulated makes Lady Susan look better.



Reginald is now more submissive than ever, but Lady Susan can't forgive him; she wonders whether she should punish him by leaving, or by marrying him and "teasing him for-ever." However, there's a lot on her plate right now: she needs to punish Frederica for the **letter**, Reginald for believing it, and Catherine for her triumph at Sir James's departure. Lady Susan plans to visit London soon to conclude Frederica's engagement to Sir James; it's urgent now, since her daughter's love for Reginald has become "romantic nonsense." However, renewing the engagement will be tricky—she surrendered Sir James to remain on good terms with Reginald, so she'll need to rely on his devotion to her once she goes against his wishes. Hopefully, Alicia can secure Lady Susan some lodgings near the Johnsons'.

Lady Susan is debating how she should punish Reginald, but her intended "punishment" rings false; even if Reginald were trapped in a loveless marriage with Lady Susan, it's unlikely that he would view it as punishment. Lady Susan would, after all, want to control his finances—and in order to do that, she'd at least need to keep him happy. This is, notably, the first time Lady Susan has ever mentioned a potential marriage to Reginald; previously, she denied that she wanted to marry him. It's possible that she's framing the marriage as a "punishment" now, but she really intended it all along. This framing allows her to seem in control, even though she really needs Reginald's money. In fact, her plans seem increasingly impossible, suggesting that Lady Susan is losing control—which would explain her sudden urge to get married. Sir James is gone (Lady Susan confirms that it was a tactical surrender), and forcing a marriage between Sir James and Frederica would mean going against Reginald. Meanwhile, Frederica loves Reginald more than ever, which is dangerous, since Reginald obviously isn't immune to flattery. In order to marry Reginald and punish Frederica at the same time, she needs to secretly force Frederica to marry Sir James against Frederica's will, all while ensuring that her daughter won't go to Reginald for help again. She can't even stay with the Johnsons, since Mr. Johnson hates her. The scheme is therefore a secret operation, which certainly doesn't imply that Lady Susan is all-powerful or even entirely in control.



Letter XXVI. Alicia responds to Lady Susan, saying that she should come to London but leave Frederica at Churchill. It would benefit Lady Susan more to marry Reginald than to stir the pot by forcing her daughter to marry Sir James. Frederica, after all, doesn't represent the family well, but Lady Susan is meant to be out in society. Leaving Frederica would be punishment enough. Alicia does have another reason for encouraging the solo visit—Mr. Manwaring keeps coming to the Johnsons', jealous about Reginald. Lady Susan needs to see him to calm him down, and to get him out of the way if she's going to marry Reginald—and she has to do both of these things in person.

Alicia provides her friend with the perfect solution: if Lady Susan abandons Frederica, she can keep Reginald around without any risk. This, of course, also allows Lady Susan to pretend that she's more in control of the situation than she actually is; it would be quite difficult to force a marriage between Frederica and Sir James at this point, now that everyone knows and is against it. Lady Susan can pretend she's abandoning her daughter because she wants to be alone in society, but the reality is that Frederica has won this round—her appeal to Reginald worked, if not for the reasons she expected. Of course, Alicia is wrong that Frederica will be punished by remaining at Churchill—this is another victory for Frederica—but perhaps Lady Susan is desperate enough to forget about punishment. Besides, Lady Susan marrying Reginald would also punish Frederica, who loves him. But even Lady Susan's solo visit to London proves she's not in control: if she wants to marry Reginald, she needs to get rid of Mr. Manwaring. She can't break things off by letter, since she's an in-person manipulator; even Alicia seems to imply that Lady Susan can't effectively lie in a letter. Lady Susan's financial security therefore relies on her ability to manipulate both Reginald and Mr. Manwaring. Obviously, her situation is entirely dependent on the whims of men, even if she pretends that it's not.



Luckily, Mr. Johnson will be in Bath recovering from a gout attack, so they can enjoy themselves. She would ask Lady Susan to stay at the Johnsons', but Mr. Johnson pressured her into swearing Lady Susan would never be invited to their home—which Alicia, desperate for money, obviously had to agree to. However, Lady Susan can stay nearby and visit. Mr. Manwaring keeps going on about Mrs. Manwaring's jealousy—she seems to be a stupid woman, both because she expected him to be faithful and because she married him at all, since she was rich and he was broke. Alicia and Mr. Johnson agree on almost nothing, except their dislike of Mrs. Manwaring.

Alicia clearly doesn't care much about her friend; she accepted her husband's bribe readily. She and Lady Susan are pretty similar—both are concerned with their own happiness, even though Alicia's role in the novella has been to aid her friend. Even Lady Susan's most genuine relationship isn't genuine; the two women are both shallow and self-centered. Alicia doesn't seem to understand genuine love either: Mrs. Manwaring clearly cares about her husband, despite all his faults. It's now clear that Mr. Johnson cut ties with Mrs. Manwaring in part because she married a poor man. She must have done so out of love, which is something Alicia can only ridicule. Mr. Manwaring seems to be a lot like Lady Susan as well—he probably married Mrs. Manwaring for her money, which explains why he cheats on her now.



Letter XXVII. Catherine writes a **letter** to her mother, which Reginald will deliver—he's going home, but it's too late for that to mean anything. Lady Susan is off to London; at first, she was going to bring Frederica, but the Vernons objected. Catherine worried that she'd either be left alone or that she'd have to see Reginald, which would hurt her. At the Vernons', she'll be distracted and may get over the unique pain of him choosing her mother over her. Catherine wasn't "cordial" in inviting Lady Susan back to Churchill, but she knows that wouldn't stop her if she wanted to come. Reginald, meanwhile, won't deny that he might visit London, and Catherine knows that if he does, he'll marry Lady Susan.

Lady Susan wants to make her losses seem like victories; she was always planning to leave Frederica at Churchill, but she forces the Vernons to beg for it. Much like her earlier plan to send Frederica to boarding school, hoping to make a marriage to Sir James seem like Frederica's idea, Lady Susan now wants to make Catherine feel dependent on her. Her power, as always, depends on others feeling powerless. If Catherine were thinking clearly, she'd realize that Lady Susan's behavior doesn't make any sense: Frederica is better off at the Vernons', where she can't see Reginald. Catherine should realize just from Lady Susan's uncharacteristic restraint that she has ulterior motives, but she doesn't. Instead, she continues to believe that Lady Susan is more powerful than she really is, even implying that she could reappear at Churchill at any moment. Although Reginald doesn't say that he'll see Lady Susan after he leaves Churchill, Catherine believes that Lady Susan is all-powerful and will lure him to London.



Letter XXVIII. Alicia writes to Lady Susan, upset: Mr. Johnson heard that Lady Susan would be in London and has now decided to have a gout attack to delay his trip to Bath. He can control them at will, and of course, he does so to torment Alicia. She's glad that her **letter** had an impact on Lady Susan, and that her friend has secured Reginald. She doesn't know when she can see Lady Susan—she has to nurse Mr. Johnson herself, which is a nasty trick on his part.

Once again, Alicia proves that she has no love for her husband. It's possible, of course, that Mr. Johnson is faking this gout attack to keep Lady Susan away from his house—however, his motives for doing so might be nobler than Alicia gives him credit for. Rather than punishing Alicia, he might be looking out for her, since Lady Susan is a genuinely bad influence on everyone, even if Alicia seems to be equally cruel. If Alicia is nursing him, she can't spend time with her friend. This letter also reveals that Lady Susan has taken some new step forward with Reginald (likely an engagement)—Alicia seems to think that she convinced Lady Susan to do it, but since Lady Susan never listened to her before, it's likely that her advice was just a convenient excuse to enact a prior plan.



Letter XXIX. Lady Susan, writing to Alicia, is furious on her friend's behalf. Alicia shouldn't have married a man Mr. Johnson's age: too old to manipulate, "too young to die." In other news, Lady Susan saw Mr. Manwaring the other night, which confirmed how superior he is to Reginald. For a moment, Lady Susan wasn't sure if she should marry Reginald at all; this wasn't logical, but she still isn't looking forward to the marriage, or to Reginald's upcoming visit to London.

Lady Susan thinks she should delay the marriage until Mr. Manwaring leaves. If Sir Reginald was dead, she'd be certain she's making the right call, but she doesn't want to be dependent on the old man. Instead, she wants to convince Reginald to delay the engagement until he dies, and she'll argue that the delay is proper because she's recently widowed. Mr. Manwaring, for his part, is clueless about all of this

Letter XXX. Lady Susan writes to Reginald: she thinks that they should delay their meeting. She isn't trying to be cruel or fickle; lately, she's been thinking that they should be more delicate, since they've allowed their passion to move things forward too fast. After all, his family will disapprove of their marriage: Sir Reginald wants him to marry rich—which doesn't make sense given the family's wealth, but it's still fair. Meanwhile, Lady Susan is recently widowed, and while she didn't love her husband, a hasty remarriage would look bad.

Lady Susan's anger about Mr. Johnson, while comical, is also revelatory: she previously spoke at length about her freedom, but now she seems to think that if someone's husband can be manipulated, it's a good relationship. This, of course, seems like a justification for her engagement to Reginald (which she confirms here for the first time). But she also seems to be undermining this engagement at every turn, which implies that she's unhappy she has to marry Reginald at all. Mr. Manwaring might genuinely be superior to him—from what Lady Susan has said before, he seems to be slavishly devoted at the very least—but it's likelier that Lady Susan is just nervous about being legally dependent on anyone, especially a man with a mind of his own.



Lady Susan's nervousness about Sir Reginald seems to be a kind of cover story. After all, Sir Reginald himself admitted that he couldn't prevent Reginald from inheriting, and Lady Susan would be dependent on Reginald regardless. Still, if Lady Susan can delay the engagement, she can maintain some semblance of control. Of course, this control would just mean that she's able to string along both Reginald and Mr. Manwaring at the same time. But for Lady Susan, this would be an assertion of independence—again implying that her independence is actually an illusion, since she's dependent on men, regardless of her legal ties to them.



Readers already know that everything Lady Susan writes in this letter is a lie: she has no real passion for Reginald, and she's the one who decided to manipulate Reginald into a flirtation, then an engagement. The only reason she wants to slow things down now is (allegedly) because she wants Sir Reginald to die before she and Reginald marry. However, it's significant that Lady Susan can't quite stick to the plan here. She uses Sir Reginald's disapproval of their relationship as an excuse for why she and Reginald shouldn't marry yet, but she insults the De Courcys in the same breath, saying that their disapproval doesn't make sense—they already have enough money, so they don't need Reginald to marry rich. Meanwhile, by saying that a hasty remarriage would look bad, Lady Susan implies that she cares more about society's opinion than about Reginald, which—while technically true—can't endear Reginald to her. So far in the novella, readers have learned about Lady Susan's character primarily through her letters to Alicia; she rarely needs to write letters full of lies. In fact, it seems like she isn't very good at doing so. Clearly, she can't manipulate quite as effectively from afar, which makes sense, because her letters tend to be where she tells the truth.



Their sudden marriage would especially upset Charles, whom Lady Susan admires, as well as De Courcys. She would be doubly miserable if she created a rift between Reginald and Sir Reginald. Only her love for Reginald could force Lady Susan to be this selfless; in a few months, Catherine will have calmed down enough to see that Lady Susan's financial status isn't everything. For now, Lady Susan will amuse herself by spending time with her friends, Mr. Manwaring and Mrs. Manwaring.

Lady Susan obviously doesn't admire Charles, but it's true that she cares about his opinion, since she currently depends on him financially and socially. Lady Susan may insult Charles in her letters to Alicia, but she does need to remain on his good side—which demonstrates, yet again, how dependent her position is. However, if she married Reginald, this would no longer be the case: Lady Susan would trade dependence on one man for dependence on another, something she doesn't seem to realize. She instead uses her vulnerability as a tool, mentioning her poverty in this letter—because Lady Susan believes that she's lying, it's possible that she can't understand how vulnerable she actually is or how truthful she's really being. Once again, her lies aren't effective here: if she was actually worried about causing a rift between Reginald and his family, she wouldn't have mentioned their financial situation. Lady Susan also seems to be throwing caution to the wind by mentioning the Manwarings. This is a dangerous lie, since it could put Reginald on guard or cause him to be suspicious. Lady Susan's manipulation isn't working as effectively as it needs to be, since her lies are more transparent than ever.



LETTERS 31–41

Letter XXXI. Lady Susan writes to Alicia, telling her that the plan didn't work—her **letter** to Reginald spurred him to come to London rather than keeping him away, and he'll deliver this letter himself. Admittedly, this does prove how much he loves her. Lady Susan wants Alicia to spend the evening with Reginald—she feigned sick—and flirt with him if necessary. Crucially, Alicia must convince him that his continued stay in London will make Lady Susan miserable for reasons of “propriety, and so forth.” In the meantime, Lady Susan will spend the evening with Mr. Manwaring.

Because Lady Susan's letter was pretty transparent, it's not surprising that Reginald came to London. Lady Susan seems to think that he did so because he was lovesick, which she appreciates—she values love if it benefits her. However, it's equally likely that her excuses made him nervous about the future of their engagement, something that wouldn't have happened if the two spoke in person. In fact, Lady Susan seems to be losing all her early advantages over Reginald. Telling Alicia to flirt with him is counterproductive, since he fell in love with Lady Susan's feigned modesty and restraint. If he realizes that her best friend is a shallow flirt, he might rethink the rumors about Lady Susan. It would certainly be difficult to believe that Lady Susan cares about “propriety” if Alicia is delivering the message. It's entirely possible that Lady Susan is self-sabotaging; it seems like a mistake to spend the night with Mr. Manwaring when Reginald is nearby, and when her engagement with Reginald depends on eventually getting rid of Mr. Manwaring. Lady Susan either believes that she has total control over the situation, or she's subconsciously trying to find a way out of her engagement—which would end her so-called freedom.



Letter XXXII. Alicia writes to Lady Susan, distraught. Reginald came to the Johnsons' at exactly the wrong time: Mrs. Manwaring had come to see Mr. Johnson, and as they spoke, Reginald waited for Alicia. Mrs. Manwaring had come to look for Mr. Manwaring and to ask Mr. Johnson to interfere in the affair between him and Lady Susan—she knew that Mr. Manwaring had seen Lady Susan every day since she'd been in London. Mr. Johnson then spoke with Reginald privately, telling him everything. He'd wanted to talk with Reginald anyway, since he knew that Reginald was attached to Lady Susan. Mrs. Manwaring, uglier than ever, is still at the house, and the three are shut up together.

Letter XXXIII. Lady Susan, replying to Alicia, thinks that the situation is very annoying and unlucky. But Alicia shouldn't worry—Lady Susan can sort things out with Reginald. Mr. Manwaring just left her lodgings after telling Lady Susan that Mrs. Manwaring was in town. Lady Susan wishes she hadn't come, but no matter: Reginald will forgive her in the span of a day.

This situation only happens because Lady Susan never got rid of Mr. Manwaring, which Alicia told her she had to do, and because Lady Susan wrote to Reginald to delay their engagement. If Lady Susan had broken things off with Mr. Manwaring after her engagement to Reginald, Mrs. Manwaring never would have come to the Johnsons'. And if she'd never written to Reginald to delay his visit, he wouldn't have arrived so soon. Mr. Johnson would still have warned Reginald about Lady Susan's character at some point, but Reginald never took stock in the rumors before—the only reason he might believe them now is because he saw Mrs. Manwaring in the flesh, and because she revealed the extent of Lady Susan's affair with her husband. It was Lady Susan's final bid for control that did her in: stringing two men along at once might have made her feel powerful, but it ended up making her powerless. Of course, Lady Susan had no good options: she would have also been powerless in a marriage to Reginald, though in a different way. Lady Susan and Alicia might make fun of Mrs. Johnson's "ugly" appearance and blame her for this situation, but in reality, Lady Susan could have avoided it if she'd accepted her own unavoidably powerless situation.



Admittedly, Lady Susan has good reason to think that she can turn this situation around. She's made Reginald change his mind about her before—when he was going to leave Churchill, she even made him feel that he was in the wrong to do so. Lady Susan is so cocky, in fact, that she's apparently still taking social calls from Mr. Manwaring, which at this point seems like social suicide. But Lady Susan is an effective manipulator, at least in person, so it won't be totally surprising if she convinces Reginald that Mrs. Manwaring is lying.



Letter XXXIV. Reginald writes to Lady Susan to say goodbye—he now knows what kind of person she is. He’s just received information that made him realize how stupid he’d been, and how quickly he needs to leave. She should know what he’s talking about, and he mentions only the name of the Manwarings’ estate, Langford; he got his intel from Mrs. Manwaring directly. He loved Lady Susan but won’t say more about how he’s feeling—she’ll be too smug at his pain, and he knows now that she never loved him.

Reginald’s cryptic letter is bizarre—he doesn’t want to name Lady Susan’s crimes, even though he explicitly named them earlier in the novella, when he wrote to Catherine about the Langford rumors. Reginald has certainly been played for a fool, but he also comes across as a hypocrite: he was initially amused by Lady Susan’s alleged affairs but now finds them too horrible to speak of. Of course, he wasn’t in love with Lady Susan earlier, and he’s clearly hurt by her deception. Still, he plays the victim here, assuming both that Lady Susan never cared about him and that she’d be happy he’s in pain. Reginald came to Churchill solely to laugh at Lady Susan, so he doesn’t have a moral high ground to stand on. But once again, he acts like she’s much more powerful than him, and like his love was totally absent of ulterior motives. If readers believe Lady Susan, Reginald willfully deceived himself about her character in hopes that she could convince him the rumors weren’t true. It’s unclear who is telling the truth, but it is clear that Reginald won’t admit to his own flaws.



Letter XXXV. Lady Susan responds to Reginald, shocked—she can’t even imagine what Mrs. Manwaring could have told him to make him change his mind about her. She’s never hidden anything from him and can’t believe that he once again buys Mrs. Manwaring’s tales of jealousy. She asks him to come see her to explain what’s going on, since the name “Langford” revealed nothing to her. If they have to break their engagement, it would be kinder of him to do so in person—she’s humiliated by his reproach, and she awaits his arrival.

Once again, Lady Susan’s lies aren’t very believable—she and Reginald presumably discussed the rumors about her and Mr. Manwaring at some point, since he knew about them and later decided they weren’t true. In this letter, Lady Susan acts like she doesn’t know about them and instead is only vaguely aware that Mrs. Manwaring is jealous. This is a lie that Reginald would almost certainly see through. However, Lady Susan’s real objective is clear: she wants Reginald to visit her in person, likely because she could more effectively manipulate him if he did so. She must realize that none of her letters have served their intended purposes; it was her letter, in fact, that caused Reginald to rush to London in the first place. She frames the situation comically, suggesting that she’d meekly accept a breakup if it happened in person. But readers can guess that if Reginald did visit her, she’d be able to change his mind—after all, she always has before.



Letter XXXVI. Reginald writes to Lady Susan, shocked that she even responded and that she's asking for details. But he gives them anyway: he knows everything about her behavior since her late husband died. Most horribly, he knows that she was seeing and continues to see Mr. Manwaring romantically, that she been writing to him and not his wife, and that he now visits her daily. All the while, Lady Susan was pretending to love Reginald and agreed to marry him. He's just grateful that he got out of it in time. Reginald owes this clarity to Mrs. Manwaring, who sadly can't get out of her situation as easily as he can. He says goodbye to Lady Susan a final time: he's disgusted that he fell for her charms, and that he was weak enough to do so.

It's strange that Reginald is surprised at Lady Susan's response—he should know by now that she'll try to spin the situation in her favor. Again, it's also odd that he mentions her affair with Mr. Manwaring as though it's a total shock. It's true that he thought Lady Susan was innocent, but this was a well-known rumor, and he once believed it was true. It's also surprising that no one questioned why Lady Susan was writing to Mrs. Manwaring—even Catherine believed this lie earlier in the novella. It seems obvious that Reginald was, to some extent, willfully deceiving himself; he wouldn't be this surprised otherwise. Meanwhile, the end of Reginald's letter presents a double standard: he's sad for Mrs. Manwaring, who is powerless to change her situation (divorce was almost unheard of in 18th-century Britain). But he also paints Lady Susan as a villain who overpowered him. He doesn't seem to realize that, apart from her skill at lying, Lady Susan is no different from Mrs. Manwaring. She, too, had no power in her marriage to her husband, and she was dependent on Charles's hospitality for as long as Reginald knew her. Reginald is more powerful than both women, but he still paints himself as Lady Susan's victim. It's true that she was always trying to manipulate him, but it's also true that his "weakness" was an illusion. In reality, he held all the cards.



Letter XXXVII. Lady Susan responds to Reginald; she won't write again. She understands that their engagement is no longer "compatible with [his] views," and she's glad that he's following his parents' advice to break it off after all. He'll be happy obeying their wishes, and Lady Susan will just have to survive her disappointment.

This is Lady Susan's final manipulation: she wants Reginald to feel as though he's giving in to his parents by breaking off their engagement. This would make him seem weak, and make her seem strong in comparison, since she has a mind of her own. She also wants Reginald to believe that she's more hurt than she really is. Readers don't know how she feels about her broken engagement yet; it's possible that she actually is upset. But it's obvious that this letter is one last attempt to distance Reginald from his family, something Lady Susan has been trying to do all along. This was, in fact, the main goal of her initial flirtation.



Letter XXXVIII. Alicia writes to Lady Susan, sorry for Reginald's departure but not surprised—he told Mr. Johnson that he was going to leave. Unfortunately, Alicia will have to stop writing to Lady Susan: Mr. Johnson told her that if they stay friends, he'll force Alicia to move to the countryside with him, and of course Alicia couldn't suffer through that if there was an alternative. She goes on to tell Lady Susan that Mr. Manwaring and Mrs. Manwaring will soon separate, and that Mrs. Manwaring will come live with the Johnsons again—maybe she'll die young due to stress.

Miss Manwaring, meanwhile, has returned to London to get Sir James back; Alicia thinks that Lady Susan should marry him instead. She also wants to tell her that she liked Reginald—he was just as handsome as Mr. Manwaring, as well as open and good-natured. Alicia says goodbye, saddened but sure that Lady Susan couldn't have prevented anything that happened.

Letter XXXIX. In reply, Lady Susan sadly agrees to part with Alicia—someday, once Alicia is as “independent” as Lady Susan is, they might be able to be friends again. For now, though, Lady Susan is completely content: she hates Mr. Johnson and Reginald, and she won't have to see either again. Plus, Mr. Manwaring remains loyal—if he were able to, Lady Susan would marry him in a heartbeat. Maybe Alicia can stress Mrs. Manwaring to an early death.

Alicia again demonstrates that she cares more about herself than her friendship with Lady Susan. She humorously implies that living in the countryside would be a horrific punishment, and that it's worth losing Lady Susan to avoid it. Clearly, Mr. Johnson knows Alicia well: his threats are effective, suggesting that their marriage is another example of a transactional, give-and-take relationship. This is a real blow for Lady Susan: for the first time, someone else's selfishness runs counter to her own, and she's going to lose her friend because of it. Still, their relationship doesn't seem very meaningful, since Alicia reveals this information casually—maybe Lady Susan won't care either. It's significant that Mr. and Mrs. Manwaring are separating; Mrs. Manwaring must have been wildly unhappy to agree to this, because it will make her look bad in society. It's extra cruel, then, that Alicia casually hopes for her death. Alicia and Lady Susan still seem unable to empathize with other people.



Interestingly, Alicia seems to sense how precarious Lady Susan's position is. Lady Susan has no money, and she's not staying with the Vernons any longer; it's critical that she marry a rich man, and soon. By suggesting that Lady Susan marry Sir James—someone Lady Susan has repeatedly ridiculed—Alicia is hinting that desperate times call for desperate measures. It's strange, therefore, that Alicia also brings up how great Reginald was. This seems like twisting the knife in Lady Susan's back, since Reginald has just broken up with her; maybe Alicia is tired of Lady Susan's schemes and wants to hurt her. Over the course of the novella, Lady Susan believed that she was in complete control—now, Alicia saying that she wasn't will certainly sting.



If Lady Susan really believes what she's saying, her letter is nothing short of delusional. First, she's far from “independent,” since, As Alicia has just hinted, Lady Susan needs money. Her hostile response implies that she's angry at Alicia's insinuation—essentially, she's suggesting that she's free while Alicia is trapped. Meanwhile, Lady Susan might hate Mr. Johnson, but it's hard to believe that she hates Reginald. She's angry that he broke up with her, but it's likely that she did care about him to some extent. It's also difficult to imagine Lady Susan eagerly marrying Mr. Manwaring if his wife died—it's true that he'd be easy to manipulate, but she'd still be dependent on him, which is what she wanted to avoid in a marriage to Reginald. In fact, Lady Susan might like Mr. Manwaring because he can't marry her and tie her down.



Lady Susan now thinks that she couldn't have gone through with a marriage to Reginald, and she won't let Frederica marry him, either—her daughter *will* marry Sir James, no matter who whines about it. Lady Susan is tired of “submitting [her] will” to others; she's sacrificed enough, and Frederica will pay for it. In closing, Lady Susan hopes that Mr. Johnson's next gout attack will be “favourable.”

Lady Susan's sudden desire to force the marriage between Frederica and Sir James—which she previously gave up on—seems to be a last-ditch attempt to control things. It also seems like an attempt to ensure that Frederica can't marry Reginald, again implying that Lady Susan did care about him. Lady Susan's statement that she has submitted her will to others is meant to read humorously—after all, Lady Susan has never “submitted” to anyone, and she's sacrificed very little. But it also rings true, since all the power Lady Susan thought she had is now gone. Her parting statement to Alicia, hoping for the death of Mr. Johnson, is both petty and bleak: if Mr. Johnson died, Alicia would be in the same position as Lady Susan, which is certainly not an “independent” one.



XL. Lady De Courcy writes to Catherine with great news: Reginald was in London but has now returned, not with tidings of a marriage, but to announce his breakup with Lady Susan. She doesn't know the specifics yet, but she hopes that Catherine and Charles will come visit, and that they'll bring Frederica. Once Reginald recovers from his heartbreak (which she thinks will happen soon), they can set him up with Frederica.

Readers can now confirm that Reginald really did leave Lady Susan this time, presumably for good. But Lady De Courcy's response is strange—Reginald has just broken up with Lady Susan, so the last thing he'd want to do is get together with her daughter. Lady De Courcy seems to think that Reginald didn't really care about Lady Susan, but readers know that he did. It's possible that Lady De Courcy wants him to marry Frederica just because Catherine spoke highly of her. It's also possible she wants to ensure that Reginald can't ever marry Lady Susan—which is a possibility as long as he's single.



XLI. Catherine, replying to her mother, is shocked to hear the news about Reginald's breakup, especially because the day he must have returned home, a cheerful Lady Susan visited Churchill, which Catherine took to mean the two were engaged. She said nothing about a breakup, and when Catherine asked if she'd seen Reginald in London, she only mentioned that they'd missed each other.

Lady Susan is obviously maintaining a façade of power in front of the Vernons; even though she's lost her leverage against them, she doesn't show it. She may believe that she can still turn things around, or she just doesn't want to seem weak. Either way, Catherine shouldn't be shocked—Lady Susan would never admit that Reginald broke up with her. She'll probably never even admit that they were engaged, even though Catherine suspected that they were.



Catherine will be glad to visit home, but sadly, they can't bring Frederica—Lady Susan came to Churchill specifically to bring her to London, and Catherine was unable to stop her. Charles thinks that Frederica will be treated well, but Catherine disagrees, and she's sorry to say that Frederica appeared miserable. Catherine took her aside specifically to tell her to write; she wishes that she could look forward to a marriage between Frederica and Reginald as her mother does, but it doesn't seem likely.

Catherine doesn't say anything about Sir James, but she's probably aware of Lady Susan's plan to force Frederica's hand. If Charles still believes that Frederica will be treated well, Catherine must not have told him about Lady Susan's manipulations. This makes it all the more obvious that Catherine never had any power over Lady Susan and could never have stopped her from marrying Reginald.

Catherine wasn't even willing to go to Charles for help; maybe she assumed he wouldn't believe her (and, if he's as gullible as Lady Susan says, he probably wouldn't have). Catherine is right that a marriage between Frederica and Reginald seems unlikely—even if Frederica miraculously avoids a marriage to Sir James once she's in London, Reginald wouldn't forget about Lady Susan so easily.



CONCLUSION

An unnamed narrator says that the **letters** couldn't continue; no one could benefit from reading the correspondence between the Vernons and De Courcys, because Catherine soon realized that Frederica's letters were being monitored by Lady Susan. Instead of writing, Catherine decided to visit Frederica after hearing everything about Lady Susan's affair from Reginald. Catherine managed to convince the easygoing Charles to take them to London, where they saw Lady Susan; Catherine was disgusted by her good cheer and lack of guilt. Frederica remained unchanged, and her meekness convinced Catherine she needed to get her away from her mother.

Over the course of the novella, letters have been outlets for truth. There were a few exceptions—Lady Susan's letters to Charles and Reginald, for instance—but for the most part, characters were able to say things in writing that they couldn't or wouldn't say out loud. Often, this only made it easier for Lady Susan to spread lies. But in this case, Lady Susan prevents Frederica from telling the truth at all, meaning that Frederica's letters have no value anymore—they would just be spaces for Lady Susan to lie through her daughter. Instead, Austen's narrator takes over, since letters can no longer reveal useful truths. Lady Susan, meanwhile, is still lying to people in person, acting like everything is fine—even though, by this point, Catherine knows that Lady Susan is in the middle of a breakup with Reginald and that she likely still wants to force Frederica to marry Sir James. Frederica's obvious weakness is what convinces Catherine that she needs to take action. When Frederica wrote to Reginald about her engagement, her powerlessness made him feel powerful—and it seems that the same thing is happening again, except that Catherine has no real power to speak of.



Lady Susan never mentioned Sir James except to say that he was no longer in London; instead, she went on and on about Frederica's newfound accomplishments. Catherine worried that this would make it harder to get Frederica away, but Lady Susan instead wondered whether Frederica might be happier in the country. After at first declining Catherine's invitation to return Frederica to Churchill, she eventually relented after an influenza outbreak in London—she worried about Frederica's health.

Lady Susan's behavior is suspicious; it's unlikely that Frederica could have become so accomplished in such a short amount of time. It's also strange that Frederica isn't yet married to Sir James—Lady Susan only wanted Frederica's education to continue until she got married. And Lady Susan has certainly never cared about Frederica's happiness before, nor about her health. It's also not like Lady Susan to relent to Catherine without wanting something in return.



Three weeks after the Vernons returned to Churchill with Frederica, Lady Susan announced that she had married Sir James. Catherine realized that Lady Susan had wanted Frederica gone all along, and she hadn't really needed to convince her. Frederica remained with the Vernons—though Lady Susan invited her back to London in a few **letters**—and eventually lost touch with her mother. She'd stay with the Vernons until Reginald could be “talked, flattered, and finessed” into loving her, which would probably take a year, given his current heartbreak over Lady Susan and distrust of women. Ordinarily, it might only take three months, but Reginald's feelings were strong.

Now, Lady Susan's behavior makes sense: she always intended to leave Frederica with the Vernons, but she wanted them to think it was their idea. This is a tactic she's used before—for instance, when she dropped Frederica off at boarding school—and one which makes her appear more in control than she really is. After all, she certainly doesn't seem to have been in control of Frederica; it remains unclear why Frederica wasn't forced to marry Sir James, and why Lady Susan went through with it instead. It's possible that Frederica outright refused and was able to convince her mother to relent. It does seem likely that something went wrong; if Lady Susan was pleased with the circumstances, she wouldn't have manipulated Catherine into begging for Frederica to stay. Perhaps Lady Susan realized that Alicia was right: Frederica wouldn't represent her well in society, which explains why she stopped writing. This passage, to some degree, gives Frederica a happy ending: she'll eventually marry Reginald, a man she loves. But Austen also reminds readers that this marriage won't be a love match. Reginald's family will have to coerce him into marrying Frederica, which will be more difficult than Lady De Courcy expected, since Reginald apparently did love Lady Susan—it takes him a whole year to get over her. The De Courcys don't have the best interests of both parties at heart—Reginald will always be comparing Frederica to Lady Susan, and Frederica will always remember Lady Susan's influence on Reginald. In this way, Lady Susan maintains some level of power over the situation.



The narrator doesn't know whether Lady Susan was happy with her “second choice” of Sir James—and no one will ever know, since they can't trust anything she says. But the only negative circumstances in Lady Susan's life were her husband and her “conscience,” which might one day work against her. In fact, Sir James is probably the real loser, since he was just a foolish pawn—the reader should pity him instead. The narrator, meanwhile, can only pity Miss Manwaring, who came all the way to London only to lose Sir James to a much older woman.

On the surface, Lady Susan has been punished for her lying and scheming. She lost her best friend and her fiancé, lost control of her daughter, and is now married to a foolish man. However, Austen seems to suggest that Lady Susan's circumstances aren't all bad—her husband is rich and easily manipulated, after all. And Lady Susan never had much of a “conscience” to speak of, so it's unlikely that she'll feel any pangs of guilt. She can still control Sir James's money, and her schemes won't be hindered by financial concerns; she could even, hypothetically, maintain her affair with Mr. Manwaring, newly separated from his wife. Lady Susan gets off lightly for her lies and manipulation in the end, which leaves readers to wonder whether Austen really condemns her actions. Lady Susan is, after all, a product of her society: her boredom causes her cruelty, and the societal limitations placed on women make that cruelty possible. Lady Susan's prescribed role in polite society is what allows her to lie.





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