



SELF-PRESENTATION STRATEGY THROUGH LETTERS IN JANE AUSTEN'S LADY SUSAN

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Abstract

This study analyzes the self-presentation strategy through letters depicted in Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*. This research employs a qualitative method, with the novel serving as the primary source of data. Supporting information is obtained from books, journal articles, and other relevant references. The data are collected through close reading and note-taking techniques and analyzed using Wellek and Warren's Sociology of Literature and Erving Goffman's concept of self-presentation. The study focuses on three self-presentation strategies reflected through letters, namely front stage, back stage, and impression management. The findings reveal that Lady Susan uses letters not only as a means of communication but also as a strategy to construct a positive image, conceal her real motives and intentions, and influence other people's judgments. Through front stage, she presents herself as polite, friendly, and caring, while back stage reveals her true thoughts and intentions through private correspondence. Furthermore, impression management enables her to deceive, impress, and persuade others in order to achieve her personal goals. The study also reflects contemporary social behavior, where individuals carefully manage their self-presentation through various communication platforms, particularly social media, to create favorable impressions and influence how others perceive them.

Keywords: letters, self-presentation, front stage, back stage, impression management

1. Introduction

Literature is closely related to human life because it reflects social reality, human behavior, and relationships within society. According to Wellek and Warren (1956), literature cannot be separated from society since literary works represent social values, cultural conditions, and human experiences. Therefore, literary works may be analyzed through the sociology of literature approach to understand the relationship between literature and social life.

Jane Austen is one of the most prominent English novelists whose works frequently portray social life, family, marriage, and women's position in society during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. One of her unique novels, *Lady Susan*, is written entirely in the form of letters, making it an epistolary novel. Unlike conventional novels, the story develops through correspondence exchanged among the characters, allowing readers to

observe how characters present themselves through written communication.

Lady Susan, the central character, consistently uses letters to shape other people's opinions about herself. In her correspondence with relatives and acquaintances, she presents herself as polite, friendly, respectful, and caring. However, her private letters reveal different thoughts, motives, and intentions, indicating that her public image differs from her true personality. Through letters, she attempts to deceive, impress, and persuade others in order to achieve her personal goals.

Goffman's concept of self-presentation (1959) explains that individuals perform different roles during social interactions to influence how others perceive them. His concept consists of front stage, back stage, and impression management, which explain how individuals construct, maintain, and control their public image. These concepts are highly relevant to *Lady Susan* because



almost every interaction in the novel occurs through letters.

Several previous studies have examined *Lady Susan* from different perspectives. Horwitz (1987) analyzed Lady Susan's manipulative character through a characterization approach. Owen and Alexander (2005) examined the epistolary form and its contribution to the narrative structure and character development. Anastasi (2020) focused on Lady Susan as an unconventional character using a characterization approach. Gaston (2016) discussed gossip and identity formation from a socio-cultural perspective. Patras, Wantasen, and Senduk (2025) analyzed Lady Susan as an independent woman in a patriarchal society using a feminist approach. Tontiplaphol (2006) examined how letters negotiate social obligations and responsibilities through a socio-legal and epistolary perspective. McClelland (2018) explored Lady Susan's shameless behavior using a psychological approach. Kaplan (1987) investigated female friendship and the epistolary form through feminist and narratological approaches.

Although these studies provide valuable discussions on characterization, feminism, psychology, social behavior, and the epistolary form, limited attention has been given to self-presentation as a strategic process constructed through letters. Therefore, this study specifically analyzes how Lady Susan constructs and manages her self-presentation through front stage, back stage, and impression management based on Goffman's concept within the framework of Wellek and Warren's Sociology of Literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Self-Presentation

Self-presentation refers to the process by which individuals attempt to influence how other people perceive and evaluate them. According to Goffman (1959), individuals behave like actors who perform different roles depending on the audience they face. Their performance is intended to

create a favorable impression and support the identity they wish to present.

Goffman explains that self-presentation consists of three interconnected concepts: front stage, back stage, and impression management. Front stage refers to the public performance displayed before an audience, where individuals carefully manage their appearance and behavior. Back stage is the private area where they can express their genuine thoughts, motives, and feelings without maintaining their public image. Impression management refers to the strategies used to control other people's perceptions and judgments. In *Lady Susan*, these concepts are reflected through Lady Susan's letters, which become the primary medium for constructing and maintaining her public image.

2.2 Sociology of Literature

This study applies Wellek and Warren's Sociology of Literature as its theoretical framework. According to Wellek and Warren (1949), literature is closely related to society because literary works reflect human behavior, social relationships, and cultural values. Through literary analysis, readers can understand how social interaction and human behavior are represented in literary texts. Based on this perspective, *Lady Susan* is analyzed not only as a literary work but also as a representation of social interaction through written communication. Lady Susan's letters illustrate how communication functions as a social strategy to construct identity, influence others, and manage interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the Sociology of Literature provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining self-presentation as a social phenomenon represented in the novel.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method because it focuses on analyzing words, sentences, and characters' behavior rather than numerical data. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research is used to understand and interpret meanings in social phenomena. The primary



data source is Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*, while the secondary data are obtained from books, journal articles, and other relevant references. The data were collected through close reading and note-taking techniques to identify quotations related to self-presentation strategies. The collected data were then classified into front stage, back stage, and impression management and analyzed descriptively using Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative data analysis model, interpreted through Wellek and Warren's Sociology of Literature and Erving Goffman's concept of self-presentation.

4. Result and Discussion

Lady Susan tells the story of Lady Susan Vernon, a beautiful widow who maintains relationships with other characters mainly through letters. Throughout the novel, she carefully uses her correspondence to influence other people's opinions, maintain a respectable reputation, and achieve her personal goals. At the same time, her private letters reveal motives and intentions that remain hidden from the other characters. These findings indicate that letters function not only as a medium of communication but also as a strategy of self-presentation. Based on Goffman's (1959) concept of self-presentation, the findings are reflected through three interconnected strategies: front stage, back stage, and impression management. These strategies demonstrate how Lady Susan deliberately manages her communication to construct a favorable image, conceal her genuine motives, and influence other people's perceptions.

4.1 Front Stage

According to Goffman (1959), front stage is the performance displayed before an audience to create a favorable impression. In *Lady Susan*, this performance is reflected through the letters Lady Susan sends to the Vernon family and other characters. Rather than revealing her genuine personality, she carefully presents herself as a polite, respectable, friendly, and caring woman. The findings indicate that her front stage

performance is represented through her appearance and manner.

Lady Susan's appearance creates a favorable first impression before other characters recognize her true personality. Catherine Vernon describes her as: "She is really excessively pretty." (20). Although Catherine Vernon has previously heard unfavorable opinions about Lady Susan, her physical beauty encourages Catherine to reconsider her initial judgment. Lady Susan is therefore perceived as an attractive and respectable woman. This finding supports Goffman's concept of appearance because physical appearance contributes to the positive identity presented before an audience.

Besides appearance, Lady Susan also performs her front stage through her manner. She consistently uses polite and affectionate language to present herself as a respectful and friendly woman. This is reflected in her first letter to Charles Vernon: "My dear Brother, I can no longer refuse myself the pleasure of profiting by your kind invitation..." (9). The expressions "My dear Brother," "pleasure," and "kind invitation" convey respect, gratitude, and friendliness. Through this language, Lady Susan creates the impression of an appreciative guest who sincerely values Charles Vernon's invitation.

The effectiveness of her manner is reflected in Catherine Vernon's response: "Her address to me was so gentle, frank, and even affectionate, that, if I had not known how much she has always disliked me... I should have imagined her an attached friend." (20).

This quotation demonstrates that Lady Susan's carefully controlled communication successfully strengthens the favorable image she intends to present. Overall, the findings reveal that the combination of appearance and manner enables Lady Susan to establish a positive public image despite concealing her genuine personality.

4.2 Back Stage

Back stage refers to the situation where individuals no longer perform before an audience and are free to express their genuine



thoughts, feelings, motives, and plans (Goffman, 1959). In *Lady Susan*, Lady Susan's backstage is reflected through her private correspondence with Mrs. Johnson. These letters expose attitudes and intentions that are hidden from other characters.

Lady Susan openly reveals her true feelings toward the Vernon family when she writes: "Charles Vernon is my aversion; and I am afraid of his wife." (13). This statement contrasts with the polite and friendly image she presents in her public correspondence. While she appears respectful in her letters to the Vernon family, she privately admits her dislike for Charles Vernon and her concern about Catherine Vernon. This contrast illustrates the distinction between her public performance and her genuine emotions.

Lady Susan also discloses her personal plan regarding Frederica's future: "I hope to see her the wife of Sir James within a twelvemonth." (24). Rather than considering Frederica's own wishes, Lady Susan focuses on achieving her personal objective by arranging the marriage with Sir James Martin. Sharing this intention only with Mrs. Johnson allows her to express her genuine motive without maintaining the favorable image she presents to others. These private letters therefore function as Lady Susan's backstage, where she freely communicates thoughts and plans that remain concealed in her public correspondence.

Overall, the findings indicate that Lady Susan's private letters reveal the contrast between her authentic personality and the favorable image she deliberately constructs through letters.

4.3 Impression Management

Impression management refers to the strategies individuals use to control how others perceive and evaluate them (Goffman, 1959). In *Lady Susan*, Lady Susan carefully manages her communication to create, maintain, and protect a favorable public image. Through her letters, she deliberately influences other characters to support the impression she wants them to believe.

Her strategy is evident when she writes: "it shall be my endeavour to ... persuade

Reginald that she has scandalously belied me." (15). This statement shows that Lady Susan intentionally attempts to change Reginald De Courcy's perception by convincing him that Catherine Vernon has misrepresented her character. Rather than accepting criticism, she deliberately manages communication to preserve her positive reputation.

The success of this strategy is later acknowledged by Lady Susan herself: "I have made him sensible of my power." (27). This admission demonstrates that she recognizes the effectiveness of her communication in influencing Reginald's judgment. She deliberately uses language to persuade, impress, and manipulate others in order to achieve her personal objectives.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that impression management functions as the central strategy connecting Lady Susan's front stage and back stage. Through carefully constructed letters, she maintains a favorable public image while concealing her genuine motives, illustrating that letters serve not only as communication but also as an effective medium for self-presentation.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that self-presentation through letters is a central strategy employed by Lady Susan throughout Jane Austen's *Lady Susan*. Rather than functioning solely as a means of communication, letters become a medium through which Lady Susan constructs a favorable public image, conceals her genuine thoughts and intentions, and influences how other characters perceive and evaluate her.

The findings demonstrate that Lady Susan's self-presentation is reflected through three interconnected strategies: front stage, back stage, and impression management. In the front stage, she presents herself as a polite, respectable, friendly, and caring woman through her appearance and manner. In the back stage, her private correspondence reveals her genuine feelings, motives, and future plans. Meanwhile, impression management illustrates how she deliberately controls communication to persuade,



impress, and influence other people's judgments in order to achieve her personal goals.

These findings support Goffman's concept of self-presentation by showing that communication is not merely used to exchange information but also to construct and manage social identity. They also support Wellek and Warren's sociology of literature, which views literary works as reflections of social behavior. Although the novel was written in the nineteenth century, the strategies represented by *Lady Susan* remain relevant today, as individuals continue to manage their public image through various forms of digital communication and social media.

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