0.1 Chapter 6: curriculum: Literature

0.2 Literature

1 Jane Austen

Jane Austen is loved mainly as a charming guide to fashionable life in the Regency period. She is admired for portraying a world of elegant houses, dances, servants and fashionable young men driving barouches. But her own vision of her task was radically different. She was an ambitious and stern moralist. She was acutely conscious of human failings and she had a deep desire to make people nicer: less selfish, more reasonable, more dignified and more sensitive to the needs of others.

Born in 1775, Jane Austen grew up in a small village in Hampshire where her father was the Anglican rector. They had quite a high social status but were not at all well-off. She started writing young: at only twenty-one she had a novel turned down by a major publisher. During most of her adult life, Britain was at war with Napoleon. Two of her brothers became admirals. She did much of her writing at a tiny octagonal table. She was a very good dancer and very interested in being well-dressed. She was neat, elegant and lively. She never married, though on a couple of occasions she was tempted. Mostly she lived in pleasant small houses in the country with her sister Cassandra.

The novel was her chosen weapon in the struggle to reform humanity. She completed six: *Northanger Abbey, Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Mansfield Park, Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

Some of the main things she wants to teach you are:

One: Let your lover educate you

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet start off heartily disliking each other and then, gradually realise they are in love. They make one of the great romantic couples. He is handsome, rich and well connected; she is pretty, smart and lively. But why actually are they right for one another?

Jane Austen is very clear. Its for a reason we tend not to think of very much today: It is because each can educate and improve the other. When Mr Darcy arrives in the neighbourhood he feels superior to everyone else, because he has more money and higher status. At a key moment, Elizabeth condemns his arrogance and pride to his face. It sounds offensive in the extreme, but later he admits that this was just what he needed:

What did you say of me that I did not deserve? … The recollection what I then said, of my conduct, my manners, my expression is inexpressibly painful to me. Your reproof, so well applied, I never shall forget. You taught me a lesson, hard indeed at first, but most advantageous. By you I was properly humbled.

Elizabeth shares this view of love as education. They suit each other because:

It was a union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved; and from his judgement, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance.

Its a lesson that sounds strange because we still tend to think of love as liking someone for who they already are, and of total acceptance. The person who is right for us, Austen is saying is not simply someone who makes us feel relaxed or comfortable; they have got to be able to help us overcome our failings and become more mature, more honest and kinder and we need to do something similar for them.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy and Elizabeth improve one another and then the novelist lets them get

engaged. The story rewards them because they have developed well. Thats why the novel feels so beautifully constructed. Its not merely ingenious. It illustrates a basic truth: marriage depends on maturity and education.

Two: We shouldnt stop judging people; but we have to judge more carefully

Mansfield Park starts when quiet, shy Fanny Price goes to live with her much richer cousins, the Bertrams at Mansfield Park, their big house in the country. The Bertrams are smart, fashionable, confident and well-off. In social terms they are stars and Fanny is a very minor character indeed (her cousin Julia looks down on her because she doesnt know where the different European countries are). But Jane Austen judges people by a completely different standard.

Austen exchanges the normal lens through which people are viewed in society, a lens which magnifies wealth and power, for a moral lens, which magnifies qualities of character. Rather than focus on who has the nicest dress, the best carriage, or the most servants, she examines who is vain, selfish or cruel; who has integrity, humility and true dignity.

Through this lens, the high and mighty may become small, the forgotten and retiring figures may grow large. Within the world of the novel, virtue is spread without regard to material wealth: the rich and well-mannered are not (as in the dominant status schema) immediately good nor the poor and unschooled bad. Virtue may lie with the lame ugly child, the destitute porter, the hunchback in the attic or the girl who doesnt know the first facts of geography. Certainly Fanny has no elegant dresses, has no money and cant speak French but by the end of *Mansfield Park,* she has been revealed as the noble one, while the

other members of her family, despite their titles and accomplishments, have fallen into moral confusion.

Jane Austen is not the enemy of status. She just wants to see it properly distributed and at the end of her novels it always is. Fanny is raised up, and will become the mistress of Mansfield Park. Her selfish, empty-headed cousin Julia, is disgraced.

Three: Take money seriously

Jane Austen is quite frank about money. She tells us the details of peoples financial status: In *Pride and Prejudice* she explains that Mr Bingley has an income of GBP 4000 a year (which is clearly rather a lot); while Darcy has more than twice that. Rather than feeling that it is not quite polite to go on about peoples money or lack of it, she thinks that money is an eminently suitable topic for high-brow literature. Because how we deal with our finances has a huge effect on our lives.

She takes aim at two big mistakes people make around money. One is to get over-impressed by what money can do. In *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram gets married to Mr Rushworth (the richest character in all Jane Austens novels) but they are miserable together and their marriage rapidly falls apart. But, equally, she is convinced that it is a serious error to get married without enough money. At one point in *Sense and Sensibility*, it looks like Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars, who are otherwise well suited, wont be able to get married: they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year [a little below the middle-class average] would supply them with the comforts of life.

Elinor takes the view that wealth has much to do with happiness though by wealth she doesnt mean

great luxury, just enough to live carefully in moderate comfort. Marriage, without a reasonable economic basis, is folly.

Jane Austen is steering her way towards an elusive but crucial attitude. Money is in some ways extremely important and in other ways unimportant. We cant just be for it or against it. It sounds simple, of course, to assert this; and yet we are continually going wrong in practice.

Four: Dont be snobbish

In *Emma*, the heroine Emma herself takes Harriet Smith a pretty girl from the village under her wing. Harriet is a very pleasant, modest and unassuming young woman. But Emma decides she should be much more than this. She wants Harriet to make a impressive match with the smart vicar. Harriet is swept off her feet by Emmas excessive praise. She turns down a very suitable offer of marriage from a farmer, because she thinks him not good enough, though in fact he is thoroughly good hearted and quietly prosperous. The Vicar turns out to be horrified at Emmas idea and Harriet has her heart broken.

Its droll in the novel, but the underlying point is serious: Emma is unwittingly, but cruelly, snobbish. She is devoted to the wrong kind of hierarchy. Jane Austen does not think that the cure for snobbery is to think that everyone is equal. In her eyes, that would be immensely unjust. Rather, the real cure is to pay attention to true merit. The farmer is essentially a better person than the vicar; but social conventions and manners make it easy to ignore this.

Few people are deliberately snobbish. And Jane Austen is careful to give this fault to Emma, who is in many ways an enchanting character. But eventually Emma is corrected. We see her recognise her error, feel very sorry and learn a life-long lesson. In other words, Jane Austen does not mock snobbery as

the behaviour of ghastly and contemptible people. Instead, she regards the snob with pity as someone who lives a blighted life (however materially comfortable); they are in need of instruction, guidance and reform. But mostly, of course, they dont get this help.

But Austen does not simply assert her concept of true hierarchy with the bluntness of a preacher, she enlists our sympathies for it and marshals our abhorrence for its opposite with the skill and humour of a great novelist. She does not tell us why her sense of priorities is important, she shows us why within the context of a story which also happens to make us laugh and grips us enough that we want to finish supper early to read on (as an early critic of Austen, Richard Whately, later the Archbishop of Dublin, put it in the *Quarterly Review* of 1822: Miss Austen has the merit of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and of practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive. She might defy the most fastidious critic to call any of her novels a dramatic sermon.) Upon finishing one of the novels we are invited to go back into the sphere from which Austen has drawn us aside and respond to others as she has taught us, to pick up on and recoil from greed, arrogance and pride and to be drawn to goodness within ourselves and others.

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During her late thirties, Jane Austen had several productive years, living in a congenial and well-ordered house in the little village of Chawton in Hampshire. Her novels were increasingly well-received and she started making some money from them (though she never became famous because they were always published anonymously during her lifetime). In 1816, when she was forty, her health declined rapidly. She died the following year and was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Austen modestly and famously described her art as the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as produces little effect after much labour, but her novels are suffused with greater ambitions. Her art is an attempt, through what she called a study of three or four families in a country village to criticise and so alter life. She is the usual assumption that the exciting, important things are going on somewhere else and that we, unfortunately, are missing out.

Austen might have written sermons. She wrote novels instead. Sadly, we refuse to read her novels as Austen would have wanted. The moral ambition of the novel has largely disappeared in the modern world, yet it is really the best thing that a novel can do. The satisfaction we feel when reading Austen is really because she wants the world to be a certain way which we find immensely appealing; its the secret, largely unrecognised, reason why she is so much loved as a writer.