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Religion in Sense and Sensibility

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Religion in *Sense and Sensibility*

Jane Austen is one of the most beloved authors of romantic novels. Her characters capture the hearts of readers, and her stories, centered on family, friendship, and romance, beg a reader to relive them again and again. As an author writing on the cusp of the Romantic period, Jane Austen bridges the gap between Neoclassicism and Romanticism as she portrays aspects of both literary periods in her novels. Though she wrote prior to the flourishing of the Romantic period, Romantic undertones nonetheless run deep in her novels. The tension between Neoclassical and emerging Romantic thought appears subtly in the religion that is woven into the fabric of her works. *Sense and Sensibility*, her first major novel published, exemplifies the shifting perspectives in religion during this period by exploring the virtues of its title through the lenses of the Anglicanism of Georgian England. *Sense and Sensibility* reflects Jane Austen's worldview which stems from the Neoclassical and Romantic fusion present in her religious belief.

Though thoroughly infused with biblical principles and guided by clear moral standards, Jane Austen's writing has been deemed secular by numerous scholars who deny that religion had any influence in her writing. Jane's religion has been a source of much disagreement among scholars throughout the years for several reasons. First, although she expertly unveiled the inner workings of the human heart in her characters, Jane left little to help her adoring readers gain entrance into her own heart, leaving readers to speculate about her personal beliefs. What can be

known of Jane exists in the accounts of her family members and in her personal letters. In 1869 her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh (JEAL) published *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, containing his memories of Jane and the first of her letters ever published. He wrote the *Memoir* in response to the overwhelming interest in his aunt, attempting to give the public a glimpse into her personal life by providing descriptions of her and her life. JEAL describes his aunt fondly based on his memories of her; but, as he was young when she died, his *Memoir* provides a very incomplete picture of Jane.

Along with his own recollections, JEAL provided readers the opportunity to examine Jane through her correspondence. Gathering some of Jane's letters, mostly written to her sister Cassandra, he published a small collection of letters in *Memoir* with the disclaimer that they contained information that would have been interesting only to the recipient of the letter, and he believed readers "would not feel that they knew her any the better for having read them" (173-174). Indeed, Jane's letters published in *Memoirs* were casual and dealt with the common and mundane subjects pertaining to everyday life; yet this selection of letters hardly represents the whole of Jane's correspondence. Jane wrote an estimated 3,000 letters throughout her life, and the world has access to only 160 of them (Le Faye 33). Her family used great caution in publicizing information about her, and the letters that survive contain only the most impersonal information. Prior to her death, Cassandra burned many of her letters from Jane and cut out portions of some (33-34).

The censored picture of Jane that *Memoir* and other biographies provide cripples scholars today in discovering her thoroughly; for this reason, she has been read many different and conflicting ways. Although information about Jane's personal life and beliefs is limited, however, the testimony of her family strongly suggests her religious piety. In *Memoir*, JEAL

writes, “She was thoroughly religious and devout; fearful of giving offence to God, and incapable of feeling it towards any fellow creature. On serious subjects she was well-instructed, both by reading and meditation, and her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church” (141).

In addition to the difficulty in ascertaining Jane’s personal beliefs either from biographical accounts or from her letters, scholars note the lack of explicit references to religious belief in her novels and thus infer that religion is absent. Yet Jane’s religious background would suggest that religion played a significant role in her life and therefore flowed into her work. In his article “Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England,” Michael Giffin suggests that Jane is often perceived as secular because modern readers have lost sight of her Georgian context. The Victorian period that followed Jane’s writing disdained the Georgian society of which she was a product. Hostile toward both her society and also toward certain aspects of its Christianity, the Victorians read her secularly, obscuring the religiosity of her novels in their own perception and subsequently in future reception of them. In opposition to this artificial approach to interpreting Austen’s works, Giffin argues that an interpretation must recognize that religion was central enough to Georgian society that it is impossible to separate Jane’s religiosity from her writing. Jane wrote in a religious context from which stemmed her beliefs about the world.

The practice of the Church of England in Jane’s day fell between Enlightenment Rationalism and emerging Evangelicalism. Rationalism produced an approach to religion driven by faith in God and the exercise of human reason. Evangelicalism, on the other hand, tended to be more zealous in practice, emphasizing conversion and new life in Christ. Jane was influenced by Evangelicalism and found herself drawn to some of the ideas of the movement, but she most

definitely did not convert to it; consequently, she cultivated a religious piety characterized by moderation, something of a compromise between Rationalism and the religious fervor of Evangelicalism (Wheeler 406). In a chapter about Jane's religious context, Gary Kelly summarizes the Anglicanism of her time:

> The central doctrine of Anglican theology asserts that God has knowledge of predestination to salvation but that individuals still have free will to be saved or damned, that good works are useful but true faith matters more, and that neither faith nor works can guarantee salvation without the intervention of grace, or divine power, infusing the individual life and actions. (163)

Jane's handling of religion in her novels is consistent with her moderate religious philosophy.

Jane Austen's family instructed her in Anglican doctrine and instilled in her the importance of religion. Her father and grandfather were priests, and several uncles, cousins, and two of her brothers were clergymen as well; at their hands, Jane received extensive religious instruction. Training for clergymen consisted of a general course of study: before seminaries, clergy received a normal education supplemented with a selection of established theological texts (Collins, *Parson's Daughter* 46). George Austen, her father, was educated at Oxford, where he would have been trained in Enlightenment thought (19-20). George Austen would have understood the world in terms of God's sovereignty over a universe governed by natural laws, in which man can please God by exercising reason and living according to biblical principles.

George Austen's religion was much more than a vocation to him. Records show that he was active in his duties, rarely having anyone fill in for him at the pulpit and performing all the clerical obligations in his town (45). Though he gave rigorous attention to the needs of his town, his religious care centered first on his family. George trained his children to attend church

regularly and to practice spiritual disciplines. Evangelicals, who focused on conversion and transformation, accused Christian parents of focusing as much on preparing their children for life on earth as for the afterlife; this was doubtless somewhat descriptive of George Austen's instruction (56). He showed great concern that his children maintain proper religious practice. A letter he sent to his son Frank upon his departure for the navy exemplifies this concern; George wrote, "The first & most important of all considerations to a human Being is Religion" (45). His attention to religious observance did not prove too strict, however; he went on to exhort Frank to pray diligently, but he recognized that sometimes time would allow only a short prayer and deemed this acceptable (48). George was devout in practice and belief but was not overly harsh in his religious instruction, impressing upon his children the importance of religion in daily living.

Growing up under his influence, Jane learned the devout but reserved Anglican approach to Christian life. Life for the Austens was guided by this principle: live in harmony with God and man, and personal fulfillment will follow (50). Life should not be lived recklessly in pursuit of pleasure; reason, common sense, and moderation were to guide religious practice, in keeping with Enlightenment ideas (54). If George Austen and the clergymen of his time saw value in reason and common sense being applied to biblical principles, it makes sense that they would live and teach a very practical Christianity. This type of Christianity is precisely what a reader finds in Jane Austen's novels.

Some contend that Jane Austen should have been more outspokenly religious in her novels; yet her restraint coincides with that of the Anglicanism of Georgian England. In *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, Irene Collins suggests that "the austerity of the Anglican worship of the time, and of the surroundings in which it took place" may explain Jane's lack of direct

engagement with Christian ideologies in her writing (181). In keeping with the cultural context in which she lived, Jane portrayed Christianity as she would have experienced it.

Understanding the context in which Jane Austen formed her religious beliefs and practice allows the reader to recognize that, though subtle in accordance with the customs of her day, religion plays an indispensable role in Jane Austen's writing. Jane represented the values that her religious belief and her society supported; yet she takes morality farther than simple conformity to societal conventions. Collins points out that Jane differentiates between manners and morals in her novels (148-149). Plenty of characters in her novels showed good manners and adhered to the rules of society yet were by no means admirable characters. The character qualities she portrayed positively in her novels are not simply the conventions of her society coming through—she most definitely held beliefs about character that ran deeper than what would have been expected in a person's manners.

Jane's writing evidences a strong moral philosophy. She believed life was to be lived redemptively, not for pleasure, but unselfishly. She was not against engaging in pleasurable diversions when they were wholesome and enjoyed in moderation, but she was against living for pleasure (164). For Jane, religion influenced daily living. Religious observance was a fixed part of life; regular church attendance, for example, was so important to her that on occasions of missing Sunday evening church, she made a point to inform Cassandra in her letters that devotional time had been held at home (192). Beyond formal religious observance, Jane expected religious piety to be reflected in conduct. JEAL mentions on several occasions throughout his *Memoir* that she attended to the needs of those who were sick or impoverished, a practice that appears in her novels as well. If one practiced religion publicly, Jane expected that the individual live accordingly. She held herself and others to a moral standard.

Jane's convictions, arguably stemming from her religion and sense of morality, motivated her to critique societal conditions that she saw as problematic and in need of alteration (160-161). For instance, the arranging of marriages receives much attention in her novels, as she clearly had concerns with some of the customary ways of approaching marriage. In *Sense and Sensibility*, she highlights the distasteful attitudes various members of society hold toward marriage: Mrs. Ferrars's favor rests on her son only if he marries a woman with enough money to match his social standing, Mrs. Jennings promotes the idea of marriage to Colonel Brandon based on the appeal of his wealth, and Willoughby abandons Marianne to marry a wealthy woman he does not love.

A more personal example of Jane's societal concerns coming through in her novels is found in the situation at the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility* in which Henry Dashwood passes away and leaves virtually everything to his son, leaving his widow and daughters in near poverty. This situation echoes the struggle Jane, Cassandra, and Mrs. Austen faced when George Austen became ill and eventually died. Circumstances such as these in Jane's life made her aware of the struggle of women trying to support themselves in society, as her situation as a single woman transformed her writing from a hobby to a necessity. Discussing the challenges facing a woman author in Jane's time, Jan Fergus explains that women who wrote for profit were looked down upon (14). Yet in the middling and upper classes in the eighteenth century, writing was one of the only ways a woman could make money (17-18). Jane's success as a writer came with great effort, and she certainly felt the pressure placed on women in her society to marry for financial security. The struggle of the Dashwood women to support themselves in a society where women could not easily do so excites the sympathies of the reader. In these and many

other examples, Jane wrote about the things that were important to her in order to draw attention to those elements of society that needed to be reformed.

Though her criticism of societal issues hints at her standard of morality, her development of virtues in her characters both provides the strongest evidence of her deeply held religious convictions and shows synthesis between Neoclassical and Romantic philosophies. Jane upholds classical virtues in her writings in accordance with Neoclassical thought. However, in *Jane Austen's Philosophy of the Virtues*, Sarah Emsley argues that while Jane does present the classical virtues, her morality stems from a personal faith and not simply pure adherence to tradition. Jane's writing goes deeper than simply portraying virtue, instead showing how characters grow through the challenge of balancing virtues—of balancing extremes (10). Her characters experience the struggles of life and must cope by cultivating good character, which often means struggling to act as they should and eventually learning to temper one virtue with another. Jane also departs from a traditional view of virtue as pertaining only to women and their modesty and chastity by broadening virtue to qualities that both men and women should develop (3). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane incorporates virtues consistent both with traditional virtues and biblical principles through themes of character, love, repentance, and grace.

In her novels, Jane never preaches a sermon; rather, she uses her characters' engagement in the world to develop their character with wisdom and discernment through balance. Characters grow in wisdom as they navigate the challenges of life. For Marianne, wisdom meant recognizing that her spontaneous expression of her feelings needed to be tempered by self-control and caution. For Mrs. Dashwood, it meant recognizing her "imprudence" in encouraging her daughter's "folly" (Austen 183; ch. 47). For Elinor, wisdom came in balancing her prudence and reserve with the need to speak at the proper time. After containing all her thoughts and

feelings about Edward and Lucy's engagement for months with no release, she is finally able to express herself to Edward toward the end of the novel, saying his conduct toward her while engaged to Lucy was "certainly very wrong" (191, ch. 49). Jane's characters learn from their mistakes and grow in character in response to the people and circumstances influencing their lives.

Character development in Jane's novels reflects the classic virtues of antiquity, but it also contains traces of the fruit of the Spirit spoken of in Scripture (*English Standard Version*, Galatians 5.22-23). Following her heartbreak at the hands of Willoughby, Marianne finds *love* for Colonel Brandon and restored *joy* as her heart heals. Mrs. Dashwood, initially wracked by anxiety and worry over their situation, finds a greater sense of *peace* as the novel progresses. Colonel Brandon is the picture of *patience* and *kindness*, waiting for a long period of time for Marianne to return his affections and caring for her in the meantime. Edward's *goodness* shows as he remains *faithful* to Lucy despite his heart's desire for Elinor. Elinor, *gentle* in the company of many indiscreet and forceful women, practices *self-control* in the face of trying circumstances. The character qualities that Jane portrays as praiseworthy align with biblical principles for godliness.

Perhaps the strongest force in the novel is love. Sacrificial love reigns in the novel, beginning with Elinor's care for Marianne in the midst of her own grief. When Marianne finally becomes aware of Elinor's heartache, Elinor explains, "While the comfort of others was dear to me, I was glad to spare them from knowing how much I felt" (Austen 136; ch. 37). While Elinor's conduct showed excessive reticence, her motivation for it was founded upon her love for her family. Though *Sense and Sensibility* is most definitely a love story, Rachel M. Brownstein points out that at the very end of the novel, Jane draws attention back to the familial affection

(48-49). The bond of love present in the sisters' relationship nearly outshines the romantic love in the novel. Love manifests itself in other relationships as well. In Scripture, Jesus commanded, "'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" and throughout the novel, Elinor also shows love, quite literally, to her neighbors, maintaining civility and good manners toward Sir John and Lady Middleton, Mrs. Jennings, and the other acquaintances whose company often became tiresome (Matthew 22.39). In the midst of her own despair over Lucy's confession and Marianne's lack of concern for socializing politely with their company, Elinor maintains good manners and respectfully engages with their community, no matter how wearisome the effort became to her (Austen; ch. 23). Colonel Brandon also models Christ-like love, first in caring for the orphaned daughter of his lost love despite any inconvenience to him or the rumors it sparked concerning his past (ch. 31). He continues his pattern of selfless love as he sets his affections on Marianne, enduring the pain of seeing her with Willoughby and sacrificially serving her in her time of need despite her prior disregard for him (ch. 45). The law of love set forth in Scripture is demonstrated in the actions of Jane's most admirable characters.

The key element in the growth and maturation of each character in Jane Austen's novels is repentance. Mary Augusta Austen-Leigh deems repentance "a natural and indispensable part of the plot" (68). Without repentance, characters like Marianne would never experience positive outcomes of the trials they face. Marianne does exhibit the greatest amount of repentance in the novel. She is ultimately ashamed of her behavior and desires to cultivate increased discretion in her relationships. When Marianne discovers that Elinor has long been aware of Edward's engagement, she is mortified at her lack of sensitivity toward her sister (Austen 136; ch. 37). Following her terrible illness that might have resulted in her death, Marianne shows an altered perspective and a resolve to conduct herself differently, saying, "[M]y feelings shall be governed

and my temper improved (180; ch. 46). Marianne's change of heart evidences Jane Austen's belief in the importance of repentance.

Repentance not only redeems the protagonist but also serves to justify, to some degree, the villain. The scoundrel Willoughby has behaved shamefully, from his immorality and abandonment of Eliza to his conduct toward Marianne both before and after his engagement to Miss Grey. Willoughby shows no caution in his relationships and misuses the women in his life, making him a character worth despising. Yet as Marianne lies ill, Willoughby makes a shocking appearance at the house where they are staying, seeking to talk to Elinor about all that had transpired (ch. 44). In Willoughby's account of his actions, Elinor hears the sorrow he feels for the way he mistreated Marianne. He did indeed love her, yet he chose to marry another for wealth; his greedy and selfish decision has brought him great remorse. He seems to display a repentant heart and a desire to make things right—if at all possible—with Marianne, begging Elinor, "Tell her of my misery and my penitence" (171; ch. 44). Repentance reaches the hearts of characters of all calibers in Jane's novels, working redemption in even the messiest of situations.

A significant Christian element of Jane Austen's novels exists not in the characters themselves but rather in Jane's dealings with them, for she shows grace in her treatment of her characters. Reflective of the Anglican doctrinal focus of her day, Jane does not emphasize conversion and a transformed life (a more Evangelical perspective of religion); instead, she causes each of her main characters to grow gradually in character. Jane's characters are not dichotomized into wicked and good, or even portrayed as wicked turned good; all characters have strengths and weaknesses. Jane recognizes the fallibility of all her characters as well as their potential, and she deals mercifully with her them. This merciful stance is evidence of the balance her faith strikes between Neoclassicism and Romanticism, for she does not severely chastise

those who exhibit behavior contrary to classical virtues. Nevertheless, she does not permit free expression of feelings; instead, she cultivates improved character. In an article about the theology of the novel, Kathleen James-Cavan suggests that Marianne should have died from her illness based on her brash behavior throughout the novel, and yet she does not die—in fact, she is given what most would consider a happy ending in her marriage to Colonel Brandon. Brownstein explains this divergence from a Neoclassical approach further, observing that in its dealings with its main characters, "*Sense and Sensibility* corrects the typical didactic emphasis by refusing to choose between Marianne and Elinor. While the action of the novel is mediated by the consciousness of the prudent sister, the narrative rewards both equally" (43). Jane takes a sympathetic approach to her characters' moral development, showing grace that models the grace shown by God toward His children.

In character, love, repentance, grace, and numerous other principles, Jane synthesizes traditional virtues and biblical principles that emanate from her personal convictions and sincerely held religious belief. Readers and scholars will never be able to know Jane Austen as well as they would like; and while her novels do not overtly preach the gospel, the themes of Christianity run so deep in her stories that to ignore her religiosity ignores the reality that her work is the product of her Georgian context, her family's firmly established Anglican belief and practice, and her own moral standards. Her religiosity reveals the motivation behind her endearing stories and illumines her purpose in crafting her delightful novels.

Jane Austen's religion highlights the transitional nature of her works as they mediate between Neoclassical thought of the past and budding Romanticism. *Sense and Sensibility* explores the nuances of religion lived out in daily life and shows evidence of a religious belief situated between two eras. Jane's beliefs incorporated Romantic approaches into the traditional

Anglicanism which was deeply ingrained in her, producing novels which began to let go of past approaches to writing and set the stage for the literature of the era to come.

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