



Jane Austen - Great Christian Novelist

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Introduction

Why the growing popularity of Jane Austen? Is it accidental, a typical postmodern temporary fad, or is there some deeper reason for the recent films of Jane Austen's novels?

In fact, there has been a growing interest over the past 20-25 years. The BBC produced *Pride and Prejudice* back in the late 70's for television in a dozen or so half-hour episodes.

Then, in the 80's came television versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*, and a film of *Northanger Abbey*.

In the early 90's the BBC also produced *Persuasion* for television, a shortened version of this being released as a successful movie.

Then a new BBC version of *Pride and Prejudice* was aired on television in the UK in the 90's, and in the USA, and in many other countries.

Around the same time *Sense and Sensibility* was released as a film — and also *Clueless*, a very loose adaptation of *Emma* set in a Beverly Hills High School.

Then two other films of *Emma* in the movie pipeline and these are due for release later this year.

Sense and Sensibility was the most widely seen movie, setting off such large sales of the book that it was in the *New York Times top ten* fiction list for several months (along with the latest

offerings of John Grisham and Tom Clancy) reaching as high as no. 5.

As well as the increased sales of her novels in English these television and film versions spawned new translations of Jane Austen's books into many languages.

However, the new *Pride and Prejudice* is probably the best produced of all the adaptations so far — the BBC making it not as a normal TV video but spending lavishly on it to produce a 5-6 hour feature film shown in Britain in six episodes. There it was wildly popular with what seemed like half the nation watching it every Sunday evening (and the repeats each week on Saturdays), and then everyone talking about it at work on Mondays, and even the daily rags (sensational newspapers) having front page articles and photographs on the state of Darcy and Elizabeth's romance week by week.

Every book store I passed by that October in England had a full center window display on Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* and the making of the film.

Millions of people have been watching and reading Jane Austen.

Why the popularity: Nostalgia for Romanticism?

Longing for manners and courtesy in an age of culture war?

1. Jane Austen was no Romantic
Jane Austen was not interested in making herself known (quite unlike Romantic novelists like Charlotte Bronte).

Sense and Sensibility makes her rejection of Romanticism clear in its presentation of the discourteous, self-centered, ultimately self-destructive face of Romanticism in the person of Marianne.

2. Beautifully written novels
'The little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush as to produce little effect after much labor.'

Jane Austen writing to her nephew, Edward

Austen-Leigh, November, 1816.

There is nothing extraneous - every sentence furthers the story or the revelation of character.

3. Ability to capture character

Her characters are not drawn from life, but from her own imagination.

A gallery of unforgettable individuals.

Each person has his or her own speech patterns – there is no other novelist who accomplishes this so well.

4. A profound moral and spiritual vision

These works are touching a deeper chord in the human soul. The books (and the films) teach the importance of self-control, of courtesy, of a mannerly consideration for others, but these are presented, not simply as nice behavior, but as moral characteristics by Jane Austen, characteristics which arise from the profound sense of a Christian moral order which pervades all of the novels.

In several of the books the main characters have experiences of a profound and permanent transformation, which reads like a conversion or deep repentance, when they 'see' their own blindness, moral failure and lack of self-knowledge. This is true of both Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*, and of Emma in *Emma*; also to a lesser extent of Anne Eliot in *Persuasion*, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* and Edmund in *Mansfield Park*.

It is the individuals who fail to come to this realization of their own folly (who do not 'repent'), whose lives come to ruin and disgrace, or increasing shallowness and perpetual self-indulgence: Wickham and Lydia, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice*; Lucy Steele, Robert Ferrars, John and Fanny Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*; Mrs. Norris, Maria Bertram, Henry and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*.

There is a moral and Christian vision communicated in Jane Austen's books, and it is this I believe that is touching such a deep chord in the hearts and minds of our postmodern contemporaries.

5. Humor

'What about the humor?' - Jane Austen's books are indeed hilariously funny. She has a sharp and amused eye for human folly and failure in all its diverse forms. Even her heroes and heroines ought to be laughed at and with, and several of them have to learn this themselves. It is this delightful humor which makes Jane Austen's moral vision acceptable, even to our relativistic generation.

The stories are subversive and work like Jesus' parables. The humor and the ironic insight into human sin get under your skin, and then you find yourself on board for the ride as you enter further into her very serious journey of understanding into the human condition.

Jane Austen was most certainly a Christian believer. She was also, I think, the finest novelist to write in the English language. If you haven't read her novels: 'Start now!'