English Seminar II
Standing At the Threshold: Reading Austen as “New Adult Literature”       MW 9:30

“And here, too, was the specter of [one’s] future, the great questions over which there was little control: Was it better to be alone and in some sense intact? Or better to be coupled—and compromised, denied freedom but awarded the respect of society?”

Carol Shields
Jane Austen: A Life

“If we look into the shrewdness and quiet satire of [Austen’s] stories, we shall find a much keener sense of disappointment than joy fulfilled. Sometimes we find more than disappointment.”

Julia Kavanagh
English Women of Letters

This seminar will examine three novels by Jane Austen (1775-1817): Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Emma. These novels feature four very different young women at the threshold of adulthood: the Dashwood sisters who are 19 and 16 years old; Elizabeth Bennet, 20; and Emma Woodhouse, 21.

More than a recent marketing tool to sell books, the genre of “new adult literature” is as old as literature itself. The epic Beowulf begins when its champion is a young warrior; Shakespeare’s Romeo is 17 or so; Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, a college student; Shaw’s Vive, 22 years old; Hansberry’s Beneath Younger, a college student, etc. In short, writers have told compelling, worthwhile stories centering on characters undergoing—struggling with? surviving?—that transition, whatever we call that period, in which they break away from parents and siblings, end their formal education, that time in which young people strive to address essential questions about their identity, purpose, value, their communities, relationships, etc. as adults.

The title of the seminar points to what twentieth-century anthropologists called liminality, the middle stage of rites of passages—after the first stage of separation yet before the third stage of incorporation. Time and again, they describe young people “standing at the threshold” (or in the liminal stage) as perplexed, apprehensive, disordered. Unsurprisingly, writers (but especially novelists) and readers find that emotionally complicated time of life a time of fascinating drama.

Moreover, these characters and novels are interesting because of the period in which Austen lived and wrote. Cultural anthropologists appropriated the concept of liminality to study societies transitioning, to examine that “middle stage” in which new ideologies, hierarchies, institutions and attitudes clash with established customs and manners. Writing in the Regency Era (1795-1820) when writers were coming to understand what one might do with this emerging form called the novel, Austen reflects the liminality of her time—as English Romantic ideas collide with the morals and mores of the eighteenth century.

Austen is in my view a major writer, and her novels worthy of a seminar. Undeniably, her novels remain as popular as ever with “general readers,” and many have dismissed them as “love stories for girls, that are all the same.” I suspect much of that cursory, uninformed condemnation arises from knee-jerk reactions to her art because of her gender, her class, her era, her focus, her subjects, and her young, privileged white characters. Yet to read her novels carefully, deliberately, unhurriedly, and objectively reveals the achievements of an exceptional writer—with an intimate narrative voice, a clever, strikingly funny wit, and ingenious, insightful satire, at times both laughing and biting.