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What Would Jane Do?

How a 19th-century spinster serves as a moral compass in today's world

By JAMES COLLINS

Jane Austen is very funny. Her characters are vivid. The poise of her sentences is perfect. Her plots are pretty good—at least, they keep you reading. However, to write brilliant novels was not Jane Austen's foremost goal: What was most important to her was to provide moral instruction.

In their essence, Austen's books are moral works. "Northanger Abbey" is really about Catherine Morland's moral education: She learns that the world does not operate on the principles of a gothic novel. As the title indicates, "Sense and Sensibility" is a moral tale: It is the story of Elinor's self-command and Marianne's self-indulgence. The central event of both "Pride and Prejudice" and "Emma" is each heroine's discovery of her own moral weakness. "Mansfield Park" treats any number of moral issues, from the propriety of engaging in amateur theatricals to the consequences of leaving one's husband for another man. The premise of "Persuasion" is that Anne Elliot once sacrificed her happiness by doing her duty and obeying the admonishment of her moral guide, Lady Russell. Moral concerns are not only reflected in the large themes of the books, however: They are pervasive. Even the smallest act or the briefest dialogue or the mere description of a character's manner of dress is freighted with moral content.

Today's readers tend to appreciate Austen despite her didacticism rather than because of it. She can be positively priggish, and that is an embarrassment. The contemporary reader who loves Jane Austen sort of blips over the moralizing sections and tells himself that they don't really count. It is possible to ignore this aspect of her work, just as it is possible to discuss a religious painting with hardly any reference to the artist's religious intent. But this seems absurd: Ignoring a writer's central concern is a strange way to attempt to appreciate and understand her.

The question arises, then, of how to reconcile Austen's moralism with modern sensibility. To address this problem, it would be useful if we could find someone with this modern sensibility who actually reads Austen for her moral instruction (in addition to the literary pleasure she provides). How convenient that we have someone who fits that description available to us: me.

I find that reading Jane Austen helps me clarify ethical choices, helps me figure out a way to live with integrity in the corrupt world, even helps me adopt the proper tone and manner in dealing with others. Her moralism and the modern mind are not, in fact, in direct opposition, as is so often assumed.

To say that one values Austen's moral instruction may produce skepticism because, after all, she was a spinster living in provincial England 200 years ago. But our worlds aren't so very different. We see Austen's characters—vain, selfish, naïve, compassionate—in our own lives every day. Her time and place are actually an advantage. In her circumscribed world, the problems of life may be examined with clear-eyed precision.

Austen lived on the cusp of the 18th-century Augustan and 19th-century Romantic ages. In our own time, nearly every song, advertisement and movie is based on Romantic principles. No matter how much we may enjoy the "felicities of domestic life," as Austen put it in "Persuasion," we still feel the enormous Romantic pull to do something more heroic and intense. Rather than digesting

a good dinner while conversing with friends, we should be out forging the consciousness of our race in the smithy of our soul, or some damn thing. I don't really want to forge the consciousness of my race, but at the same time I don't want to miss out on all that Romanticism offers. This is where Austen comes in, for she is an Augustan familiar with Romanticism, which makes her more useful than a modern writer in helping us face the Romantic challenge. Only she can so credibly show us that it is possible to have moderation and deep feeling, good dinners and good poetry.

What, then, are the values that Austen would teach us? Value-laden words and phrases appear again and again in her work, often in clusters: self-knowledge, generosity, humility; elegance, propriety, cheerful orderliness; good understanding, correct opinion, knowledge of the world, a warm heart, steady, observant, moderate, candid, sensibility to what is amiable and lovely.

Austen's moral instruction points one toward a more moral life—where “moral” refers not only to right principles but to conduct in general. Austen's value system can be thought of as a sphere with layers. The innermost core might be called “morals,” the next layer we could call “sentiments,” and finally the surface “manners.” Morals are the fundamental principles: self-knowledge, generosity, humility, tenderest compassion, upright integrity.

Austen's emphasis on good order and propriety can seem dry and stiff. But anyone who reads “Mansfield Park” will feel the same relief that Fanny does at the change from the rackets disorder of her family's house in Portsmouth to the order of the Park. Similarly, Austen's regard for self-control, especially as expressed in “Sense and Sensibility,” can seem hard, but it must be remembered how the author clearly regards Marianne's emotionalism with the greatest compassion. Austen is not advocating a suppression of the feelings themselves— despite her faultlessly correct behavior, Elinor undergoes great suffering and feels every bit of it. What Austen is saying, as a modern psychologist might urge, is that one should try to prevent the disintegration of one's personality. Sentiments are built on the foundation of our morals: an amiable heart, sensibility to all that is lovely. Manners, in turn, have to do with behavior, with the way we work in the world: perfect good breeding, gentle address. Surely it is still necessary to have models of good sense and gentle manners held up for us.

How can morals, sentiments and manners help one live in the world? What should one's relations to the world be? Should one reject the world entirely as corrupt and mercenary and hypocritical and shallow? Or is there some other way, where one can keep one's integrity and sensitivity, but live in the world too? W. H. Auden stated the problem well when he wrote:

Does Life only offer two alternatives: ‘You shall be happy, healthy, attractive, a good mixer, a good lover and parent, but on the condition that you are not overcurious about life. On the other hand you shall be sensitive, conscious of what is happening round you, but in that case you must not expect to be happy, or successful in love or at home in any company. There are two worlds and you cannot belong to them both.’

In effect, Auden is asking if life offers only the two alternatives of “Sense and Sensibility,” and one can sympathize with his cry of despair, for when the dilemma is put the way he puts it, the two seem hopelessly irreconcilable.

Austen comes to our rescue, though, for she does manage to modulate between “Sense and Sensibility,” rejecting the excesses of both. Her attitude appeals because the combination of morals, sentiments, and manners provides a way of living that allows one both to be in the world and to enjoy the sweets of sensitivity as well. Austen does not write about bohemians and rebels; she

doesn't want to change her world—"she would not alter a hair on anyone's head or move one brick," as Virginia Woolf wrote. Her sympathetic characters participate fully in their society and accept its conventions, yet they have exquisitely well-tuned minds and hearts. Good sense does not have to be at war with sensibility.

Irony is not just Austen's characteristic mode of expression: It is her characteristic mode of thought. Austen's irony reflects a perfect understanding of all the ways the world is wretched and the belief that although you can't really fight it, you can at least separate yourself from it. In her ironic sentences, there is movement with stability. She moves toward the object of criticism, then away from it, and then provides a gentle snap of closure at the end. This rhythmic motion serves as an ideal for both accepting and rejecting the ways of the wretched world while maintaining balance.

The irony of Austen's characters also gives those of us who believe in decorum a way to handle hypocrites. "Sense and Sensibility"'s Elinor Dashwood is rarely ironic, but she provides a good example. Recall the conversation when the odious John Dashwood, who has reneged on the deathbed promise to his father to help his half-sisters, suggests to Elinor that Mrs. Jennings will leave them a bequest. Elinor replies, "Indeed, brother, your anxiety for our welfare and prosperity carries you too far." John Dashwood lacks generosity and integrity. Elinor insults him, but she does it in the politest possible way.

If one is to argue that Austen's morality is useful for a person living today, one must deal with three hard cases. First, there is Fanny's objection to the amateur theatricals in "Mansfield Park." Then, in "Sense and Sensibility" there is Elinor's refusal to pursue the man she loves, Edward Ferrars, when she learns that he is officially engaged to Lucy Steele, a woman who "joined insincerity with ignorance." Finally, there is Anne Elliot's avowal in "Persuasion" that she did the right thing by following the dictates of Lady Russell to refuse Captain Wentworth, even though this led to years of loveless misery for them both. In all three cases, Austen endorses a morality that seems nearly absurd in its strictness. What is the big deal with theatricals? Is the principle of honor worth upholding when it results in mismatches and regret? And what kind of value system puts obedience before love?

Perhaps Austen's strictness is very old-fashioned, but anyone can find merit in the concepts of honor, duty, and obedience. Those strings have gone so slack that there's nothing wrong in their being tightened by a sympathetic reading of this aspect of Austen; they will loosen again soon enough.

To dispense briefly with Elinor and Anne, I will say simply that their actions must be seen in the context of their own sincerely held beliefs. The lesson is that it is sometimes right to sacrifice something we want for the sake of our conscience.

With Fanny Price it almost seems as if Austen set out to create a character that has no manners and no personality, but is simply raw morality. She is famously disliked by readers, but her actions and attitudes can be defended. For all her timidity, she has real courage. She stands up to all the others when they want her to participate in the play, and she even withstands the terrible onslaught of Sir Thomas's disapproval when she refuses to marry Crawford. It is too rarely acknowledged that Fanny is right. The danger of the theatricals is that they bring young men and women together in a sexually charged setting, and, indeed, they do lead to the very outcome Fanny dreads: Henry Crawford and Maria Rushworth run off together. So Fanny is not simply adhering to an arbitrary and silly rule about whether amateur theatricals are proper, she is trying to forestall a circumstance that does end up causing real pain.

Jane Austen's principles are of transcendent value, they are not "priggish," and her novels illustrate and advocate a way of being in the world that is ethical, sensitive and practical. The best representative for the worthiness of Austen's approach to life, however, is Austen herself. The reflection of the first sentence of "Pride and Prejudice" shimmers beneath it: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman of small fortune must be in want of a husband." There is nothing ironic about that: In Austen's time it really was a universal truth. Austen's condition as a single woman without money and no longer young was, as she put it when describing Miss Bates in "Emma," to stand "in the very worst predicament in the world for having much of the public favor." As that very phrase indicates, however, Austen was able to regard her predicament coldly, clearly and without self-pity. The novels convey the poise, balance, forbearance and humor of their creator. By reading them, one is enfolded in her personality, a personality we might wish we could adopt ourselves, for it seems to resolve many of life's problems, moral and otherwise.

—James Collins is a writer and editor whose first novel, "Beginner's Greek," came out last year. This piece was adapted from "A Truth Universally Acknowledged," an anthology of essays about why we read Jane Austen, published earlier this week by Random House.

Notes

¹<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703683804574531863687486876.html>