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THE LIFE AND WORLD OF AN UNDERESTIMATED GENIUS



Jane Austen was not inflamed or inspired or even moved to be a genius; she simply was a genius.

—G. K. Chesterton, preface to *Love and Freindship*
[sic; Austen's spelling]

One time I almost got into a fight about Jane Austen in a bookshop. Okay, that's an exaggeration—I only *thought* about fighting someone. A guy in a green polo shirt walked past the classics section, pointed at *Sense and Sensibility*, and said to his date, “Have you read this? It's not any good. Just a bunch of fancy dances and high society rules and stuff.”

I considered encouraging his date, who looked bored to tears by Green Polo Guy's literary commentary, to run for the hills. I also considered throwing a book at his head. But instead, I did what I think Jane Austen would have done: I maintained my composure with dignity—and later I decided to write about it instead of resorting to physical violence.

Fighting my instinct to attack Green Polo Guy wasn't easy, because he was simply dead wrong about Austen. And the frustrating thing is that he's not alone in his misconceptions. People imagine her novels to be the work of a prim and somber spinster, only concerned with table settings, dance cards, who is and isn't properly chaperoned, and other “high society rules and stuff.”

On the contrary, Jane Austen's novels are full of *life*. They're exciting! There is more to them than trips to the seaside, lively dances, strawberry-picking parties, and weddings (although, thank goodness, there are plenty of those). There's suspense, drama, dangerous illnesses, and death. Most of Austen's protagonists are in crisis. Will a financial nightmare be resolved? Will the family be homeless? Will the much-anticipated letter from a lover ever arrive? Will a young woman recover from a nearly fatal accident? Will a foolish little sister ruin the entire family's reputation by running off with a womanizer in a red coat?

In addition to being compelling, Austen's novels also include their fair share of scandal. It's funny that Austen is considered the "safe" author for sheltered Christian homeschoolers. (As a sheltered Christian homeschooler, I should know.) While there's nothing graphic about Austen's novels, the plotlines are hardly tame. Some of her themes, such as cohabitation or children born outside of wedlock, were shocking in Austen's time, though they aren't considered taboo topics now. But we still clutch our pearls when reading her plots about sexual exploitation or attempted seduction (often of vulnerable minors!) and adulterous affairs.

And yet, these are not chick-lit bodice rippers, either. Jane Austen is no spinner of sensational sap. She's a master of realism, and she crafts complex, lifelike characters with brilliant precision. Every detail of her works is meticulously placed to be accurate to real life—including references to real people who would have moved in the circles of her fictional characters.¹

Jane Austen, Herself

If the true-to-life nature of Austen's stories makes her novels so gripping, why do they have a reputation as, well, *boring*? One answer is a false portrayal of Jane Austen herself. While recent biographers have revealed how well traveled and lively the novelist was, in the past those who wanted to ensure her respectability

(being a female novelist was unusual at that time) tended to portray Austen as an isolated, prudish maiden aunt. Her brother's biographical notice and a nephew's memoir, written after her death, paint a picture of a very quiet woman. Consequently, once people hear that Austen never married, some imagine her to be a sour hermit authoress!

In reality, Austen loved people and loved life! Austen grew up in rural Steventon in Hampshire, and then her family moved and spent several years in Bath. She was close to her family, especially her older sister Cassandra, cherished by her friends, and loved jokes, games, and putting on plays. She doted on children and excelled at entertaining them. Her surviving letters (sadly, much of her extensive correspondence is lost to us) reveal a witty, animated, and even snarky personality. And her world was filled with fascinating people and dramatic events.

Some of the figures in Jane Austen's social circle sound almost too sensational to be characters in her novels. There was a scandal involving a friend of the family (and former pupil of Austen's father), John Wallop, with rumors of his madness and drinking the blood of his servants, which gave him the nickname the Vampyre Earl!²

Another friend and mentor of Jane's was Anne Lefroy, a kind of motherly figure who had introduced Jane to her nephew, the handsome young Irishman Tom Lefroy (with whom Jane shared a brief romance). In 1804, on Jane's twenty-ninth birthday, Anne was thrown from a horse and died a few hours later—a loss that was still fresh to Jane four years later.³

After the death of her father in 1805, Jane, Cassandra, and their mother visited relations here and there until they found a more permanent home at Chawton Cottage, where Jane had the peace and stability needed to write several of her novels. But she also loved the busy life of London, with its bustling shops and sparkling fashion. She visited friends and family far and wide, and she would have listened to firsthand accounts of India,

revolutionary France, and the rest of Europe from even more well-traveled family members. Her Aunt Philadelphia made the perilous journey to India as a teenager to have a chance to marry well on a continent where British ladies were scarce and in high demand on the marriage market. Philadelphia's sophisticated and flirtatious daughter, Eliza, married a Frenchman who lost his head to the guillotine during the French Revolution. (Eliza was very close to Jane and later married her brother Henry.)

Austen's immediate family's struggles were also full of high drama. In 1805, Jane's father died suddenly from an illness, leaving Jane, her mother, and her sister nearly penniless. One of the Austen brothers, George, suffered from epilepsy and was cared for outside of the family home. Another of Jane's brothers, Edward, was adopted out of the family by wealthy childless relatives to live a life of luxury—a decision that was surely heart-wrenching for Jane's father and mother. Jane's older sister Cassandra suffered a terrible loss when her beloved fiancé died on a sea voyage, and she never married. Three of Jane's sisters-in-law also tragically died in childbirth.

So, Jane Austen did not live a boring life. And yet her fight to see her novels published was a long and frustrating battle, and the desire for financial stability may explain how she was momentarily persuaded to agree to marry the younger brother of close friends while visiting their estate. However, she changed her mind and revoked her acceptance the next morning before rushing away from what can only have been a painfully awkward situation.

No, Jane was not the dull old maid she's often made out to be. She was surely as vibrant and fascinating a woman as the heroines who fill her novels—not some insufferable Mary Bennet, sermonizing at any captive audience. Not so!

Giving Jane Her Due

Austen is rightly remembered for her ability to draw characters and imagine story lines that place her among the literary greats. Philosopher and fellow Austen aficionado Cornel West places her in the “pantheon” of literary giants including Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare, and Chekhov,⁴ not simply for her ability to paint memorable stories and characters, but for her genius in capturing the deeper truths of what it means to be human. Through her stories, she reveals to us a blueprint for how to become a good person—awakening self-knowledge, cultivating humility (by the grace of community), and achieving that spiritual transformation that is necessary to become a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17, NRSV). She shows us how to become holy, to follow in the steps of the saints.

Like so many saints, she wields her talents in ways that are deceptively simple, comparing her own writing to a work in miniature, calling it “the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush.”⁵ I like to imagine her novels like tiny snow globes, perfect in detail and structure. The setting and characters are limited, their world is small—little villages, a manor house, a handful of families, a dinner party, a walk to a local shop—and yet, with her tiny strokes she paints the depths of the human soul.

A few years ago when I went to Washington, DC, one of my college roommates, Marianna, took me to the National Gallery of Art and showed me Jan van Eyck’s painting of the Annunciation from the fifteenth century. It’s a tiny painting of the angel Gabriel and Our Lady, only ninety-three centimeters high and thirty-seven centimeters wide. “Get closer,” urged Marianna as we stood staring at the masterpiece. When I leaned in, I could hardly believe my eyes. The detail was so perfect that it looked like a photograph centuries before the first photograph existed. I have never forgotten that moment of awe at the precision and perfection of that work of art. If you have never quite grasped

what “the deal” is with Jane Austen, I want to be your Marianna, urging you to get closer. There is a wonder to behold!

Jane Austen, Christian

One of the characteristics of Austen's writing that both fascinates and puzzles modern readers is the way she integrates what she knows about goodness and truth, right and wrong, into her stories. While Austen *never* writes painful moralizing exposition in her novels, she *is* concerned with two things modern audiences struggle to understand: piety and virtue. We tend to associate these words with “prudery” and “judgmentalism,” which is not at all what Jane Austen is interested in—in fact, the characters who exhibit these traits are her most odious figures. Think of Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*—you can almost feel Austen cringing as she writes his oily lines!

In *Mansfield Park*, the worldly and sophisticated Mary Crawford has trouble accepting the notion of her love interest Edmund's genuine religious faith because such a thing does not fit into her own secular schema. She expresses disdain for devotional practices and clergy as if all clerics are disingenuous mercenaries and all of religion is an empty show. But we must not mistake this attitude for Austen's. Mary Crawford's views on religious faith are one of the reader's first red flags that she is flawed. Austen is not dismissive of genuine faith, but she is critical of those who mock religious faith either by their hypocrisy or by their denial of Christianity's moral standards. Mr. Collins, for example, sermonizes and yet fails in the demands of compassion. Mr. Elton, another of Austen's clergymen, is arrogant, conceited, and vain. And yet, Austen censures these characters not for being clergymen but for being *bad* clergymen. Bad clerics are all the more damnable because they are poor representatives of the faith Austen claimed as her own.

Jane Austen was a practicing Christian, participating in corporate worship as well as private devotion and prayer. While Austen is repulsed by any self-righteous gesturing of clerics and laypeople, she was the proud daughter of an Anglican clergyman. In other words, as Dr. Cornel West points out, she was a “preacher’s kid!”⁶ Surprisingly (and, to me, delightfully), Austen may have had some Catholic sympathies. In particular, she had a soft spot for the Catholic monarch Mary, Queen of Scots, as shown in her cheeky *History of England* written in her childhood. It’s even speculated that in her sister Cassandra’s illustrations of English figures accompanying her *History*, Jane herself was the model for Mary.⁷ But whatever her attitude to Rome might have been, no one can deny that Jane lived as a devout Anglican from birth to burial.

Perhaps Jane Austen’s Christianity is often downplayed because her characters don’t share emotional religious fervor in their conversations or pray aloud (although they do refer to God).⁸ But she wrote original prayers, and the little worlds she creates in her novels are saturated with Christianity. We don’t see her faith displayed in passionate speeches of religious devotion from her characters—although I loved seeing Emma Woodhouse pray very hard for Mr. Knightley not to marry Harriet Smith in the 1996 film version of *Emma*. Austen’s faith is instead communicated in the way she builds her novels on the Christian tradition of virtue. If we ignore the influence of Christian faith on devoutly Anglican Jane Austen, we will fail to understand her.

Jane Austen, Philosopher

Austen builds a world that is interested in the questions both philosophers and the Christian faith seek to answer: What is the self? What are human beings designed to be? What is a good person? How do good people behave? How do they fail to live well? Can a flawed soul be transformed into something better? What does

that transformation look like? What Jane Austen shows us in her novels is nothing less than how human beings can know what is true, grow into their authentic selves, and live well. In other words, Jane Austen was a philosopher. And if you're interested in the question of how human beings should live, then you are a philosopher, too.

Austen's moral landscape, deeply rooted in the traditional Christian understanding of vice and virtue, has captured Christian readers of all denominations. For Austen, the virtues are paths on our journey toward holiness. And we are *all* called to be holy because that is what God created us to be.

My name, Haley, comes from the Old English word for "whole." Think "hale and hearty" (whole and healthy). It's also connected to the Old English word for "holy" or "sacred," *hal-lowed*—they have the same root.

God wants us to be holy because he wants us to be whole, to be fully ourselves as he designed us to be. Sin disfigures our souls, holding us back from this wholeness, or holiness, that God desires for us. Sin also distorts the way we understand the world, preventing us from having the clear soul-vision we need to live out our purpose: to love well. Our vices are failures to love, which in turn prevent us from being truly good.

The exploration of what makes someone a good person is one of the deepest questions of the human soul. Today, there is a strong aversion to the idea that certain actions are objectively right (or wrong), leaving even professing Christians choosing the more socially acceptable path of moral relativism: "Who can say?" But Austen disagrees with this modern claim that there is no right answer. She subscribes to a Christian tradition of objective morality that teaches that it's possible to know what is right and that we have the freedom to choose what is good. And that assent to moral objectivity is part of what keeps us reading her novels, creating new film adaptations, and discussing her exploration of ancient traditions of virtue.

To take just one example, in the goofy and lighthearted film *Lost in Austen*, the protagonist, a woman living in the twenty-first century, longs to leave behind the dull and drab modern world and her lowlife selfish boyfriend for an environment in which Mr. Darcys still exist. She pines for a world in which there are decent men who might treasure her as she deserves. But beyond the desire for romance, we all get “lost” in Austen’s works in no small part because we long for a world in which it is possible to know what is right, how to behave, and what we want to become. Austen’s characters are familiar with the social conventions of their time—what fork to begin a meal with, what words to say in polite conversation, and what clothes to wear. But this isn’t why we are drawn to them. We want to inhabit a world in which the deep moral choices of how human beings ought to act are—although not always easy—*clear*.

Jane Austen, Comedienne

Austen’s engaging novels show us that exploring the idea of virtue is anything but boring! Austen handles weighty moral philosophy with the light touch of joy and laughter. Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton notes that her early, unpublished writings were thought “not sufficiently serious” by her surviving relatives, but he reflects that “greatness is not made up of serious things, in the sense of solemn things.”⁹ Austen’s work has depth, but it is never solemn. Chesterton argues that she wrote under “the gigantic inspiration of laughter.”¹⁰ And her laughter echoes even now in the pages of her books. Her novels are full of comically awkward situations and side-splittingly funny characters.

My husband, who is a trail runner, started listening to Jane Austen audiobooks when he was training for ultramarathons. He told me that he would have to stop midrun clutching his chest to recover from fits of laughter over characters like Mr. Rushworth in *Mansfield Park* and his “two and forty speeches . . . which is

no trifle.”¹¹ Anthony Trollope, a British novelist writing at the end of the nineteenth century, wrote, “The letters of Mr. Collins, a clergyman in *Pride and Prejudice*, would move laughter in a low-church archbishop.”¹²

But it is partly Austen's structure of both internal virtue and the public expression of virtue (how we interact with other people) that provides so much of the humor. In a short essay about Austen, Anglican apologist and Oxford Inkling C. S. Lewis muses, “The hard core of morality and even of religion seems to me to be just what makes good comedy possible. ‘Principles’ or ‘seriousness’ are essential to Jane Austen's art. Where there is no norm, nothing can be ridiculous.”¹³ If there are no principles that dictate how we ought to behave toward one another, then no behavior can be wise or foolish. By placing her characters in the Christian tradition, Austen has a whole world of humor to engage. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet remarks, “For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?”¹⁴

Austen is the queen of pointing out the ridiculous—not merely in others, but more importantly in *ourselves*. In this, she is very much a Christian artist. Chesterton reminds us, “Angels can fly because they can take themselves lightly. This has been always the instinct of Christendom, and especially the instinct of Christian art.”¹⁵

Virtue Basics

In addition to his praise of Austen's witty humor, Anthony Trollope wrote that Jane Austen “places us in a circle of gentlemen and ladies, and charms us while she tells us with an unconscious accuracy how men should act to women, and women act to men. It is not that her people are all good; and, certainly, they are not all wise. The faults of some are the anvils on which the virtues of others are hammered till they are bright as steel. In the comedy of folly, I know no novelist who has beaten her.”¹⁶ He is exactly right.