

Why was Charlotte Brontë Critical of the Writings of Jane Austen?

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Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) were two English novelists whose books *, published in the early to mid-nineteenth century, were immediately successful. Their popularity has continued ever since, not only in their own country, but all over the world. Jane Austen is famous for her witty, ironic style, and for the preference she shows in her novels for reason and intelligence to take precedence over passion and impulse. Charlotte Brontë's books, equally well-known and loved, possess romance, realism, and an imaginative, almost poetic, use of language to describe society's injustices and inequalities.

What Jane Austen might have thought of the works of Charlotte Brontë, we can never know, since their lives overlapped by only one year. Would she have been shocked by the passion and frankness of *Jane Eyre*, as were some of its Victorian readers? Perhaps not, since she was brought up in the less prudish eighteenth century. Would she, who fully accepted the social conventions of her world, have been puzzled by Charlotte's rebellion against them? Possibly, since she enjoyed the society in which she grew up, and highly valued good manners and self control. Would she have thought them overly melodramatic? Maybe, since she made fun of her own era's popular novels, which were full of mystery and sentiment.

We do, however, know what Charlotte Brontë thought of her predecessor's works, since she was quite outspokenly critical of them. In 1848 Charlotte Brontë read for the first time a Jane Austen novel, namely, *Pride and Prejudice*. She didn't much admire it. It may seem strange that it took so long before she read this novel, for it was first published in 1813 and was very popular. The Brontë children, moreover, were great readers, and had, from their earliest childhood, not only free access to their

* Jane Austen : *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Persuasion* (1818).

Charlotte Brontë : *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853), *The Professor* (1857).

father's extensive library, but also his permission to borrow books from the nearest circulating library. The following excerpt from a letter Charlotte wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey on July 4th, 1834, shows what kind of books she was reading :

“. . . You ask me to recommend you some books for your perusal. I will do so in as few words as I can. If you like poetry, let it be first-rate ; Milton, Shakspeare, Thomson, Goldsmith, Pope (if you will, though I don't admire him), Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth, and Southey. . . . For history, read Hume, Rollin, and the Universal History, if you *can* ; I never did. For fiction, read Scott alone ; all novels after his are worthless. For biography, read Johnson's Lives of the Poets, Boswell's Life of Johnson, Southey's Life of Nelson, Lockhart's Life of Burns, Moore's Life of Byron, Wolfe's Remains. For natural history, read Bewick and Audubon, and Goldsmith, and White's History of Selborne. . . ”.

(Mrs. Gaskell : *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 151-152)

The sentence “For fiction, read Scott alone ; all novels after his are worthless” is indicative of the type of fiction which Charlotte preferred. By “Scott”, Charlotte was referring to Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), whose best-known novels - *Waverley*, *Guy Mannering*, *Rob Roy*, *The Heart of Midlothian*, *Ivanhoe*, and *Kenilworth* - were all published between 1814 and 1821. Immensely popular, Scott's historical romances gave new prestige to prose fiction, which had hitherto been considered not quite respectable. They were eagerly read by the Brontë children, who were fascinated by their mixture of chivalry, mystery, romance and adventure.

Of *Kenilworth*, Charlotte had this to say, in writing to Ellen :

“I am glad you like “Kenilworth ;” it is certainly more resembling a romance than a novel : in my opinion, one of the most interesting works that ever emanated from the great Sir Walter's pen. Varney is certainly the personification of consummate villainy ; and in the delineation of his dark and profoundly artful mind, Scott exhibits a wonderful knowledge of human nature, as well as a surprising skill in embodying his perceptions, so as to enable others to become participators in that knowledge”.

(Mrs. Gaskell : *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p.146)

This freedom to read stimulated the minds and imaginations of the four Brontë children to the extent that they began writing : Emily and Anne the “Gondal” stories, Branwell and Charlotte the saga of “Angria”, a place full of romance, passion, strong characters, and dramatic adventures, very different from the isolated and lonely Haworth parsonage where they lived. These early writings of Charlotte are important for their influence on her later work.

Following the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, Charlotte was encouraged by the critic, G.H. Lewes, to read the novels of Jane Austen. She wrote to him on January 12, 1848 commenting on *Pride and Prejudice* :

“If I ever *do* write another book, I think I will have nothing of what you call “melodrama ;” I *think* so, but I am not sure. I *think*, too, I will endeavour to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen’s “mild eyes”, “to finish more and be more subdued”; but neither am I sure of that. Why do you like Miss Austen so very much ? I am puzzled on that point. What induced you to say that you would have rather written “Pride and Prejudice” or “Tom Jones”, than any of the Waverley Novels ?

I had not seen “Pride and Prejudice” till I read that sentence of yours, and then I got the book. And what did I find? An accurate, daguerreotyped portrait of a commonplace face, a carefully-fenced, highly-cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers ; but no glance of a bright, vivid physiognomy, no open country, no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck. I should hardly like to live with her ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses. These observations will probably irritate you, but I shall run the risk.

Now I can understand admiration of George Sand ; for though I never saw any of her works which I admired throughout. . . . yet she has a grasp of mind, which, if I cannot fully comprehend, I can very deeply respect ; she is sagacious and profound ; - Miss Austen is only shrewd and observant.”

(Mrs. Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 336-337)

These were harsh words to write to a great admirer of Jane Austen’s work, and they resulted in an immediate reply on the part of G. H. Lewes, and another letter from Charlotte written on January 18 (only six days after her initial letter - one has to admire both the efficiency of the Victorian postal system and Charlotte’s own indus-

triousness !), in which she says

“ . . . you add, I *must* “learn to acknowledge her as *one of the greatest artists, of the greatest painters of human character*, and one of the writers with the nicest sense of means to an end that ever lived”.

The last point only will I ever acknowledge.

Can there be a great artist without poetry ?

. . . Miss Austen being, as you say, without “sentiment,” without *poetry*, maybe *is* sensible, real (more *real* than *true*), but she cannot be great.

I submit to your anger, which I have now excited (for have I not questioned the perfection of your darling ?) ; the storm may pass over me. Nevertheless, I will, when I can diligently peruse all Miss Austen's works, as you recommend. . . . ”

(Mrs. Gaskell : *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p.338)

There is no record of whether Charlotte did, in fact, “diligently peruse” the five other novels of Jane Austen, or ever change her opinion to one of greater appreciation. It seems unlikely, however, in view of her strong feelings on what a good story should consist of. In a later letter, written in 1850, she makes this further comment on Jane Austen :

“ . . . She does her business of delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. . . What sees keenly, speaks aptly , moves flexibly, it suits her to study ; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death - this Miss Austen ignores. She no more, with her mind's eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not senseless) woman. If this is heresy, I cannot help it. ”

(from Penguin edition of *Jane Eyre*, Introduction by Q.D. Leavis, p.10-11)

Charlotte Brontë wanted more from a story than a superficial description. She wanted a portrayal of life with all its experiences, from tragedy to comedy, both the bitter and

the sweet, and an acknowledgment of all the undercurrents and impulses which affect people's behavior.

Let us look at the two writers and see how their different lives and experiences affected their books. Jane Austen came from a family who often enjoyed themselves by putting pen to paper. Her father, George Austen, had a great love of literature, which he imparted to his children by reading aloud from his favorite books. Her mother, Cassandra, enjoyed composing comic verse. From an early age, Jane also contributed to the family entertainment with her own stories, which are notable for their mischievous humor, and ". . . showed a formidably keen eye to perceive human folly" (David Cecil, *Portrait of Jane Austen*, p.61).

On reading about the Austen family, one's impression is of a happy, united, articulate, and talented group. They were well-read and well-bred. Their position in society, living among the country gentry, was secured by their family connections. George Austen, though left a penniless orphan at the age of nine, came from a wealthy merchant family, some of whose members provided him with an education and a living. Cassandra Austen was even better socially connected, with aristocratic relatives such as the Leighs of Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire and a great uncle who was the first Duke of Chandos. The young Jane Austen was as much accustomed to visiting friends and relatives in stately homes and mansions as she was to joining in the social life of provincial Steventon, her father's parish. Without being directly autobiographical, she wrote about what she knew, the kind of life that people in her class of society led.

What was England like for the middle and upper classes in Jane Austen's day? The years 1714-1830 are known as the Georgian era, from the names of the four kings who reigned during that period. At the highest level of society, it was a time of great wealth, when huge fortunes could be amassed by trade on the world markets. For those who had or inherited property, income could be generated through investments, rents from land, sale of timber, and so on. Money was spent lavishly on building magnificent country-houses and filling them with the finest products of the age : furniture by Sheraton, Hepplewhite, and Chippendale, and porcelain from the factories of Wedgwood, Worcester, Derby, and Chelsea. Landscape gardening also reached its apogee at this time, with lawns and lakes, shrubberies and flower gardens all serving to enhance the beauty of the buildings. The lives of the people who inhabited this

world of elegance and luxury had a definite rhythm or pattern. Part of the year would be spent at home in the country, where the gentlemen would oversee the management of their estates, and for leisure go hunting, shooting or fishing, and the ladies would supervise life inside the house, raise their families, entertain their neighbors, and for relaxation they might sew or paint, or enjoy music in some form.

This fashionable world spent the months of May, June, and July in London, attending or giving private parties or balls, going to concerts or the theatre, visiting exhibitions, meeting friends, or shopping for all the things not available in the country. When the London season came to an end, they might go to one of the famous spa towns such as Bath, to drink or bathe in the hot spring water. Visiting seaside resort towns was also becoming increasingly popular in Georgian times. Brighton in Sussex, or Lyme Regis in Dorset, attracted many visitors who believed in the health-giving benefits of bathing in sea water ; and, as the roads improved, travelling around the country looking at places of interest was yet another way of passing some time pleasantly.

Even without being extremely wealthy, most middle-class people could to some extent lead a similar kind of existence : if you did not own a house in London, one could be rented ; if you had no carriage, one could be hired. For shorter journeys, there were plenty of inns to stay at, or, in those days of large families, you could plan a journey by travelling from relative to relative.

This lifestyle was familiar to Jane Austen and she could write about it easily. Pretty much as she herself might have done, we find the characters in her novels making journeys from their homes in the country to spend time in Bath - the Elliots in *Persuasion*, or Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* ; visiting Lyme Regis - the Musgrave family and Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* ; making a group excursion to Box Hill, a well - known scenic spot - in *Emma* ; or going on a trip to the north of England - Elizabeth Bennet and the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice*.

When at home, they pursued their daily routines, some more diligently than others. Mr. Knightley in *Emma* has much to discuss with his brother when the latter returns home on a visit. “. . . As a magistrate, he had generally some point of law to consult John about. . . as a farmer, he had to tell what every field was to bear next year. . . . The plan of a drain, the change of a fence, the felling of a tree, and the destination of every acre for wheat, turnips, or spring corn. . . .” (Chapter 12).

Lady Bertram in *Northanger Abbey* is less busily employed. “To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for

such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty. . . her girls. . . were under the care of a governess, with proper masters, and could want nothing more. . . ” (Chapter 2).

What did Jane Austen’s young ladies do at home, once they had passed the age of requiring a governess? *Northanger Abbey*’s seventeen-year-old Catherine Morland, “. . . just returned from her first excursion from home. . . ” (Chapter 29), (in fact sent home by the unexpected inhospitality of General Tilney), found it so hard to settle down to her needlework that her mother “. . . could no longer refrain from the gentle reproof of, ‘My dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady. I do not know when poor Richard’s cravats would be done, if he had no friend but you. Your head runs too much upon Bath ; but there is a time for everything - a time for balls and plays, and a time for work. You have had a long run of amusement, and now you must try to be useful. . . ’”(Chapter 30).

Being able to play a musical instrument and sing was considered a necessary accomplishment for young ladies. At an evening party at Sir William Lucas’s house (*Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 6), Charlotte Lucas requested her friend Elizabeth Bennet to play and sing for them. “. . . Her performance was pleasing, though by no means capital. After a song or two, and before she could reply to the entreaties of several that she would sing again, she was eagerly succeeded at the instrument by her sister Mary, who. had neither genius nor taste ; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner, which would have injured a higher degree of excellence than she had reached. Elizabeth, easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well. . . ”.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne “. . . was discovered to be musical. . . . The instrument was unlocked, everybody was prepared to be charmed, and Marianne, who sang very well. . . . was highly applauded. . . ” (Chapter 7) .

Miss Crawford, in *Mansfield Park*, was “. . . A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself. . . she played with the greatest obligingness, with an expression and taste which were peculiarly becoming, and there was something clever to be said at the close of every air. . . ” (Chapter 7).

Exercise for young ladies was limited to walking or riding. In *Pride and Prejudice*, (Chapter 7), Elizabeth “. . . continued her walk alone, crossing field after field

at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity, and finding herself at last within view of the house, with weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise. . . ". In *Mansfield Park* (Chapter 4), when Fanny Price's old pony dies, she ". . . was in danger of feeling the loss in her health. . . ". However, her cousin Edmund bought another mare for her to use and ". . . her delight in Edmund's mare was far beyond any former pleasure of that sort. . . ".

For young ladies of that era, attaining accomplishments, being well-read, or able to discourse intelligently, were assets in making a good marriage, but Jane Austen shows clearly that they were very much a matter of individual perseverance. As Elizabeth Bennet (*Pride and Prejudice*, Chapter 29) remarks, ". . . such of us as wished to learn never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might. . . ".

Although England was in a state of turmoil both at home and abroad for much of Jane Austen's life (1775-1817), this is barely touched upon in her novels. The American War of Independence officially ended in 1783, the French Revolution lasted from 1789-1799, war with France continued from 1793-1815, and from 1812-1814 England was again at war with America. Within the country, the Industrial Revolution was causing serious social upheaval through the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. The avoidance of these topics could not have been due to any lack of interest on Jane Austen's part. Her cousin Eliza Hancock married a Frenchman, Comte de Feuillede, who was guillotined in 1794 during the French Revolution, and with two brothers in the navy, she was certainly aware of the war at sea. In Chapter 8 of *Persuasion* there is a slight reference to it when Captain Wentworth describes the ships he had commanded and mentions having ". . . the good luck to fall in with the very French frigate I wanted. I brought her into Plymouth. . . ", and for Anne Elliot, on becoming engaged to him, ". . . the dread of a future war (was) all that could dim her sunshine. . . " (Chapter 24) ; and perhaps some of Jane's own feelings about her brothers are put into her descriptions of Fanny and William Price in *Mansfield Park*. William was Fanny's favorite brother, and she listened with ". . . deep interest. . . absorbed attention, while her brother was describing any of the imminent hazards, or terrific scenes, which such a period at sea must supply. . . . Young as he was, William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean ; in the West Indies ; in the Mediterranean again ; . . . and in the course

of seven years had known every variety of danger which sea and war together could offer. . . ” (Chapter 24).

Why didn't Jane Austen, in her writings, have more to say on such major events as revolution and war? In the two examples quoted above, we are, in fact, looking at Captain Wentworth and William only through the eyes and feelings of the two heroines, Anne Elliot and Fanny Price. Since their normal daily lives were not otherwise affected by world events, these are not mentioned in the novels. In addition, Jane Austen's books are, above all, humorous, hence tragic events have no place in them. To quote David Cecil, her "work can be described as a realistic picture of social and domestic life, seen from a woman's point of view and treated in a spirit of comedy." (*A Portrait of Jane Austen*, p.144).

For Charlotte Brontë, this way of looking at people was too superficial, hence her remark in the letter quoted earlier about Jane Austen ". . . delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people. . . ". She considered Austen's books competent and skilful, but lacking in real feeling. There was more to the business of life than the marrying off of daughters or the searching for husbands. In the Brontë novels, the characters are much more fully drawn and the plots are far more complicated. Charlotte Brontë's own position, and that of her sisters, made her acutely aware of the realities of a life with little social or financial security. Like Jane Austen, she had no independent income except what she might make by her own efforts. However, Jane Austen's milieu was that of the upper middle classes and though totally dependent on her family and obliged to be careful in her expenditure, her position within the large Austen family was relatively secure. She never, for example, considered leaving home to find a job. Charlotte Brontë, on the other hand, did have this experience, and used it to great effect in her stories. In *The Professor*, *Villette*, and *Jane Eyre*, the three heroines, Frances Henri, Lucy Snowe, and Jane Eyre, all face isolation and dependency in a hostile world, but struggle against, challenge, and eventually overcome a social order which tries to deny them the right to retain their own individuality, and to regard themselves as equals in a male-dominated world. This is a serious theme, and the pain and anguish experienced by the main characters is no laughing matter. All their deeper impulses and feelings are described, in a way that Jane Austen would never have attempted.

Charlotte Brontë was also influenced by the Romantic movement associated with the writings of Lord Byron (1788-1824), whose poetry, read in childhood, had

stimulated her imagination in inventing the characters and happenings in Angria. In the description of the Byronic figure of the Duke of Zamorna of Angria “. . . His hair was intensely black, curled luxuriantly, but the forehead underneath. . . looked white and smooth as ivory. His eyebrows were black and broad, but his long eyelashes and large clear eyes were deep sepia brown. . . ” (*Juvenilia*, p.232), can be seen the forerunner of Mr. Rochester “. . . with his broad and jetty eyebrows, his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. . . his decisive nose. . . he had great dark eyes, and very fine eyes, too. . . ” (*Jane Eyre*, Chapter 13 & 14). By comparison, there is rarely any detailed physical description of the characters in Jane Austen's novels. We learn that they are “handsome”, “pretty”, “good-looking”, or “plain”, “bulky”, or “slender”, but little as to the color of eyes or hair. Similarly, not much space is given to descriptions of places or apparel. We learn far more about personality and behavior, Jane Austen's primary interest, than about looks.

Emotion, also, was far more strongly portrayed in the novels of Charlotte Brontë than in those of Jane Austen. Witness the language of Mr. Rochester after Jane refuses to stay with him once she knows of the existence of his wife “. . . Jane, this is bitter ! This - this is wicked. It would not be wicked to love me. . . Give one glance to my horrible life when you are gone. All happiness will be torn away with you. . . you condemn me to live wretched, and to die accursed ? . . . My deep love, my wild woe, my frantic prayer, are all nothing to you ? . . . Jane, cast a glance on my sufferings - think of me. . . ” (*Jane Eyre*, Chapter 27), and compare it with the cooler Mr Knightley when asking Emma to marry him but afraid of her response “. . . My dearest Emma, . . . for dearest you will always be, whatever the event of this hour's conversation, my dearest, most beloved Emma - tell me at once. Say 'No', if it is to be said. . . You are silent. . . absolutely silent ! At present I ask no more. . . I cannot make speeches, Emma. . . If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more. . . ” (*Emma*, Chapter 49).

The three books by Charlotte Brontë mentioned above (*Villette*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*) are to some extent autobiographical, since their author had to earn her living as a governess, went to Belgium to study, and fell in love with her professor. Her experiences during her childhood, when she was employed as a teacher, and while she lived in Belgium, are made use of in her novels sufficiently closely for them to be recognized as such. They are therefore much more impassioned than the works of Jane Austen, who wrote as a detached observer of her characters' lives.

Charlotte Brontë's own life would in any case have precluded the kind of light-hearted writing that was characteristic of Jane Austen. From an early age, she was no stranger to death, with the loss of her mother in 1821, when she was only five years old, and her sisters Maria and Elizabeth in 1825. Never strong, her health was not improved by the insalubrious surroundings of the Haworth parsonage. Obligated through family circumstances to try and earn her own living as a governess, she loathed the teaching positions she accepted in a school (in 1835), and, later, in private homes (in 1839 and 1841). Her visit to Brussels from 1842-1844 ended in the anguish of unrequited love. Branwell, her brother, died in 1848, and with the subsequent loss of her sister Emily, also in 1848, and then her sister Anne in 1849, she suffered unbearable loneliness. For Charlotte Brontë, writing was of especial importance. In a letter to her publishers written on completion of her novel *Shirley* in 1849, she said ". . . Whatever now becomes of the work, the occupation of writing it has been a boon to me : it took me out of dark and desolate reality into an unreal but happier region. . . ." (Gérin, p.395).

With so much personal tragedy, she put both heart and soul into her stories. In the letter quoted above, she continued ". . . You can write nothing of value unless you give yourself wholly to the theme, and when you so give yourself you lose appetite and sleep - it cannot be helped" (Gérin, p.395).

Charlotte Brontë was well aware of the dark side of life, and did not ignore it. Jane Austen was no doubt equally aware of it, but considered it had no place in her books. As she wrote in Chapter 48 of *Mansfield Park*, commenting on the elopement of Mrs Rushworth and Henry Crawford, "Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest."

It could be said that Jane Austen lived in sunlight, and Charlotte Brontë in sorrow, and that this is reflected in their books. There is humor in Charlotte Brontë's books, and there is pain in Jane Austen's. However, just as the purely light-hearted comedy of Jane Austen cannot be found in Charlotte Brontë, so the latter's impassioned writing cannot be found in Austen.

On the subject of style, Charlotte Brontë, replying to criticism of *Jane Eyre*, wrote ". . . imagination is a strong, restless faculty, which claims to be heard and exercised : are we to be quite deaf to her cry, and insensate to her struggles ? When she shows us bright pictures, are we never to look at them, and try to reproduce them ?

And when she is eloquent, and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear, are we not to write to her dictation? . . ." (Mrs. Gaskell, *Life*, p.330).

Jane Austen, in *Northanger Abbey*, praised novels ". . . in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. . ." (Chapter 5).

The modern reader can justifiably be puzzled by Charlotte Brontë's dislike of Jane Austen's novels, since the individualistic style of each of these great writers is the major reason for the continuing popularity of their work. Jane Austen has left us a charming record of life among a certain class of people in the early nineteenth century. Charlotte Brontë portrayed with devastating and moving truth the position in her society of single, intelligent women, be they rich or poor.

For readers today, the books are perfect as they are. The poetry and drama of Charlotte's writing would be inappropriate in an Austen novel. Fortunately, Jane Austen was well aware of her own limitations as an author and kept within them. It seems a pity that Charlotte Brontë, who had little joy in her life, could not have let *Pride and Prejudice* entertain and amuse her as it has all its other readers.

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