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LIFE WITHOUT REFERENCE TO THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

A Study of the Cultural and Intellectual
Environment Reflected in Six
Novels by Jane Austen

HONORS INDEPENDENT STUDY

Kathy Olive
23 April 1984

Psychologists have argued for years over the effects of heredity versus the effects of the environment in the development of the individual. While both play an important role in everyone's development the artist or writer leaves behind a more visible record of these effects. Although not written from a psychologist's viewpoint, this paper will focus on the environment which helped to shape the novelist Jane Austen and the reflection of that environment which is found in her six major novels: Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, Emma, and Mansfield Park.

The life of the gentry in eighteenth-century England was a comfortably secure one. Although the income of the gentry did not equal that of the aristocracy, their standard of living was vastly higher than that of the lower classes. Together with the aristocracy they formed the ruling class. Indeed, besides income, the only other major difference between the gentry and the aristocracy lay in the area of politics, where the gentry were traditionally Tory and the aristocracy Whig. In this segment of society, "Manners were looked on almost as an aspect of morals: politeness almost as a virtue. Concern for politeness was, like everything else, checked by realistic good sense."¹

For the most part, the gentry, like the aristocracy, were orthodox Anglicans. IN a society which accepted class distinction as a normal part of life, "A good Christian... was a man who did

his duty in that state of life to which it pleased God to call him....² The duties of their class included benevolence, prudence, honesty, and public spirit.³ Moderation was also a highly prized virtue. These beliefs reflect an overall attitude which colored almost every aspect of life. "Man was primarily regarded as a social being and judged by his conduct as such."⁴

The gentry were eighteenth-century conservatives who believed that

... God created society with such a degree of precision that each unit, whether it be the primary one of the individual or one of the smallest groupings of the family and the village, is a microcosm of the whole. For the eighteenth-century conservative it would therefore have appeared unnecessary to employ the large-scale methods of the historian or the sociologist in order to arrive at an understanding of the major forces at work in society. All that was required was to examine the conduct of the individual in the context of his family and immediate community.⁵

Gentry families were those of "... squires and better-born parsons, of naval and military officers and the fellows of Oxford and Cambridge colleges."⁶ It was into this world that Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, the seventh of eight children of a well-connected Anglican minister. According to Lord David Cecil, "... Jane Austen was lucky in having an easy childhood and adolescence. She is one of the few persons of genius who, as far as we know, managed to reach the age of eighteen without having felt noticeably lonely or rebellious or misunderstood."⁷ A close-knit, happy family provided a stable background for the development of Jane Austen's talent. Characteristic of the age in which they

lived, the Austen children were taught the importance of keeping social life pleasant.⁸ They were also taught to cultivate the virtues of unselfishness, self-control, prudence, and good humor.⁹ Good humor was an integral part of life at Steventon Rectory. The object of this humor was human absurdity and affectation.¹⁰ From the beginning this sense of humor was to emerge in her writing.

After attempting to have Jane and her sister Cassandra educated at various boarding schools, George Austen finally decided to educate his daughters at home as he had their brothers. Although he did not subject them to the same requirements of study as his sons, Jane "... grew up well read in the English classics, prose and poetry, with a reasonable knowledge of history and French, some acquaintance with Italian and, above all, able to express herself in her own language with ease, accuracy and polish."¹¹ Literature and history were her favorite subjects and her favorite authors included Johnson, Fielding, and Richardson. True to the views of the day concerning appropriate areas of study for women, Latin, Greek, mathematics, and philosophy played no part in her education.

Although somewhat shy as a child, by the time she reached her middle teens

... she had learned to conceal if not wholly to overcome her shyness ... it was sufficiently under control as to be no impediment to her enjoying the new pleasures open to her as a fully grown-up young lady. She did enjoy them. Like the other girls of her acquaintance, she liked balls and dinner parties, took a lively though not obsessive interest in dress and

fashion; and, as much as other girls was interested in young men. She was attractive enough to have little trouble getting on with them.¹²

Social life for the young ladies of Steventon Rectory revolved around morning calls, dinner and card parties, and dances. In addition, the Austens regularly participated in amateur theatricals.¹³

When George Austen's health began to decline, his wife and daughters moved with him to Bath. While in Bath, Jane met the young clergyman who seems to have been the only man she ever loved. Only a few weeks after they met he was forced to leave Bath to attend to an important business matter. He had intended to return; however, he suddenly became ill and died. Although his name remains unknown, he evidently had a profound impact on Jane's life. She later became engaged to Harris Bigg-Withers, but broke the engagement the next day. All records indicate that she never became romantically involved again.

George Austen died in 1805. After his death, Martha Lloyd, the sister of his son James' second wife, moved in with his widow and daughters. The four of them travelled first to Southampton and then to Chawton, where they set up housekeeping at Chawton Cottage. Here Jane faced "... a dull future as a spinster in reduced circumstances, confined indefinitely to a monotonous existence in a small country village."¹⁴

Daily life may or may not have seemed dull. For Jane, piano practice preceded breakfast. Reading and writing occupied the morning hours. A walk followed luncheon. The hours between dinner and bed were filled with sewing, cards, or reading. It was out of this

lifestyle, relieved by visits from the many nieces and nephews, that she revised the earlier manuscripts and began new ones. From these would come Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Persuasion, Emma, and Mansfield Park.

However uneventful and isolated this life may have been, it had at times been touched by the larger sphere of things. For example, one of her cousins lost her husband in the French Revolution. In addition, two of her brothers were naval officers in the Napoleonic wars. The larger sphere of things enters into her novels in much the same way, ie. indirectly rather than by first hand experiences. According to Christopher Kent,

... the novelist is in danger of being judged chiefly by the degree to which he fits retrospectively prescribed emphases and directions into the historical background of his work. Notoriously, Jane Austen fails these tests. Quite unashamedly she seems to flout Fanny Burney's Law: that it is 'impossible to delineate any picture of human life without reference to the French Revolution.'¹⁵

Furthermore, "It is this sense of participation, rather than having /history/ all packaged and labelled that is perhaps most satisfying to the historian who enters Jane Austen's world."¹⁶ Because of the view which her contemporaries held of the individual as a microcosm of the whole

... Jane Austen's decision to deal with the minutiae of her characters' social lives... rather than to follow Sir Thomas Bertram into the House of Commons or Captain Wentworth to sea would not have seemed to /them/ to reflect any intention of escaping social reality. On the contrary, they would have recog-

nized that she was directly encountering the kind of moral questions that had to be answered if a society based on a code of duty and obligation was to flourish.¹⁷

Providing "... vivid views of gentry life in the Southern counties during the late Georgian period,"¹⁸ her novels use love, courtship, and marriage as the major theme to portray this lifestyle. In her world, the stages of courtship, "... initial attraction, flirtation, infatuation, and love--develop within a social world and are subject to intense social scrutiny. Moreover, the public eye is readily offended by any deviation from the various courtship conventions."¹⁹ The "courtship conventions," the rigidly prescribed behavior, the publicity with which the courtship must be conducted are subjected to "... the scrutiny of irony and common sense..."²⁰ in her novels.

In the novels, the first stage of courtship, initial attraction, more often than not occurs between two opposite energies. For example, in Pride and Prejudice Elizabeth is attracted to Darcy not because they are alike, but because they are unlike each other. The same is true of Marianne and Colonel Brandon in Sense and Sensibility and of Emma and Mr. Knightley in Emma.

The second stage, flirtation,

... is often indistinguishable from courtship. In the beginning, the same behaviour--attention, admiration, teasing, flattery, even professions of devotion--may be appropriate to both. But the two cannot be confused in the end, for courtship 'means' something--marriage--and flirtation nothing.²¹

Difficulties arise when one of the parties involved engages in this type of behavior with the idea of courtship in mind while the other party is thinking of it merely in terms of flirtation. Or, as in the case of Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park, a character may deliberately set out to deceive by his behavior. Another possible cause of confusion may be a character's failure to properly identify the object of these attentions, as is the case in Emma.

The third stage of courtship, infatuation, "... often involves attraction to a consciously predetermined ideal."²² This is exemplified in the relationship between Edmund Bertram and Mary Crawford in Mansfield Park. Edmund forms an ideal of what Mary is like. He is infatuated with that ideal and not with the real Mary. As long as possible he ignores the facts which point out that the two are not the same.

For Austen, love, the final stage of courtship and the one which should lead to marriage, is based upon mutual esteem, mutual knowledge, and, contrary to social conventions, "... an equality as complete as differences between the characters themselves allow."²³ This can be seen in the conclusions of all six novels.

In three of her novels, she uses the mentor relationship to bring the hero and the heroine together. Edmund assumes the role of advisor and confidante for Fanny in Mansfield Park, Knightley for Emma in Emma, and Darcy for Elizabeth in Pride and Prejudice. According to Jan S. Fergus,

Austen seizes on the mentor relation, a dissatisfying plot invention of eighteenth-century didactic fiction, as a convenient means to dramatise the conscious or unconscious sexual attraction that can develop over time in conjunction with intimate knowledge.²⁴

Although sexual attraction is presented both as a game and a contest, "It is in knowledge and intimacy ... that Austen prefers to locate the most enduring sexual responses; she trusts sexual attraction only when it is based on knowledge."²⁵ As seen in Mansfield Park, sexual attraction can become dangerous when the social conventions are ignored. During the preparations for the play Lover's Vows, greater opportunities are given for the private conduct of courtship. The absence of publicness constitutes a removal of restraint. Also the rehearsal of the play necessitates physical contact. Any physical contact is rare in Austen's²⁶ world, therefore it has the greater sexual and emotional power.

Although Jane Austen's marriages were based to some extent on equality of the partners, an unusual concept at that time, she "... would not have sympathized with the modern and feminist view²⁷ that wives are an oppressed race."

None of her heroines has any ambition to be admitted into the professions, to manage an estate, or to join the army. Instead, they concentrate their energies into the world of manners until, at the conclusions of the novels, they add to this the concerns of marriage. /For Jane Austen/ the restrictions imposed on the woman's social role do not diminish its importance. Rather, basing her case on contemporary conservative philosophy, she argues that those who control manners and the home have a critical role to play in preserving the status quo.²⁸

Her views do differ significantly from those of her contemporaries. First, and perhaps most importantly, she "... operates on the assumption that women are inherently as intelligent and rational as men."²⁹ Moreover, she believes "... that intellectual abilities are as desirable in the woman as in the man."³⁰ This belief is best illustrated in the relationship and conversations between Catherine Moreland and John Thorpe in Northanger Abbey.

furthermore, she places little emphasis on the "accomplishments" which society deemed necessary for young ladies. Her heroines, while well-mannered, are remarkably unaccomplished in the areas of art, music, etc. In addition, "... none of them are called upon to improve in these areas. Their education is complete so far as Jane Austen is concerned once they have corrected certain failings in judgement and/or feeling."³¹ Emma (in Emma) and Catherine (in Northanger Abbey) together with Elizabeth (in Pride and Prejudice) provide three good examples of "unaccomplished" heroines.

Although she differed from them in these respects, Jane Austen agreed with her contemporaries that the two main functions of women in society were to preserve and promote good manners and to regulate domestic life. This, however did not seem at all unimportant because of the eighteenth-century microcosmic view of society.

The lives of Jane Austen's heroines, who spend much of their time at balls, dinners, and on extended visits, should not, therefore, be considered trivial. Essentially

they are engaged in receiving an education in manners, the subtleties of which can be fully explored only in the context of the formal social occasion, and are thus being prepared for their role as arbiters of manners and preservers of morals.³²

Since the weddings in her novels come at the end of the story rather than at the beginning, she concerns herself primarily with women as preservers of manners and morals. However, she does address the role of women in the regulation of domestic life, especially in the education of young children. This is particularly prominent in Mansfield Park, where the education which Fanny receives at Mansfield is contrasted with that of her brothers and sisters at Portsmouth.

In the world of eighteenth-century England, the family occupied a very important place.

Family duties were especially emphasized; for the family was the nursery of social virtues, the divinely ordered, natural unit around which a coherent society was built and maintained; and marriage was for the eighteenth-century Christian an institution involving lifelong and serious obligations. Parents and children were also united by a bond involving serious obligation on both sides.³³

This is also the order of things in Jane Austen's novels. Problems arise when the obligations of marriage and family are not taken seriously. The sanctity of marriage and the prudence of choosing a mate wisely are ignored in Mansfield Park when Maria leaves her husband for Henry Crawford and Julia elopes with Mr. Yates. Both young ladies suffer for their follies. In Emma, Emma's match-

making brings nothing but grief to herself and those she "helps." Tom Bertram incurs his father's wrath in Mansfield Park when he persists in the production of Lovers' Vows, knowing that his father will not like it. If, in Pride and Prejudice, Mr. Bennet had fulfilled his duties as a father, Lydia would not have eloped with Wickham.

Despite the problems brought on by their failures, Jane Austen's families remain securely established in the world of the gentry. Their lifestyle remains that with which she was familiar. Their daily life could, for the most part, have been lived out within the walls of Steventon Rectory or Chawton Cottage. Morning calls, hunting, card parties, dinners, and occasional dances formed the mainstays of their social lives. This lifestyle was characterized by an abundance of leisure time.

In her early novels, Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Northanger Abbey, "... Austen seems to have been influenced by a convention about leisure which she discovered in earlier eighteenth-century novelists."³³ This convention was the admiration of those who had the "... ability to fill up immense tracts of leisure time with constructive activities that make them better people."³⁴ However, Jane Austen's heroines do not live up to that ideal. They tend to waste more of their time than they spend profitably.

But in her later novels many of the ideas about work and leisure which she employs reflect those of her favorite moralist, Samuel Johnson, a writer who consistently stresses the importance of useful labour in the achievement of self-definition, sanity, contentment, and even salvation.³⁵

This change in outlook is particularly evident in Mansfield Park, in which Fanny becomes happy at Mansfield only after she becomes useful. Likewise the hero, Edmund, actually does the work in his parish rather than assigning it to a curate. Two aspects of the "work ethic" are demonstrated here. First, "The worker must derive his sense of identity from activities that are socially valuable and not merely from activities that are primarily intended to improve or amuse himself as an individual."³⁶ This part of the work ethic applies primarily to Fanny. Furthermore, "... the enterprise in which the worker engages must require sustained effort."³⁷ This facet applies primarily to Edmund.

The topics of eighteenth-century literature are also a part of Jane Austen's novels. Popular literature of that day can be divided into two broad categories. "... novels of Sentiment [*sic*], designed to stimulate agreeable tears, and novels of Terror [*sic*], designed to awake agreeable shudders."³⁸ She read both varieties, and "... was pleased to find them absurd as well as absorbing. This mixed reaction was later to prove an inspiration to her own work."³⁹

Although she uses some of the conventions of eighteenth-century literature, she does not use others, or rather, she modifies them for her use. Even those that she uses are often the object of her ridicule. One of the conventions which she ridicules is that of the perfect heroine. The novel which best illustrates this is Northanger Abbey, in which she utilizes the character of Catherine Moreland and the technique of demonstration by negation. She points out that although Catherine does not

have certain qualities which convention prescribed as necessary for a heroine, she is, nonetheless, a heroine.

Other conventions which she ridicules but uses include the violent catastrophe (Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and Mansfield Park), the Cinderella motif (Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park, and Emma), love or friendship at first sight (Northanger Abbey, and Sense and Sensibility), the melodramatic happy ending (Northanger Abbey), the importance of written communication (Northanger Abbey), the seduction/elopement (Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park), and the theme of Virtue Persecuted (Mansfield Park). All of the novels are reflections to some extent of the didactic novel. All make use of such stock characters as the chaperone, the clergyman, and the opposing relative.⁴⁰

According to Henrietta Ten Harmsel, it is not strange that Jane Austen continues to use the conventions which she ridicules because she does not use them in the conventional ways. Rather she transforms them by the use of "... realism, developing character, variety of function, and irony."⁴¹

Another motif, common to Romantic fiction, which Jane Austen uses is that of the "... double prison, in which a journey of apparent liberation from captivity leads only to a more implacable arrest."⁴² While in other novels this is applied literally, according to Nina Auerbach it is society which imprisons the heroines of Austen's novels.⁴³

Satirizing the Gothic and Romantic novels (while at the same time making use of their conventions), Austen's novels, according

to Susan Morgan, may be divided into two categories. The first, which includes Emma, Northanger Abbey, and Pride and Prejudice, are novels of crisis. In these, a particular event enables the heroine to see herself more clearly. The second category, the novels of passage, include Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park, and Persuasion. In these, increased self-knowledge is acquired by the heroine not as the result of a particular event, but as a result of the passage of time.

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The society in which these young ladies move is, admittedly, a restricted one. Jane Austen's

... view of human nature was limited in the first place by her circumstances. she wrote about men and women as she herself had known them. Her view was further limited by her sex, by the fact that she saw only as much of humanity as was visible to a lady, and this was when a lady's view was narrowly confined by convention, so that the only people she ever knew well belonged to her class and lived in her neighborhood. Secondly--and this is more important--her view was conditioned by the nature of her inspiration. It was confined to those aspects which happened to stimulate her individual creative imagination. For Jane Austen, this meant life in its private aspects; she was stirred to portray men and women only in relation to their family and friends and social acquaintances.⁴⁵

Within these boundaries Jane Austen was enormously successful. As a reflection of the philosophical, religious, political, and cultural environment in which the gentry lived her novels were popular with her contemporaries and continue to be read today. Although they provide an accurate account of the lifestyle of only a small segment of eighteenth-century English society, they are not dated.

Some things have changed greatly in two hundred years. Human nature has not. The types of characters which Austen uses, their relationships with each other, and the situations in which they become involved are still being used in today's fiction as a reflection of the forces in the environment which are shaping today's writers.

NOTES

¹Lord David Cecil, A Portrait of Jane Austen, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1979), p. 17.

²Ibid., p. 15.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 14.

⁵David Monaghan, "Introduction," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed. David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 2.

⁶Cecil, p. 12.

⁷Ibid., p. 44.

⁸Ibid., p. 36.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., p. 46.

¹²Ibid., p. 66.

¹³Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁵Christopher Kent, "'Real Solemn History' and Social History," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed. David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 86.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷Monaghan, pp 2-3.

¹⁸Kent, p. 95.

¹⁹Jan S. Fergus, "Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen's Novels," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed., David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J., Barnes & Noble, 1981) p. 67.

- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 71.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 72.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 83.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 75.
- ²⁵ Ibid., p. 74.
- ²⁶ Ibid., p. 80.
- ²⁷ Cecil, p. 119.
- ²⁸ David Monaghan, "Jane Austen and the Position of Women," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed., David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), pp 109-110.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 107.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 108.
- ³² Ibid., p. 117.
- ³³ Jane Nardin, "Jane Austen and the Problem of Leisure," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed., David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 123.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 124.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 123.
- ³⁶ Ibid., p. 122.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Cecil, p. 49.
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Henrietta Ten Harmsel, Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions, (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), pp 15, 20-21, 38-39, 55-57, 62-65, 79, 94-95, 101, 110, 131.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 21.
- ⁴² Nina Auerbach, "Jane Austen and Romantic Imprisonment," Jane Austen in a Social Context, ed., David Monaghan (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1981), p. 12.

⁴³Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁴Susan Morgan, In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

⁴⁵Cecil, p. 44.

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