Christina Tavella

Mrs. Bierling

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Jane Austen

Jane Austen was born of Cassandra and Rev. George Austen on the sixteenth of December, 1755, at Steventon in Hampshire, England. She was the youngest of eight siblings; and she had one sister and eight brothers. Her father, Rev. George Austen, was a clergyman in the Church of England and made a fair income but there was not enough to support such a large family, or mingle with other "well-to-do families. Of her brothers, the oldest was James who was lucky enough to be educated at Oxford University at the age of fourteen. He was later ordained as a clergyman and wrote a literary magazine called *The Loiterer*. It was uncommon for women to receive a formal education in this time period, it was still considered a right to men, and at times a privilege to women in wealthy families who could afford to educate the ladies. Despite the lack of money, in 1789, Jane and her sister went to study with Mrs. Cawley, who was the sister of one of their Uncles. They were brought home when an infectious disease broke out in Southampton. From then on, they attended the Abbey Boarding School to finish their education.

Jane's favorite brother, Henry, was very business mined and was adopted by rich cousins of the Austen family and eventually inherited their estate. He was also educated at Oxford University and "married his love, Elizabeth Feudillide, who died in 1813. Two years later he experienced a business bankruptcy which turned his entire life upside down and left him in shambles" (Biography). As a result of his bankruptcy, he was not able to see Jane's first novels, Persuasion and Northanger Abbey until after she died.

Cassandra was Jane's only sister and closest friend. Records indicate that there were over "one hundred letters exchanged between the two of them that have been recovered," giving historians and scholars an in-depth look at the close relationship Jane and Cassandra shared. Cassandra's fiancé, Thomas Fowle, died in 1797 from yellow fever, leaving her devastated; and she never married. Scholars

affirm that "this experience is reflected in Jane's novel Persuasion" in the character of Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft's abomination of long term engagements and uncertain engagements. Cassandra was engaged for three years, which in this time was unheard of, due to her family's lack of money to put forth a suitable dowry for her.

Frank and Charles, two of Jane's other brothers, entered the Royal Navy Academy at the age of twelve. They fought in the Napoleonic Wars, and were both eventually promoted to Admirals. "This naval connection influenced Jane's novels, Mansfield Park and Persuasion" (Biography). Frank was away at sea until he turned eighteen. Jane's family life comes through much more in her novel Pride and Prejudice, in that her family was desperately trying to improve the class of the family. In the novel, a woman named Elizabeth is the main character, with five sisters. The family is worried about putting together a dowry for each of the girls and is constantly trying to marry them off to men who would either pay the family or waive the dowry. By marrying their daughters off to wealthy men, their class status would be improved. Jane Austen's family was eagerly trying to bridge classes and while they only had two daughters, making good matches for them would certainly help. Jane Austen, much like Elizabeth Benet in the novel, refused to marry. She wanted no part of it, and fought her family on the matter every time. Elizabeth Benet does marry, after the intricate plot plays out, but Jane Austen never did marry. Jane read a lot of books, especially "serious and popular literature of the period" (Biography). A further connection between Jane and her novels can be seen in Emma in respect to her education, which was not easy for her family to provide.

In 1792 and in 14794, plays were staged at the Steventon Rectory, and a few years later, her cousin Eliza de Feuillide put more elaborate productions on which, threw an interesting light on Jane Austen's apparent disapproval of such amateur theatricals in her novel, Mansfield Park. Austen wrote Juvenilia during the years of 1787-1793. This is made up of a collection of funny parodies of literature in

that day. A prime example is Love and Friendship, where according to Jane's Biography, this work was written for the entertainment of her family members and most of the pieces were dedicated to one or another of her relatives or family friends. She wrote Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, and Northanger Abbey between the years of 1795 and 1799. "At this time, she originally named the books, Elinor and Marianne, First Impressions, and Susan" (Biography).

Jane was what one might label, a social butterfly. "She loved a good social event, party, or a dance" (Biography). Her love of social affairs is also comes through in her novels, like Pride and Prejudice, where the Benet family frequently attended social parties and events, and would go into town just to "meet new people." She also traveled a lot, "visiting London, Bath, Southampton, and Hampshire" (Biography). There is little evidence of her courtships with men; it is possible that she chose not to have any. Records do show that she did spend some time with Thomas Lefroy. Although it was known that he could not afford to marry Jane, she did not state that in any of her letters. Instead, she simply wrote to Cassandra, a sarcastic letter, stating the following:

> Tell Mary that I will make over Mr. Heartly and all his estate to her for her sole use and benefit in the future and not only him, but all my other admirers into the bargain whenever she can find them, even the kiss which C. Powlett wanted to give me, as I mean to confine myself to the future of Mr. Tom Lefroy, for whom I do not care sixpence. Assure her also, as a last and indisputable proof of Warren's indifference to me, that he actually drew that gentleman's picture for me, and delivered it to me without a sigh. Friday at length, the day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, and when you receive this it will be over. My tears flow at the melancholy idea. (Biography)

Her courtships with men, which were few, typically would end this way. She would have a little bit of fun flirting, and then kindly send him on his way. She enjoyed living an independent life and felt that if she married; she would be giving up an aspect of her independence. Hence, she never married.

In January of 1805, her father died leaving the family in much worse conditions. The income was much less, almost nonexistent, and the entire family had to live at home to help out the best they could, despite the small number of jobs available for women. The brothers contributed the best they could, but it was still not enough to support the entire family. Her mother died before Jane turned 16 which was a huge devastation for Jane.

When reading the many diverse novels written by Jane Austen, one would agree with Teuber, that she is one of the few novelists in world literature who is regarded as a classic and widely read by a vast, diverse audience. Teuber also asserts that Jane's novels represent literature with a capital L. The early domestic writings show a grasp on current literary genres as well as literary styles, conventions, and even clichés. Austen liked to write about money and marriage, because they were the major things that influenced her life, the lack of money in her family growing up, and the fact that she and her sister never married.

Many people believe that Jane wrote nothing about romance and passion, but the exact opposite is true. "For instance, Pride and Prejudice and Persuasion, captures part of a courtship dealing with the anticipation of a marriage and a happy life" (Hodgkinson). Elizabeth Benet's sister, Jane was to marry a wealthy man who essentially developed a set of cold feet and backed out of the proposal. Jane was devastated, and Elizabeth, in her overwhelming sense of pride, developed a hateful prejudice against his family, including Mr. Darce, who was in fact in love with her. The plot is intricate, and the reader does not know what will happen until the last few

chapters of the book when Elizabeth realizes that her prejudices are wrong, and she misunderstood certain things about the situation. Darce proposes to her, and she accepts. The romance is powerful in this novel. What is even more amazing is the fact that Jane Austen was able to capture the complexity, powerfulness, and deep emotion of a romance, when she never experienced one herself. The novels came straight from her thoughts of what one should be, and she was able to create a romance that was strong, powerful, and possible.

Jane Austen's Persuasion was set in 1814 and was centered on manners. It did not depict the education of an individual, but instead, it was of characters finding the rules and structures of which they should lead their lives by. The climax of the novel was when Wentforth professes his feelings for Anne in his letter, followed by her finding him and telling him that his love is requited. In some ways the relationship between the Admiral and Mrs. Croft foreshadowed the relationship between Anne and Wentworth. It was satirical, but also subtly subversive. The narrator, who is the unknown or omniscient, follows the plight of Anne Elliot, but mocks the vanity of her titled upper class family. Again, the main themes are money and marriage. It is an excellent novel. This was her last novel; she wrote it in 1816, the year before she died. She was very ill when she wrote this novel, and if she had been well, the novel may have been even better than it was.

There are many connections between Jane's work, her life and the world around her. She wrote about things that affected her family directly, like class distinction, money, marriage, and morality. She also captured the essence of the beliefs of society during the time in which she lived, because it was these beliefs that drove her family to behave in certain ways and push certain ideals on their daughters. The fact that the only way for them to bridge classes was to merge their family with wealthy families put a lot of stress on their daughters. This comes

through in the novel Pride and Prejudice when Elizabeth's father tells her she 'will' marry someone because he will do right by the family (pay them and forgo a dowry), when she doesn't love him, let alone even *like* him. Jane is extremely bothered by this mindset and writes about it often in her novels, mocking it in a way that is comical to the readers, but still gives an underlying message of how ridiculous these ideals are.

People today can still relate to these novels because society is still struggling with some of the same struggles that Jane experienced. There is still a clear class distinction that is hard to bridge, or even move up to the next class. Money is still something that drives society, because without it, nothing is possible. And finally, morality is still an issue in the world today. Back in the Romantic Era, morality consisted of family values, duties to society and the monarchy, and moral individual values that one is to live their life by each day. Three hundred years later, society is still struggling with this concept. Many would say that family values are diminishing, as more families are putting parents and grandparents in homes, transferring the burden to someone else, instead of taking care of their family themselves. Our duties to the government are always argued over; whether it is over paying higher taxes, the debt ceilings, or foreign affairs. And our duties to society are also diminishing, as people complain that the education in this country is not up to par, but refuse to put more money, via taxes, into it to improve it. It is no one's responsibility to improve society anymore because no one can agree on whose responsibility it is.

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