

Is Jane Austen Frivolous?

Making peace with novels about quips and romance

Kelsey Osgood Follow Oct 17, 2017 · 9 min read



She doesn't LOOK frivolous

In *Late to the Party*, we ask writers to read a seminal author who has somehow passed them by. You can read previous entries here.

As an adolescent prone to black-and-white thinking, I assumed there were two kinds of people in this world: people who were interested in love, and people who were interested in death. I counted myself proudly in the latter category. I didn't understand how anyone could settle for the confectionary earthliness of love when meaty, cosmic death was on the table. When love turned dark and inched toward death, as it does in many novels (*Lolita*, *The Lover*, and *Season of Migration to the North* spring to mind), I could get on board, but otherwise, I considered romance the domain of the frivolous. The marriage plot novel, then, was an even greater blight: it was frivolity once removed, a frivolous investigation of people preoccupied with the frivolous. The work of Jane Austen, therefore, was obviously a non-starter, no matter how much it was considered to be critically and culturally beyond reproach.

I might have chugged along happily for the rest of my life without ever reading Austen, had I not moved to England in 2015. It wasn't an easy transition: I was aimless and lonely a lot, the latter no doubt owing to my confusion at the rules of interpersonal conduct, so different from the forthrightness New Yorkers were known for. At first, I found myself frequently enraged at listening to someone relay a message using one hundred words, when they could have summed it up neatly using ten. During phone conversations with plumbers or pizza delivery men, I'd often try to trap them into saying "no," which is basically a swear word for nonconfrontational Brits.

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But in my two years living here, I've found myself—yes, I'll say it—falling in love with the peculiar British character: repressed, evasive, witty if a bit wordy, enamored of their history, a bit classist at times, but tough and lacking in self-pity. Who could resist the charms of a culture that wields a seemingly innocuous word like "quite" as a weapon of passive-aggression? Couched in so many qualifiers, an insult won't be felt until after impact, when you're already crumpled on the floor, clutching your spurting jugular. It's really quite impressive.

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I decided, therefore, to break my own rule and dip into Austen: a giant of literature who on the one hand transcends nationality, but on the other, is so specifically British in her worldview and so beloved by Brits. (She's the second woman, apart from the Queen, to have her face grace paper tender.) I wanted to hear about England, in other words, from one of its most beloved native daughters.

The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* needs no recounting—or anyway, I didn't seek any out despite never having read it (I had seen *Bridget Jones's Diary* a few times, although I embarrassingly didn't realize that it was based on *Pride and Prejudice* until I read the book). Though I knew how the book concludes going into it—and suspect I would have figured it out almost immediately even if I hadn't, as Austen doesn't seem too worried about building suspense—I decided to refrain from reading the many, many works of commentary to the text before I began: the academic papers, the think-pieces and paens, the riffs and re-makings. I wanted to come to the text the way I would have at fourteen, when all I would have had to inform my reading was a set of encyclopedias, the introduction to the book and the endnotes. I wanted to see if my 33-year-old self—less jaded in many ways than her teenage precursor, but still inclined towards darkness over light, and severity over fun—could become smitten with Austen the way people have since its initial publication in 1813.

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And you know what? I was besotted. Sure, the language wasn't as poetic and descriptive as I might prefer, but I don't think one reads Austen for inventive metaphors and swooning lyricism. The real appeal here is the view of the historical era, and the wry, winking banter—just the stuff I'd fallen in love with over the course of my time in England. Take for example, a moment in chapter five of *Pride and Prejudice*, when Mrs. Hurst and the protagonist Elizabeth Bennett, out on a walk, encounter Fitzwilliam Darcy and a female companion. Seeing that the path is only wide enough for three—and disinclined toward the heroine Elizabeth's outspokenness—the other two women grab the arms of Mr. Darcy and begin to strike out. When Darcy makes a move toward including her, Elizabeth responds with a subtle barb: "You are charmingly group'd, and appear to uncommon advantage. The picturesque would be spoilt by admitting a fourth." The notes to my edition (written by British academic Vivien Leigh) clarify:

Elizabeth refers jokingly to the contemporary cult of the picturesque, a fashion in both landscape appreciation and garden design which emphasized a painterly aesthetic... The allusion here is to [William] Gilpin's *Observations, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty... particularly the Mountains, and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmorland* (1786), where... he explains... his "doctrine of grouping larger cattle": "Two will hardly combine... But with three, you are almost sure of a good group... Four will introduce a new difficulty in grouping..."

So in the most essentially British way ever (by invoking landscape gardening, nonetheless), Elizabeth refers to the two catty ladies as cows. This book, I realized, was as much about delivering the killer comeback as it was about snagging the right man.

Jane Austen Letter Reveals the Author's Guilty Pleasure—Yes, It's a Kind of Book Plus this decade's Little Women squad is officially assembling electricliterature.com

Though the time period in which the book takes place is not one I'd opt to inhabit if given the choice, it's amusing to get a glimpse of it—this explains the appeal of, among many other things, *Downton Abbey*—and to imagine what you would be like if you were forced to follow the rules the characters are beholden to. Would you be like Elizabeth, spirited and unconventional (on which, more later), or like her sister Lydia, so eager to get married she runs off with the first guy who looks at her? Would you obsess over money and hierarchy, like Mrs. Bennett, or carve out a little space for yourself away from society, as her husband does? Despite most of the characters living in large homes outside of town, society has the potential to suffocate them: information about who is refusing to dance or who is coming back to inhabit his country manse is constantly being exchanged in drawing rooms (though fewer drawing rooms than I'd been led to believe) or lengthy epistles. The Bennett sisters even take trips into the local village specifically for the purpose of hearing gossip. But none of the characters, with the exception of perhaps one, seems particularly bothered by the smallness of their world. On the contrary, all the buzz is enlivening to them, and to the world of the novel itself. It makes the book exactly as Austen herself described it: "too light & bright & sparkling."

One aspect of the story, however, continues to rankle me: the fact that everything works out just a *little* too perfectly in the end. This is what I find both charming and annoying—but mostly annoying—about what, for simplicity's sake, I'll call chick lit (sorry, Jennifer Weiner). Elizabeth is a plucky, winning heroine, for sure. She trudges through the mud to visit her ill sister, propriety be damned; she refuses a strategically viable marriage proposal because the suitor is a putz. She speaks candidly, and a bit caustically, before someone of greater social stature in her stand-off with the condescending Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a choice that obviously has a risk attached. Elizabeth reminded me a little of my younger self, who thought not only that reading about love was stupid, but that all men were stupid, and pursuing them, therefore, to be the same. "What are men to rocks and mountains?" she asks rhetorically when her aunt offers to tour around the Lake District with her.

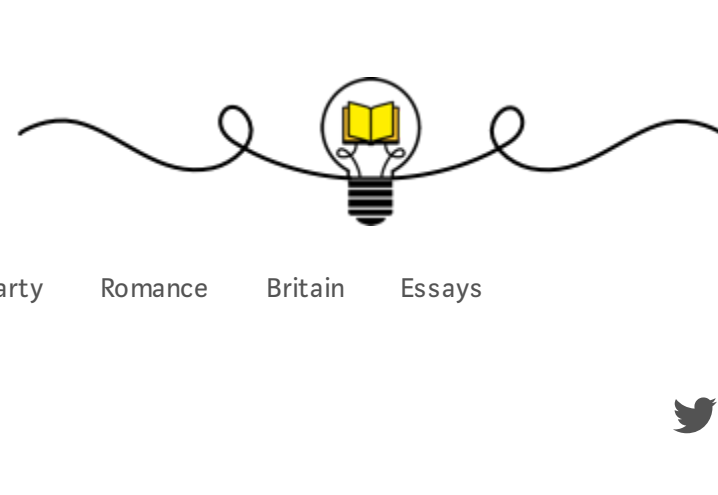
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However, I had been under the impression prior to reading the book that Elizabeth was something of a revolutionary figure, when in reality she doesn't so much upend the rigid strictures of her society as determine a way to fit neatly within them. At the novel's end, she just so happens to marry a very wealthy man, who just so happens to be handsome and honorable, too. We're assured in the last chapter that Elizabeth never gives up her "lively, sportive, manner," which is a comfort, I suppose, but still a bit too *easy*. How wonderful it must be, to be afforded the ability to be both righteous *and* rich.

It's the "rich" part that remains a bit of a sticking point for me. When asked by her sister when she first fell in love with Darcy, Elizabeth responds, "But I believe I must date it from my first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley," a line which stopped me in my tracks. According to the academic Vivien Leigh, who wrote the introduction to my volume, this probably has less to do with Darcy's wealth than it does with what she believes his "beautiful grounds" represent: the object of her affection's thoughtfulness towards his belongings, including his servants and tenants. Maybe that's true, and maybe I'm projecting a contemporary sense of social justice onto the past inappropriately, but I found myself asking a lot of questions about what would happen for those whose hearts *didn't* align so neatly with their bottom lines, or whose husbands, though tided, weren't as woke as Fitzwilliam Darcy. (Lydia, Elizabeth's "vacant" and "unabashed" sister, is not quite intelligent enough to be a sympathetic token.)

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Ersatz-enlightened though it is, *Pride and Prejudice* was still a delight to read. It won't keep me up nights pondering its great mysteries, or be a work I expect I'll re-read anytime soon, but it was pleasant, and, yes, even quite fun. And it helped solidify a lesson I had been learning since I moved to England. Back in the days immediately after the move, when I felt lonely and culturally marooned, I thought it best to stay at home and focus on my work, which was inevitably about *serious* topics. No time for love, Dr. Jones—I had to write about death. But the isolation only made it worse (go figure) and soon my mood was bleaker than a bleak house. So I cut a deal with myself: I would force myself to put work to the side and do all enjoyable things, and if it made me feel better, I'd have to concede that simple pleasures were, in some cases, more valuable than severity. I went to the theater, I took in movies at the London Film Festival; I swam in the Hampstead Ladies' Pond, viewed court proceedings adjudicated by men in funny little wigs, and read novels that had nothing to do with my research. Even if my social circle didn't widen tremendously, focusing on uncomplicated joys helped a lot. Never again will I deny the worth of fun for fun's sake, love over death—in life or, as Austen has taught me, in literature.



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