

THE ENGLISH NOVEL: INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

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Lecture 14

Pride and Prejudice III: Author Background & Context - II

Hello learners, and welcome once again.

This is the third lecture in the first novel that we have chosen to discuss in detail, that's *Pride and Prejudice*. In the previous lectures, I gave a brief introduction to the literary context in which Jane Austen began her career as a novelist, and I discussed at great length a quotation from her novel *Northanger Abbey*, in which the narrator described the contradictions that surrounded the act of reading novels, particularly novels that described female characters, and also the contradictions that surrounded the effects of reading novels on women.

These two contradictory attitudes shaped a great deal of the critical and creative energies within which Jane Austen's publishing career was shaped. In today's lecture, I will provide a much more detailed and specific contextual background to Jane Austen's life and career before setting up some of the ideas which will help us appreciate the novel under discussion, which is *Pride and Prejudice*.

Jane Austen was born in the year 1775 and died in 1817. These facts don't tell us much, but one thing which I will say before getting into a more detailed description of her life and career was that Jane Austen's life was marked by a combination of dependency and agency and both the dependency, kind of lack of choice or being forced to depend on the kindness of others, as well as agency, which reflected an empowerment and the ability to make choices based on one's own talent, labor and gifts. Both of these senses, the lack of choice and the ability to make choices, can be traced to the accident of birth or biology. To be more specific, to the fact that Jane Austen was born in the times that she was and that she was born a woman. To understand how the sense of dependency or the lack of choice plagued Jane Austen's life and career, one can very briefly remember that this was a time, as is generally true of pre-21st century England and Europe.

It was particularly true that in the 18th and 19th centuries in England, there was a severe lack of opportunity that was available to women. For a woman in Jane Austen's time, there was very little work to do. In fact, the only work that a woman of Jane Austen's time did could expect to do was the work of securing a wealthy husband. This, as many characters and in many of her novels have described in many different ways, securing a husband was the best possible way to secure a comfortable and sustainable future for a woman in 18th century England. As Charlotte Lucas puts it in *Pride and Prejudice*, and which we will discuss in subsequent lectures, marriage to a wealthy husband was the pleasantest way of securing oneself from want. So, this led to a great deal of frustration and despondency as well as a great reduction in the choices available to individuals who had the ability to think right and to make choices for themselves. So, one can imagine how an intelligent, spirited, talented and creatively gifted individual as Jane Austen was, would feel extremely trapped and extremely likely to move towards despair in such a stifling environment. Now, it also happened that Jane and her sister Cassandra, through a strange quirk of circumstance or through strict and singular decisions made on purpose, they either failed or refused to marry. That is to say, Jane and her sister Cassandra spent their adult lives depending on the kindness and multiple forms of kindnesses of benevolent men. That is to say, their father while he was alive and after he passed, their brothers, who had managed to secure a very, very comfortable and financially stable quite comfortable positions through a combination of marriage, trade and different kinds of professional training. These options, that is trade, education and professional training were not available to women, which meant that Jane and Cassandra were entirely dependent on the kindness of male relatives.

That explains a little bit of disempowerment and the general sense of dependency that characterized Jane Austen's life and career. On the other hand, however, there was also a very clear sense of agency and empowerment, which, although very feeble and not always very active, was clearly present and this was due to the creative impulse that Jane as a young girl began to nurture and the support that she received from her father. This is a biographical detail about which we don't have a great deal of evidence. But based on the work of several generations of scholars, we can safely assume that Jane had a very strong creative impulse.

As I will describe a little bit later, she began writing fiction books from a very young age, from the age of 11 by some biographers estimates and continued to write. Even after she became an adult and might have devoted her energies towards the most conventional and expected aim that is to secure a husband, she received a great deal of support, intellectual

as well as financial from her father to actually begin and establish a career as a professional writer. So, in this respect, Jane Austen was quite fortunate and also rare because a lot of men or a lot of fathers who had similar situations whose daughters had inclinations and talents in the publishing industry did not in this way encourage their writer daughters. So, this was a brief idea of understanding how both agency and its lack characterized Jane Austen's life and career.

Now, education is a hugely important theme for Jane Austen's fiction. Those of you who've read these novels, you'll realize how important education is. That doesn't come from the air. It comes from very real constraints that Jane and Cassandra faced in their lives. The biographical record that we have, which comprises letters written by Austen and preserved by her sister and other relatives, as well as memoirs written by her brothers and her nephew, from this record, it becomes clear that both the Austen sisters, that is Jane and Cassandra, were homeschooled. That is, they read and were taught the basics of literature, philosophy, music and the arts at home. There was a period when these two girls, that is Jane and Cassandra, were sent to Oxford to be tutored by Anne Cawley.

But it seems that they were called back after two years. Most biographers attribute this brief and short-lived education to lack of funds on the part of the biographers to Austin family. But for whatever reason, the fact is that the Austin sisters had a short-lived formal education and a much more long-lived and richly sustained homeschooling tenure. This difference between self-education and formal or structured education is reflected in Austen's fiction as well. Austen's novels reflect a mature attitude towards book learning and they often contrast the virtues of aptitude, emotions and intelligence over attributes such as formal or structured learning or the ability to reproduce what can be accessed through printed materials. And one very vivid instance of this very mature attitude towards learning and this skepticism towards book learning can be seen in a letter that Jane Austen wrote with regard to her novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

She often referred to this novel *Pride and Prejudice* as full of light and too airy, which is to say she was conscious of a perception that this novel might be considered too frivolous. And she writes in her letter that she often had a thought to add a great deal of padding, that is some material, some serious or boring or intellectual content to this novel *Pride and Prejudice*. And the kind of content she considered adding to her novel were, and she writes, and I quote, an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott or the history of Bonaparte i.e. some reference to the politics of the time, that is the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, some reference to the literary history of 18th and 19th century England, that is a

critique on Walter Scott, which was, Walter Scott was a hugely popular novelist of her time, so she considers writing some kind of an analytic prose on the novels or poems of Walter Scott, or an essay on writing. These are three instances of serious and seriously perceived forms of writing that *Pride and Prejudice* lacks. And she, that is, Austen in her letters, jokes that she considers, she often considered adding these things to the novel.

Now, of course, the fact is that she didn't. And the fact also is that this thought, this suggestion that a novel that is otherwise considered too frivolous may be made more serious through the addition of this kind of intellectual content is also made in jest. This is not a serious consideration. This is in fact a critique of certain attitudes towards writing by women. Why would a novel like *Pride and Prejudice* be considered too frivolous? Because it concerns the lives of women, because it concerns the struggles and the travails and the pitfalls and the anxieties and the joys that are experienced by a small group of women while they try to secure for themselves a wealthy husband. That summary, even though it is very inaccurate, captures only the very basic facts of the novel. In fact, the novel is much more intellectual as well as much more emotional than that, and the fact that this story might be considered frivolous is a reflection not on the novel itself, but rather how writing by women was perceived by the literary establishment.

So, this is a brief explication of how attitudes towards education shaped Jane Austen's career as well as her fiction. Now, continuing the theme of the lack of agency, I want to underline that a small fact which will help us understand a great divide between the brothers and sisters in the Austen household. So, Jane Austen was one of eight siblings, one of whom was born with a disability and of whom there is very little record in the preserved family archive. which is itself a comment on how disability and debility was perceived in late 18th century England.

We have very little to say about that other than to note that this lack of recognition exists and is reflected in the gaps in the historical record. Apart from this one sibling, there were seven others, two sisters and five brothers. All of these brothers did very well for themselves. James and Henry ended up as clergymen. Edward was the wealthiest who inherited multiple properties through his marriage and through different trade engagements and finally had an annual income from his properties of something between 10 and 15,000 pounds. This puts Edward at among the wealthiest of male protagonists in Jane Austen's novels and very close to Mr. Darcy, who we will encounter very shortly. in the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Now Francis and Charles, two other brothers, they made their way in the world by joining the Royal Naval Academy and continued to rise, that is to say, they

continued to get promoted and get higher ranks in the British Navy through the wars that kept progressing during Austin's lifetime.

These are the Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars. These wars are reflected in the fringes of the events in the novels and sometimes what happens on the fringes doesn't really stay on the fringe but makes its effect felt at the very heart of the novel. As we will very shortly encounter, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel that's written with a very clear perception of the threat of war. And this threat is manifested in the regiment of soldiers, that is the militia, the group of military men, that is soldiers who are posted for a few months to near the village of Longbourn.

This posting of this army is a direct consequence of the Napoleonic Wars and Austen had a very clear knowledge of both the facts of these wars and the kind of employment opportunities they provided to men like her brothers Francis and Charles. And finally, even more keenly and most astutely, Austen was aware of the implications of these wars and these forms of employment for men on the lives of women who did not get an opportunity to participate in these very public displays of masculine strength, but had to deal with the private consequences of employment and social power being given to men who decided to join the Royal Navy. So, we will see a very clearly delineated impact of these wars and the employment they gave to men in the characters of Wickham, most particularly, but also in the fate of characters like Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Now, given that these five brothers had done very well for themselves, Jane and Cassandra did not. Their careers are marked by a complete lack of financial stability or comfort as they, either through determination of personal choice, or through a lack of any opportunity, remained unmarried dependents. And just to contrast the sense of stability and comfort that the men enjoyed and the lack, thereof which was the fate of the women and to understand the great divide that existed between the brothers and the sisters and finally to understand how much and how deep was this dependence that Jane had to deal with. I want to mention that Jane's annual allowance while her father lived, was merely 20 pounds. This needs to be contrasted with the 10,000 to 15,000 pounds that Edward, who ended up as the most successful sibling in the Austen household, had at his disposal. Now, coming briefly to Austen's writing career, we can map it very roughly onto the properties that Jane inhabited as time passed. As I've mentioned multiple times already, Jane's domestic situation was characterized by a great deal of dependency.

As a woman, she could not own property and had to depend on the kindness of man and relatives. And as an unmarried woman, she had to depend on the kindness of her father and brothers. And so, while her parents aged, grew older and passed away, her own living arrangements also changed. Based on where she lived, one can roughly map the changes and the evolution in her publishing career as well.

Roughly, there are three stages into which we can divide Jane's domestic situation. The first can be called as the Steventon period. This was the period when Jane lived at the Steventon property where her father George was a rector, that is to say a clergyman. This was a very productive period. This is roughly the period when the first half of her writing career commenced and bore fruits.

The second period of stay is from the years 1801 to 1805. This was a period when little creative work was begun, but developments occurred in the financial development and the growth of Austen as a professional writer. This was when she lived in Southampton. And finally, from the years 1805 to 1817, this is the period when Jane Austen manifested the most sophisticated growth as a novelist as well as a professional writer. This is when she lived at her brother Edward's property, Chawton.

This is, after her father passed away and she moved with her sister and mother to Chawton. Now, in the first part of her career, Jane Austen wrote a lot. As I've mentioned before, a lot of her fiction was written for family entertainment. As I mentioned, she began writing prose fiction from the age of 11. This period, which saw the production of three novels, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*, as well as *Juvenalia*, is remarkable for how deeply it's influenced by the sentimental novel and how much it is also aware of the limitations of the sentimental novel.

Now, the sentimental novel is full of female protagonists who are deeply susceptible to strong emotions and who react very strongly to emotional turbulences. And a lot of these emotional turbulences have to do with the behavior of men. Most often they are romantic partners, but often they are not as well. Among the *Juvenalia*, the work that Jane Austen published initially only for family entertainment and was published posthumously much later, are three works. *Love and Friendship* was the first work of prose fiction of great length that she wrote in the year 1789, and this was followed by *Lady Susan* in 1794.

The characteristic that unites these two works is that they are deeply influenced by the kind of fiction that was greatly in vogue in the 18th century. In one of my earlier lectures, I discussed Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, which was a bestseller in 18th century England,

and which comprise letters written by a hapless young woman who was being assaulted by her employer. These two works, *Love and Friendship* and *Lady Susan* are influenced by this tradition. *Lady Susan* written in the year 1794 is a very remarkable for the way in which it receives and inverts that tradition. *Lady Susan* is an epistolary work of fiction, like *Pamela*, but while in *Pamela*, the woman is assaulted by powerful male rake, in *Lady Susan*, the woman herself plays the role of a sort of a female version of a rake. That is to say, the protagonist is a rich widow whose approach towards men is a little bit like the approach of rakes and very similar to the approach of Mr. B in *Pamela*.

So, one can see how Jane Austen was very richly aware of the trends that were in vogue in the world of literary publishing, but also had a very clear sense of the agency of women and had begun to think of creative ways of subverting the general lack of agency and opportunity that women faced. Now, in this same early phase of writing, when she was producing work which was aimed more for entertaining her own family and less for the market. Jane also wrote a work titled *Catherine or the Bower*, which scholars see as a rehearsal for *Susan*, which would later become *Northanger Abbey*. Now, this work, *Catherine or the Bower*, written in the year 1791, occupies a different terrain and a different tone from *Love and Friendship* and *Lady Susan*. While those two works, *Love and Friendship* and *Lady Susan*, are deeply influenced by the sentimental tradition, *Catherine of the Bower* is sort of an anticipation of Jane Austen's own novels, which would emerge later. And they are much more realist and they occupy a much more somber emotional terrain.

Now, from the year 1795 onwards, Jane Austen was at work on three full-length novels. This was the time when she wrote *First Impressions*, the draft of a novel which was offered to a publisher in 1797 but was unfortunately declined at that time and was later published as *Pride and Prejudice*. This, as most of you will know, has today become the most famous and the most well-known of all of Austen's novels.

But in her career, it was a relatively early work and the writer we find in *Pride and Prejudice* is a writer who is still discovering herself, who is still discovering her strengths, and who is inhabiting very cautiously multiple literary traditions. The literary tradition most consciously that the narrator is occupying in *Pride and Prejudice* is that of a sentimental novel in which the only viable career option available to most women is that of securing a wealthy husband. Now, within this tradition, of course, Jane Austen adds a great deal of nuance, a great deal of sophistication, and a great deal of intellectual and

critical probity. Now, the other two novels that Jane Austen was developing in this time were *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*.

The second part of her writing career is known as the Chawton period. This is the period in which she wrote and composed and developed for a literary market the work that is considered as the strongest and most sophisticated of her entire career and these are the novels *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*. This is also the period when Austen embraced more completely her role as a professional author. This is also the period when the fiction that was composed in the earlier period, that is *Pride and Prejudice*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, found the right kind of literary and financial institution and were transformed from simply the manuscripts produced by a gifted and intelligent individual and became commodities that would very effectively target and create a very sophisticated reading public.

In the next lecture, we will discuss some of the attitudes that today determine our reception of Jane Austen and how the opening page of *Pride and Prejudice* can help us both understand those attitudes and go beyond them to achieve a much more complete understanding and appreciation of this very powerful novelist.

Thank you!