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Jane Austen: A Study on the Influences, World, and Character of an Eighteenth-Century Novelist

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Abstract

Jane Austen is one of the most influential authors in history and her works are regarded as timeless classics. Her ability to harness the motif of the strong, independent woman in a time when society wanted women to have neither attribute is incomparable in contemporary works. This article examines Austen's life and the variety of factors (family, religious, intellectual, historical) that molded her mind and character and thus informed the characters she created and the stories she crafted.

Keywords

Jane Austen, English Literature, English Literary History, Regency England, Women's Studies

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Jane Austen:
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"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."[1] It is likewise a truth universally acknowledged that few authors have left behind such an impact on the Western world as Jane Austen. Her ability to harness the motif of the strong, independent woman in a time when society wanted women to have neither attribute is incomparable in contemporary works. Austen's bold claim invites the question: what makes this statement a truth? What makes it universally acknowledgeable? Few things are truly acknowledged by all, so how could Austen make such a claim? Was such a statement reflective of her time and culture, or merely of Austen herself? These questions arise when reading through Austen's numerous works, for although they are fictional, they still impart information about the author and her context. Details seep through the text communicating Jane's perspective on the sexes, marriage, families, religion, and, to a lesser extent, politics. In order to ascertain the origins of her beliefs, one must understand the course her life took.

Born on December 16, 1775, Jane Austen would grow up in a large, close-knit family of ten in a time of immense intellectual change, on the very brink of political upheaval.[2] The majority of her life was spent in the throes of revolutionary tensions, ranging from the effects of the American and French Revolutions to the Napoleonic Wars and even to riots on the home front.[3] Jane was far from ignorant of these circumstances, growing up in a household that valued education for all its members, enjoying schooling at her father's knee as well as a brief time in boarding school. She was the youngest of two daughters and the seventh of eight children in the Austen household. Her elder sister, Cassandra, would remain one of her closest companions throughout her lifetime, and it would be Cassandra that would construct the narrative of Jane

[1] Jane Austen, *Pride & Prejudice* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2015), 1.
[2] Paula Byrne, *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), 16.
[3] Roy Adkins & Leslie Adkins, *Jane Austen's England* (New York: Viking, 2013), xvii-xix.

Austen after her sister's passing in 1817.[4] Five of Jane's brothers were older, with one younger brother four years her junior. All of the Austen siblings appear to have gotten along amicably, enjoying each other's company and staying closely knit even after beginning their own households. Jane was very close to her nieces and nephews, spending time with them and sending letters, among other writings, that they took care to preserve. One of her great-nephews, Edward Hugessen Knatchbull-Hugessen, Lord Brabourne, was not born until well after a decade following her death. In his collection of her letters, he begins the first chapter by saying:

> I was unfortunately debarred from that personal acquaintance with her . . . I feel, however, that I have some claim to undertake the task which I am about to commence, from the fact that my mother, the eldest daughter of the Edward Austin . . . was the favourite niece of Aunt Jane, and that the latter's name has been a household word in my family from the earliest period of my recollection.[5]

During her lifetime, Jane published four novels – *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma* – with an additional two manuscripts published after her death – *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. All of these works were originally published anonymously, with only posthumous credit given to Jane. Throughout the years, several additional unpublished works have been uncovered and released to the public, including *Sandition*, *Lady Susan*, and *The Watsons*. While Jane was a prolific letter writer, especially in her correspondence with Cassandra, few original and unaltered copies survive. After Jane's death, Cassandra went through the letters, taking care to burn or edit out the information she did not want to become part of Jane Austen's narrative. This action leaves historians with little more to study than Jane's fictional works, as the non-fiction writings that survive were selected by Cassandra with her clear agenda.

[4] Janet Todd, ed., *Jane Austen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3.

[5] Jane Austen, *Letters of Jane Austen*, ed. Edward Hugessen Knatchbull-Hugessen Lord Brabourne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1-2.

Although her death at the age of only forty-one left behind several unpublished works and little fame, it can be argued that few female authors have had such a pronounced impact on Western society as Jane herself. Never to leave her homeland of England, the names Darcy and Emma Woodhouse still ring with familiarity the world over; no more traveled soul could have dreamed of leaving such a mark. Yet it is not the aim of this research to discuss the effect of her works on the world; rather, the impacts of the turn of the 19th century on Jane Austen herself will be discovered. In a time when intellectual movements of philosophy and religion intertwined with political revolutions, none could be left unscathed, certainly not a young woman as intelligent as Jane proved herself to be. Jane Austen's legacy has been debated for decades, and it is clear that the intellectual, political, and religious influences of her life must be gleaned from the minutiae of her writings, to properly understand it.

A young Jane, learning to read and write for the first time in the 1770s and 1780s, would have grown up amidst the smoking gun left in the wake of Enlightenment's shot through Europe. Ripping through the loose seam first torn by the Reformation, the thoughts – accepted for centuries – that formed the basis for European society were mortally wounded, leaving behind doorways for new movements, writings, and characters. No one could predict the events that followed, shaking the accepted way of life from its pedestal. It was into this world that Jane Austen came of age. The education provided to her by her father and brothers was remarkable for the day, more so that it included time spent with her sister Cassandra at boarding school. When finances grew tight, her father ensured that education continued. He regularly took in a handful of boys as students every year, who Jane may have learned beside, utilizing the same materials.[6] His expansive library was also open to every member of the family to access,

[6] Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen's Country Life* (London: Francis Lincoln Limited, 2014), 46-47.

enabling Jane to read everything from plays by "writers like Isaac Bickerstaffe, Susannah Centlivre, Hannah Cowley, Henry Fielding, David Garrick and Richard Brinsley Sheridan" to serious, "Gothic fiction" that included "*The Midnight Bell* (1798) by Francis Lathom . . . *Arthur Fitz Albini* (1798) a novel by Sir Samuel Egerton Brydges."[7] Through a constant rotation of books in the library during her formative years, Jane's tastes were diverse, allowing her to pen comedies, tragedies, and contemporary pieces alike and giving her a solid foundation for literary criticism.

As Jane grew, her choice of reading materials would have become more refined. Several prominent Enlightenment philosophers and writers, including Wollstonecraft, Rousseau, and Hume, were impossible to ignore at the close of the 18th century, making it likely that Jane read their works. The works of classical philosophers, such as Aristotle, would have also been familiar to her, educated as she was. "Whately was not alone in distinguishing the central features of the new novel as fine observation and a deep concern for probability, but he based his high claims for Jane Austen on Aristotle's idea that mastery of the probable is a guarantee of insight into the way things work."[8] Although the number of published works by women paled in comparison to men – Jane herself had to publish her books anonymously – more and more women were finding their voice in the public sphere as education and publishing opportunities expanded. In light of the beliefs introduced by the Enlightenment regarding freedom and slavery, women's rights began to form into an organized movement with supporters from both genders. As Jennine Hurl-Eamon explained,

> It was not long before the arguments against enslavement were connected with the rhetoric on female subordination. As early as 1706, England's Mary Astell asked

[7] Jane Stabler, "Literary Influences," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 41.

[8] Peter Knox-Shaw, "Philosophy," in Jane *Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 346.

> pointedly, 'If all men are born free, how is it that all women are born slaves?' Though herself a conservative, Astell's words took on their own life and joined those of others throughout the century who pointed out the hypocrisy of treatises expounding rights to men but denying them to women.[9]

Midway through Jane's life, in 1792 when she was seventeen years old, one of the first pieces of literature penned by a woman on the subject of women's rights was published. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, written by Mary Wollstonecraft, would shake the existing gender roles of Europe and has been lauded as the first piece of feminist literature by successive historians. A radical in her time, she firmly believed in the equality of women and men; she would only marry her lover, William Godwin, to ensure the legitimacy of her second child, Mary, who would in her own right cement a position in history when she published her first novel, *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*. In the very first pages of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft stated,

> Contending for the rights of women, my main argument is built on this simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice. And how can woman be expected to co-operate unless she know why she ought to be virtuous? Unless freedom strengthen her reason till she comprehend her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with real good? If children are to be educated to understand the true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an ordinary train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman, at present, shuts her out from such investigations.[10]

She continues in this vein for the entirety of her work, which would prove so popular that it required a second edition within a year of the first publishing. A frequent subject of scorn in the book is Rousseau himself, a figure who influenced Jane, yet held very low views on the

[9] Jennine Hurl-Eamon, *Women's Roles in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2010), xiii.

[10] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol H. Poston (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988), 4.

female sex. When speaking on femininity and motherhood, Wollstonecraft wrote, "The mother, who wishes to give true dignity of character to her daughter, must, regardless of the sneers of ignorance, proceed on a plan diametrically opposite to that which Rousseau has recommended with all the deluding charms of eloquence and philosophical sophistry: for his eloquence renders absurdities plausible, and his dogmatic conclusions puzzle, without convincing, those who have not ability to refute them."[11] One can only imagine how a book of such unrepentant bluntness could have affected the teenage Jane, on the very cusp of womanhood in a time that would see her education and intelligence as an impediment. No direct evidence exists recording Jane's familiarity with the work; however, a consideration of Jane's personality and circumstance makes it unlikely she would have missed it. Jane's books contain the repeated motif of "the importance of female education to these social groups and particularly to their material interests in an age of revolutionary change."[12]

Such a perspective on women's education would have glaringly opposed the works of Rousseau, who, in the most famous of his works, *The Social Contract*, writes on inalienable sovereignty and the rights of men. He begins his treatise with the bold statement, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they."[13] Rousseau goes on, proclaiming that, "To renounce liberty is to renounce being a man, to surrender the rights of humanity and even its duties."[14] He concludes the first book of *The Social Contract* by writing:

> I shall end this chapter and this book by remarking on a fact on which the whole social system should rest: i.e., that, instead of destroying natural inequality, the

[11] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 41.

[12] Gary Kelly, "Education and Accomplishments," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 252.

[13] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract: Or Principles of Political Right*, trans. G.D.H. Cole (Digireads.com, 2009). Loc. 39-40.

[14] Ibid., Loc. 133.

> fundamental compact substitutes, for such physical inequality as nature may have set up between men, an equality that is moral and legitimate, and that men, who may be unequal in strength or intelligence, become every one equal by convention and legal right.[15]

When contemporaries and historians alike looked at these words, they could not help but see the irony in Rousseau only speaking of men, when women were in the very enslaved condition he so vehemently opposed. This was the very subject Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in response to, one that she addresses throughout the book. Jane, while never outright responding to Rousseau's writing, shows through the thematic elements of her works how women are subject to securing a good marriage. The partnership, based far more on external circumstances such as wealth and titles than on internal feelings of love, would determine the course of the woman's life as well as her ability to support any female relatives in need. Laws preventing women from holding jobs, retaining their own funds, and inheriting in the same manner as their brothers ensured that women would be enslaved to the whims of men for the foreseeable future. A future for an independent woman in this time was, therefore, quite bleak, a fear that Jane ensures looms heavily over many of her protagonists throughout their stories.

Jane's books go further than merely demonstrating the reality of life for women, which is a fairly simple task for a writer of her caliber, extending to serving as metaphors and experiments in the manner of David Hume. In her book *Mirrors to One Another: Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume*, professor E. M. Dadlez demonstrates the connections she discovered between Hume's philosophy and Jane's books. She begins by explaining her research, summarizing her thesis:

> My own contention about Hume and Austen isn't simply that Austen provides us with illustrations of Hume's ethical stance . . . I would like to establish further,

[15] Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, Loc. 339, 344.

> beyond these initial parallels, that Austen's novels may be regarded as thought experiments that *demonstrate* . . . something about the kind of moral reasoning that Hume advocates, that engage us in that rational/emotional process as part and parcel of our imaginative participation in the work.[16]

Dadlez continues throughout her book to demonstrate these connections, showing how Hume's philosophy likely influenced Jane at some point in her life; at the very least, it made enough of an impact to reside within her subconscious. Peter Knox-Shaw explains, "For Hume . . . it was precisely in the society around them that the proof of moral activity and the key to its workings lay."[17] Humean influences on Jane can be most clearly seen in her published works in *Northanger Abbey* in the characters of Catherine and Henry Tilney.

> This stress on the importance (and difficulty) of attuning the mind to context is highly reminiscent of Hume and Smith, and the same tradition points to the normality of the imaginative acts that go in Catherine's all-consuming pursuit of the one idea. Indeed, unlike the delusions of other quixotic heroines, Catherine's fantasies reveal a natural process of growth – one that corresponds to Hume's remarks on how an irrational and universal 'propensity to believe' generates a momentum of its own, so that 'any train of thinking is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by its oars, carriers on its course.'[18]

The comparisons do not end there, for the similarities between Hume and Jane nearly exceed any other influence on her works. While scholars have claimed that Jane was heavily influenced by Aristotle, the evidence is weak. "Austen's conception of happiness seems rather closer to a Humean or modern one than to an Aristotelian one: it includes pleasure as more than a

[16] E. M. Dadlez, *Mirrors to One Another: Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume* (Chichester: Wiley & Blackwell, 2009), 7.

[17] Peter Knox-Shaw, "Philosophy," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 347.

[18] Ibid., 350.

byproduct of activity, and deploys that term in a manner broad enough to include some conceptions of human flourishing."[19]

A core influence in Jane's life from the moment of her birth was religion. Her father, a vicar, was one of Jane's closest companions. As the child of a minister, Jane was intimately tied to the church and spent a large portion of her time in religious circles. The Anglicanism that formed the foundation for her upbringing inevitably influenced her education and her lifelong perspective on women's education.

> Austin's avoidance overt didacticism and extremes in her novelistic treatment of education may owe less to conscious artistry than to her religious education. Anglican theology held that human sinfulness could only be redeemed by free will exercised for good and sanctioned by divine grace. Like contemporaries from Wollstonecraft to More, Austin believed that an educated mind was necessary for this task. As a Christian and Anglican, however, Austin rejected more reformist contemporaries' view that education or 'Enlightenment' could eventually create a humanly made paradise on earth; equally she rejects the common conduct-book doctrine that education would at best help women endure the inevitable miseries of female life and at worst inspire unachievable and thus affliction aspirations.[20]

While Jane was as far removed from the Reformation as readers are to her in the 21st century, the ramifications of the religious developments it instigated for women in Great Britain were extremely relevant to her everyday life. Roger Moore, a historian who researched this very subject, saw in Jane's works "The type of nostalgia . . . which was central to Austen, concerns the impact of the loss of historic English religious houses on English life."[21] C.S. Lewis, in a short essay on Jane Austen, identified within her writings the unconscious religious thought patterns she possessed:

> Here the very vocabulary of the passage strikes a note unfamiliar in Jane Austen's style. It makes explicit, for once, the religious background of the author's ethical position. Hence such theological or nearly theological words as *penitence*, even the *torture of penitence, amendment, self-destruction, my God*. And though not all

[19] Dadlez, *Mirrors to One Another*, 58.
[20] Kelly, "Education and Accomplishments," 259-260.
[21] Roger E. Moore, *Jane Austen and the Reformation* (London: Routledge, 2016), 23.

> younger readers may at once recognize it, the words *serious reflection* belong to the same region. In times which men now in their fifties can remember, the adjective *serious* . . . had religious overtones.[22]

The combination of these intellectual and religious developments in the 18th century led to immense changes in the perception of women and the way they were able to conduct their lives. Nunneries were no longer an option for unwed women or troublesome daughters, making it more commonplace for spinsters to be seen participating in society, rather than on the fringes. A new marriage law, led by Lord Hardwicke and announced in 1753, "decreed that after 25 March 1754 marriages were valid in law only if they had been advertised by banns or sanctioned by a special license and were conducted by an Anglican clergyman in a church."[23] Under this Marriage Act, women were still given no legal status, for "as a wife, she could not legally own land or have a separate source of income, unless set out in a specific contract – the marriage settlement."[24] Further restrictions on clandestine marriages and elopements proved a direct inspiration for Jane, who in *Pride and Prejudice* wrote of young Lydia Bennett running away with Mr. Wickham to Gretna Green, a small town in Scotland known for performing ceremonies with no questions asked.[25] The characters in Jane's works lived in conjunction with the morals of their time, which were themselves determined by the Church of England.

As distinctions in gender and biological sex were being identified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, strict gender roles began to be enforced throughout Britain. Contemporary writings by figures including John Knox (*The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*) and William Gouge (*Of Domesticall Duties*) "point quite clearly to the

[22] C.S. Lewis, "A Note on Jane Austen" in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), 27.
[23] Adkins, *Jane Austen's England*, 5.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 13.

expectation that women in the early modern period and in Britain, in particular, should lead unobtrusive, inconsequential lives within the limitations of the domestic sphere and that they should, in effect, be passive actors on the social stage."[26] In *Persuasion*, Sophia chastises her brother, Frederick, for being dismissive of the capability of women to sail in comfort. "But I hate to hear you talking so like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures. We none of us expect to be in smooth water all our days."[27] This perspective of women as delicate creatures in need of protection was encouraged by their limited roles as wives and mothers. The image of women as exclusively maternal in 18th-19th century Europe sheds new perspectives on Jane's novels, and the mothers she includes in them. Mrs. Bennett, in particular, is probably the best-known mother figure of Jane's creation. Largely considered a silly woman, her actions gain a considerable amount of logic when viewed in the context of her circumstances. Mrs. Bennett was well-aware of the ticking clock on her and her daughters' fates with the inevitable death of Mr. Bennett; without a son, and without any close male relatives aside from Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennett had to ensure that her daughters were married off before their father passed in order to stabilize their futures. Aside from her own desperate situation without a son to provide for her, Mrs. Bennett knew her daughters' only chance at a good life was marriage; the knowledge that at least one would provide for her, if they were able, would have itself proven a comfort as well.

Viewed in the context of religious interpretations in the 18th-19th centuries, Jane's heavy focus on marriage and romance is interesting in contrast to her own spinsterhood. It cannot be

[26] Anne-Marie Kilday, "That Women Are But Men's Shadows," in *Gender in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, eds. Marianna G. Muravyeva and Raisa Maria Toivo (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54-55.

[27] Jane Austen, "Persuasion," in *The Complete Works of Jane Austen (In One Volume): Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, Emma, Northanger Abbey, Persuasion, Lady Susan, The Watson's, Sandition, and the Complete Juvenilia* (Engage Books, 2015), 603.

said that Jane opposed love and romance, for letters to her sister Cassandra record a flirtation with Tom Lefroy in 1796.[28] Nothing would come of the relationship, for although attraction was present, it would have been an impractical match financially and socially. Six years later, Jane would accept a marriage proposal from her childhood friend Harris Bigg-Wither, only to recant the acceptance the following morning.[29] The reason for the abrupt acceptance and rejection is not known, but reasons can be inferred through her descriptions of love made in her writings. "It is a remarkable incident," writes historian Jan Fergus of the situation, "For she knew that, in refusing him, she was unlikely ever to have a home of her own. Her father was over seventy, and comparative poverty threatened. But as she later wrote to a niece, 'Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection.'"[30] Jane was not without other suitors, but little information on these men survives; whether this is due to Cassandra's curation of her sister's letters, or a mere lack of recording on Jane's part, is debatable. Nevertheless, Jane never married, choosing instead to spend her days with her family and traveling across England. The greatest hardship faced by spinsters was financial, as they were entirely dependent on male relatives for provision. In a letter "to her niece Fanny Knight in March 1817," she wrote, "Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor, which is one very strong argument in favor of matrimony."[31]

The romance of her works, while undoubtedly the main plotline, is only a portion of the story, the remainder driven by the friendships supporting the characters. A woman of Jane's standing would have been involved in the local social scene, and she references society

[28] Mary Ann O'Farrell, "Austin's Blush," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 27, no.2 (1994), 125.

[29] William Austen-Leigh & Richard Arthur Austen-Leigh, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 121.

[30] Jan Fergus, "Biography," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 8.

[31] Adkins, *Jane Austen's England*, 16. Includes an excerpt from a letter from Jane Austen to Fanny Knight, March 1817.

numerous times throughout her work. As the subjects of her works live within the lower echelons of high society, it would be dishonest to exclude the matter. Society, in Jane's world, was drastically different from the modern perspective, and has been defined as:

> 'Society' in these examples has nothing to do with conventions, laws, or traditions; perhaps its closest synonyms are 'company' or 'companionship.' Similarly, 'social' does not mean 'of or pertaining to the institutions of society' but 'gregarious' or, as we would now say it, 'sociable.' Far from being an abstraction, then, 'society' always suggests for Jane Austen the presence of other individuals with whom it is either a duty or pleasure to mix.[32]

To secure a match in society, connections were essential, and these bonds could be forged through the display of the accomplishments expected of women. These included proficiency in the arts, languages, and approved texts of the day, although they were becoming increasingly controversial. "Mary Wollstonecraft . . . argued that educating women to be 'accomplished' or 'notable' denied them the intellectual independence and moral self-discipline conferred by a professional education, thus leaving them an obstacle to social progress and reform."[33] In this Wollstonecraft was insightful, for although the young women entering society were skilled artists, dancers, and musicians, they lacked many of the more practical skills that would truly assist them in life. "Jane Austen would more than likely agree with Wollstonecraft's further argument that 'accomplishments' left women dependent on men's judgement and authority, consequently incapable of using God-given reason to guide desire to good rather than evil and therefore barred from spiritual salvation."[34] These expectations of accomplishments were unreasonable for all but the highest-bred women who had the time, resources, and disposable income to achieve accomplishment, thus securing themselves a match. In some circles, young

[32] James Sherry, "Pride and Prejudice: The Limits of Society," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 19, no. 4 (1979): 611.

[33] Kelly, "Education and Accomplishments," in *Jane Austen in Context*, 258.

[34] Ibid.

women falling short of this ideal would have likely faced ostracization from their peers and, in consequence, had immense difficulty in securing a husband.

Throughout the conceptual influences of intellectual movements and religious reformations, European society was facing battles fought in the streets as discontent boiled over into anarchy. The philosophical movements of the day, combined with the context of European politics, led many to revolt against the systems they believed had suffocated them for too long. Changing governments, fresh constitutions, and increased suffrage gave women hope that their fates may be changing in turn. The French Revolution completely upset the balance in Europe, bringing anxiety to every monarchy as they worked to preserve the stability of their nations. Jane was a member of the gentry, located for much of her life in the societal hubs of Steventon, Bath, and London, and so unable to escape the events occurring across the English Channel. The situation was made more real and immediate upon the marriage of Henry Austen to one Eliza de Feuillide, the Austens' cousin and widow of a French nobleman who had "met a brutal death on the guillotine, an event so shocking to the Austen family that according to Elizabeth Jenkins 'to the end of her life Jane had a horror of France.'"[35] Jane's familial ties to the unrest extended beyond France to the whole of the British Empire. "In India her father's half-sister formed close ties to Warren Hastings . . . Francis Austin, one of Jane's brothers, convoyed a fleet to India for the East India Company. Cassandra, her sister, was engaged to Thomas Fowle, a regimental chaplain who died in the West Indies of yellow fever in 1797 . . . Her sailor brothers, Francis and Charles, were active participants in the military struggle between Britain and France."[36] She was kept well-informed through letters, newspapers, and eyewitness accounts from her brothers

[35] Noel J. King, "Jane Austen in France," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 8, no. 1 (1953): 2.

[36] Warren Roberts, "Nationalism and Empire," in *Jane Austen in Contest*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 331-332.

abroad, to such a detailed extent that she was able to predict the outcomes of military engagements in Spain against Napoleon.[37]

War is not a core subject of any of Jane's books, but it is a looming specter in the background. This is most evident in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*. "In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, we are always aware of the presence of the army – Lydia Bennet is excited by a summer visit to Brighton where there will be 'a whole campful of soldiers' . . . Red coats certainly add colour to the novels and bring the prospect of romance, although the reality was not all regimental balls . . . The riotous behaviour in *Pride and Prejudice* when Lydia assists in the cross-dressing of a soldier provides a hunt of the kind of 'debauchery' Keats may have had in mind" when he wrote that he was "disgusted . . . with Government for placing such a nest of Debauchery in so beautiful a place."[38]

While constitutions were drafted and democracies enacted in response to these atrocities, most elements of British life remained the same. "The dominant order was based on agrarian landed property developed by capitalist practices of investment and improvement and managed by a variety of professions."[39] Of particular significance to Jane and her characters was the law of primogeniture, a cause and effect that can be seen in many of her works. Gary Kelly, in his essay on the educational context of Jane's world, summarized primogeniture as she would have known it:

> Stability of the family estate across generations was ensured by primogeniture, or inheritance by the fist son (rather than division of the estate among all the sons or all the children), and by entailing the estate, in default of a direct male heir, on the nearest male relative. Judging by her novels, Jane Austen had reservations about these practices. Women's interests were entirely subordinated by them, and women had few property rights in or outside marriage. Yet women were

[37] Roberts, "Nationalism and Empire," 332-333.

[38] Nicholas Roe, "Politics," in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 360-361.

[39] Kelly, "Education and Accomplishments," 253.

> necessary to successful transmission of such property from one generation of men to the next in three related ways – biological reproduction, capital investment and social culture – all directed by education.[40]

Most obviously, the regulations and concerns of inheritance can be seen in *Pride and Prejudice*. Throughout the book, Mrs. Bennett can be seen obsessing over seeing her six daughters married as quickly as possible to avoid them becoming destitute. At this point, the class system was about to enter a period of immense transition with the introduction of the working class through the birth of the Industrial Revolution. Here, Jane's characters exist in the lower echelons of high society; this is best exemplified by the character of Mr. Darcy. He has no title to speak of, yet he possesses great wealth and is offered respect by others generally only afforded to the titled aristocracy. This can be explained by his name, which is that of an old, moneyed family that, in the extremely traditionalist society of 18th century England, was far more deserving of respect and prominence than those who only recently gained a title.[41] Thus, although European nations were undergoing massive changes at the governmental levels, little changed within the hierarchies and established expectations of British society, with tradition holding firm even amid intellectual and political revolutions.

Where does all of this – the mental, spiritual, and social revolutions – leave Jane? As a female novelist in a time when women were discouraged from reading fiction at all, how could she have continued to write and publish her works? Due to this contemporary perspective, Jane's books saw only a fraction of the success during her lifetime that they would enjoy after her death. The subjects of her books were middling, falling neither into the extremes of poverty nor

[40] Kelly, "Education and Accomplishments," 254.

[41] Daniel Pool, *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist-The Facts of Daily Life in Nineteenth-Century England* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 36.

the prominence of high nobility. The central characters in each of her books demonstrate independence and intelligence little displayed in her time.

Jane Austen – in death more so than life – created the foundational narratives of romantic comedy in Western societies. As is the case with many great figures of history, Jane saw little success or fame for the works that would cement her as one of the greatest authors to ever live. The stories are so honest, genuine, and relatable that people in the 21st century, more than two hundred years after her death, can identify with her characters just as much as her contemporaries did. Why do her stories ring so true? What has made them remain a foundation of society when contemporary works have fallen into obscurity? What drove Jane to write the masterpieces of literature that, for many, equate to William Shakespeare in importance for the human race? Some call her a woman ahead of her time; conversely, she is rather a product of her time, enabled to write and publish her books only because of the circumstances and traditions to which she was born. Without the works of Wollstonecraft, Hume, and Kant; without the revolutions spanning continents; and without the reflections undertaken in religious understanding, Jane could not have produced her masterpieces. She wrote authentically, without restraint, of the world she inhabited, demonstrating women to be capable and intelligent beings. When women were being denied agency, having their ability to marry restricted, and having their roles in life limited to submissive wife and dutiful mother, Jane showed that they were capable of so much more.

Wollstonecraft challenged this perspective from a pedestal that spanned the country, calling for women to have equality with men. She criticized the male philosophers, politicians, and leaders who lived in hypocrisy by believing that all men are born free while restricting the freedom of women, limited as it was, even further.

> I may be accused of arrogance; still, I must declare what I firmly believe, that all the writers who have written on the subject of female education and manners from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, than they would otherwise have been; and, consequently, more useless members of society.[42]

Wollstonecraft is unashamed in her fiery critiques of other philosophers. "Rousseau declares that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a *sweeter* companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself."[43] She fervently believes that women can only be a true partner to men, equal in all things, spiritually mature, and a contributor to their household and family when they are properly educated, providing them with independence and self-reliance disparate from the men in their lives.

In comparison to the works of Rousseau, Jane's characters stand as the antithesis to his demands for equality and liberty for all men exclusively. The Bennett sisters are forced to secure husbands as quickly as possible when they come of age because they will otherwise be left destitute when the aged Mr. Bennett dies, for women could not inherit under British law. Hume espouses the demonstrability and acquisition of morality through observance of the world. This philosophy can be seen in several pieces of Jane's writing, most notably in *Northanger Abbey* as Catherine attempts to find answers to a single concept in her surroundings, an effort aided by Henry Tilney. Changing morality can be viewed in the character of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* as he learns to grow beyond the teachings of his youth to become a better person. Wollstonecraft, in contrast to the male Enlightenment philosophers of her day, writes in favor of women's liberty; this theme can be seen throughout Jane's works. Elizabeth Bennett turns down

[42] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 22.
[43] Ibid., 25.

two marriage proposals despite being in a desperate situation, demanding for herself a partner who respects her and loves her truly because she knows that is the only marriage in which she would flourish. The reader can see that, despite the fears and uncertainties of life after her father's passing, Elizabeth is prepared to be on her own rather than be imprisoned in a miserable marriage. It would be a difficult life, as Jane well knew, but through Elizabeth she clearly shows that it would not be the end of her life, for there is more that women can accomplish beyond raising children and running a home.

The religious shifts that began with the Reformation and continued through the Great Awakening likewise had their impacts on Jane. Women's existence, from the course of their life to their education and societal roles, were heavily influenced by the Church of England. Without nunneries, spinsters were more present in society, but had one less option for financial stability should male relatives fail to provide. Religion was central to British society, an expectation for every individual to participate fully in, but it had been undergoing immense transition since the time of the Reformation. The additional factors of the Enlightenment and Great Awakening were leading to even more change in the perception of the Church and the understandings of Scripture. Jane's life was far more intertwined with religion than most, as her father was a vicar and her brother Henry entered religious service as well. As such, religion became exceptionally important to her; however, it appears in her writing infrequently, and mainly through veiled references.[44] This does not imply that religion was unimportant to Jane, but rather something she likely treasured privately. Perhaps Jane's faith was something so intrinsic to her being that there was no need to speak of it, for any who knew her would have known its place in her life. This cannot be known for certain as no materials survive to speak of it, but her beliefs can be inferred

[44] Lesley Willis, "Religion in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 13, no. 1 (March 1987), 66.

from her surviving letters and books. Scholar Lesley Willis, in her research on Jane and religion, notes the glimmers of insight provided in several of her works, including *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*. It is in her study of *Pride and Prejudice* that the clearest indication of Jane's perspective on faith is found.

> After the revelations of Darcy's letter, Elizabeth reflects that she has never seen 'any thing that spoke him of irreligious or immoral habits' (207) – a judgement that lends itself to the possibility of interpretation in terms a mere ethical system. But when Darcy, at the end of the novel, says he feels that the letter was written in 'dreadful bitterness of spirit,' Elizabeth replies: 'The letter, perhaps, began in bitterness, but it did not end so. The adieu is charity itself' (368). The adieu is 'I will only add, God bless you' (203); and the fact she has registered this so deeply tells us much about Elizabeth – and about Jane Austen.[45]

From this excerpt, we can see that as simple a statement as "God bless you" held vast importance for Jane. The concept of God's blessing, combined with the care of an individual to wish it upon her, was enough to determine her measure of an individual's character. In Elizabeth's case, it was enough for her to overlook the emotion of the beginning of Darcy's letter and come to terms with him despite their disagreements. In the end, the couple comes together in understanding to find love and companionship, which itself demonstrates, according to Michael Giffin, the principle of *soteria,* or salvation. *Soteria* "has a variety of meanings including: wholeness, healthy, preservation from disease, and self-knowledge."[46] Giffin argues that "it is the physical (and emotional) senses of *soteria* that dominates her novels. Each novel is about achieving the physical *soteria* of its characters and communities."[47] This observation is astute, for each of Jane's novels does cycle the characters through a journey to arrive at their symbolic salvation; as exemplified in *Pride and Prejudice,* Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are married, and her

[45] Willis, "Religion in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," 67.

[46] Michael Giffin, "Jane Austen and Religion: Salvation and Society in Georgian England," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal Online* 23, no. 1 (2002).

[47] Giffin, "Jane Austen and Religion."

family's fortunes are saved. However, it did take a long path of learning and growth for the couple to arrive at their happy ending, one filled with hurt and uncertainty. In much the same way as individuals must become convinced of their sinful state and reach out, of their own free will, to receive salvation through Christ, so too did Elizabeth and Darcy need to acknowledge their, aptly named, pride and prejudice to overcome them and fully accept their love for one another. They had to experience the discomfort of acknowledging their faults and mistakes to receive the reward of a healthy and loving relationship. As can be seen in the book, this was not a necessity or common expectation for marriages in Jane's day, for marriages of convenience were extremely practical. Elizabeth and Darcy manage to overcome this cultural perception of marriage and, by doing so, receive the reward of a loving marriage, which was no small thing.

Finally, no one could live at the turn of the 19th century without being exposed to the political revolutions sweeping through the Western world. Jane, located in the hotbeds of genteel society in England, was kept well-informed of the revolutionary events occurring throughout the British Empire. Through newspapers, letters, and family members she was able to follow the situations as they unfolded, ranging from colonial interests to battles against Napoleon. The revolutions demanded far more than bloodshed as they cried out for governmental and societal reforms in equality, education, and economics. While women campaigned for the same rights as men, their voices were often suffocated and ignored, forcing them to remain in the same constraints as generations past. They may have been educated to a higher level than their ancestors, but they were living under stricter gender roles formed in the wake of new scientific understanding of the sexes. It would take more than a century for women to gain the vote in England, and decades longer for nearly complete equality in society, employment, and education.

The fires first lit by these early revolutionaries were kept stoked until the blaze could no longer be ignored lest the structure of society collapse.

Jane's perspective on these situations can be seen no more clearly than in *Emma*, where the story can be seen as an allegory for the political situation in Britain at the time of its writing. Scholar Peter Smith analyzed this connection in an article titled "Politics and Religion in Jane Austen's 'Emma.'" He notes,

> What we are meant to infer, surely, is that a social arrangement with the capacity for perfect union is currently in a state of mild dislocation. The marriage that unites the two estates both spiritually and physically – they all decide to live together at the end – represents the removal of this blemish in the nation's body politic. By choosing Mr. Knightley Emma commits her future not so much to an individual person as to a complex of ideas, one that is best summed up as Old England in its most idealized form. This is an issue so vital to the novel's structure that Jane Austen is willing to risk the broadest effects to convey it.[48]

In the combination of these three elements – philosophical, religious, and political – one can ascertain the rather hopeless position for women in British society. Due to her class and spinsterhood, Jane was forced to sell her manuscripts to earn an income, but was prevented from putting her name to them due to the perceived shame in it.[49] She was likewise prevented from securing any employment to support herself, her mother, and her sister, thereby forced to rely on the generosity of their male relatives. The newly constructed gender roles of British society, forged out of revolutionary understandings of sexual differences in men and women, limited the latter to the positions of wife and mother with no deviation. Jane's dissatisfaction with the systems of inheritance, in particular primogeniture, is clear to see in her books. It may, in fact, have been such frustration that sent her into her final relapse with her illness in 1817 when, upon the reading of her uncle's will, it was discovered that he neglected to leave anything to Jane's

[48] Peter Smith, "Politics and Religion in Jane Austen's 'Emma,'" *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1997), 222.

[49] Fergus, "Biography," 5.

mother, his sister. This would have left the Austen women in a desperate position; a glimmer of independence had been spotted in the will, but it was torn away in an instant, forcing them back into a state of complete dependence on their male relatives. Perhaps, in a way, the anonymity of her books allowed Jane more freedom to loose her social critiques on the world than authorial credit would have allowed. There was no way for the public to tie her books to the Austen family, permitting Jane to use them as an outlet for her frustrations with the culture of her day. Now preserved forever in the historical record, Jane's books and letters provide glimpses into the mind of an independent, intellectual woman during the turn of the nineteenth century.

Although Jane Austen only lived for forty-one years, she accomplished enough in her few writings to fill entire libraries with the analyses conducted on them, and with the pop culture pieces she has inspired in music, film, television, and theatre. Her contributions to Western culture are undeniable yet impossible to truly quantify, making an understanding of the people and events that influenced her essential. Countless books have been written comparing Jane to other prominent figures in history: William Shakespeare, David Hume, and even Charles Darwin. While such comparisons may illuminate new facets of Jane's character, they will always be incomplete glimpses, as viewing the outside world through a stained-glass window. The lens is pretty and worthy of admiration itself, but to look through it distorts the true picture beyond it. The years have made it difficult to completely comprehend who Jane Austen was and how she thought, but the little she gave to the world provides enough to begin answering a centuries-old question: "Who was Jane Austen?"

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