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The Genius of Jane Austen.

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THE annals of English fictional literature of the early nineteenth century show nothing more striking than the remarkable genius of Jane Austen.

In an age when the whole duty of woman was considered to be in attendance to her home and near connections, and in observing diligently the social obligations of her own special *milieu*, Jane Austen flung aside the conventionalities of that age and courted popularity and public attention by means of her caustic pen.

This action on the part of a gentlewoman was a bold one, for the men of that period still held some rather Oriental ideas on the position of woman in the social cosmos. Metaphorically, they veiled her with the *yashmak* and allowed her small freedom to exercise her individuality. Though they coveted her for her sympathetic qualities, they never regarded her as their mental equal. She was an ornamental addition to their households rather than a comrade to share their pursuits and ambitions; and in this valuation of their sex it must also be acknowledged that the majority of women were content to concur.

It was a world dominated by these opinions, then, that Jane Austen sought to depict in her novels, and if she is rather more lenient in the characterization of her male characters than one might expect, her sense of humour doubtless saved any bitterness from creeping into her cynicism. Moreover, although she may be accounted as one of the pioneers in the emancipation of women, it is evident that she also adhered fairly strictly to the tastes and prejudices of those around her. She had no affinities with the so-called "new woman" and was in no sense in revolt with her age, but being a woman with a great deal of independence, she had no qualms against determining upon a course of untrammelled action for herself, so long as it was in

accordance with her own firm views upon propriety and gentility.

Nor was she at all inimical to the other sex. Instead of that, man loomed large upon her mental horizon. He was an object for interesting study—a being whose actions were deemed worthy of supplying the basis of innumerable interesting and speculative discussions. The problem concerning whom he might be deemed to be honouring with his attentions was an all-important one. It was the home-keeping habits of her sex, doubtless, that caused Jane Austen to indulge in sentiment to the extent that she did.

Jane Austen, however, only depicted the life that she saw around her. She did not allow herself to soar on flights of imagination in search of sensational effects. It was her object to paint the conditions of life among which she moved and to procreate characters out of types with which she was familiar. In this manner she found abundant scope for the exercise of the gentle satire of her pen. It was in the delineation of the female characters of the age in which she lived, however, that she was most successful. Here, indeed, she reigned supreme! In the characterization of her men she showed a good deal of feminine reserve, and was careful not to make their coarseness too obtrusive. Here her methods were very dissimilar to those of her contemporaries; nor had she any relish for wallowing in painful subjects after the manner of the twentieth-century realistic writer. Readers with a broad knowledge of general modern literature find the peccadilloes of the men whom Jane Austen affected to despise very mild affairs.

One of the most noticeable things, indeed, about the work of Jane Austen is that, with the work of Sir Walter Scott, it stands out as a sort of silent protest against the scurrilities and obscenities with which that age and the one that immediately preceded it were rife; for when Jane Austen began to write, the most popular novelists were Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne; one of the most popular playwrights was Congreve; whilst art had its most favoured exponent in Hogarth. Thus, the greatest

men of genius of the day were those who were content to bestrew their works with the most broadly coarse incidents, or, like Sterne, to court attention by means of filthily subtle innuendos; yet to a certain extent the age excused these writers, for it was a period of laxity, both in manners and in morals, and they merely depicted life as they saw it, and often, indeed, as they lived it.

Nevertheless, it was only when a few novelists, such as Scott and Jane Austen, began to write of a purer state of existence and in a more elevated style that the morals of the country began to improve. The effect of these two novelists upon social manners and also upon literature in general has been immense, and it has never yet been fully recognized. They demonstrated, once and for all, that abiding popularity was to be won without ploughing up furrows in search of ordure.

True genius, indeed, is bound to win through some day, whilst it is, also, much longer lived than the genius that merely panders to the tastes of the age. For instance, is it not an incontestable fact that the works of Scott and Jane Austen are far more popular to-day than are the works of either Fielding, Smollett, or Sterne? Yet in many respects Fielding's "Tom Jones" is one of the greatest novels ever written. In delineation of character and in its fine pictures of old English life, it remains a commanding monument of literary ability; yet in the author's apparent lack of censure for the many foibles of his hero, one cannot help feeling the general trend of the book to be repellant. We observe the same in the work of Tobias Smollett. As a humorist he was one of the most striking figures of the eighteenth century, and the whimsical nature of his excellent character sketches did much to open up the course that the later genius of Dickens was to take; yet his "Roderick Random" and "Peregrine Pickle" are libertines of contemptible disposition who are made, nevertheless, to reap good rewards in the end. Smollett's gift of defining character was also shared by Sterne, whose "Uncle Toby" and "Corporal

Trim" have become embodied in the literary portrait gallery of the nation. He was also a fine master of style, but the disgusting suggestiveness and lack of decorum of his work does much to mar its merit.

It was in the midst of such a waste of genius, then, that the influence of Jane Austen sprang to life and flourished. Though from the first her novels were well received, only in isolated cases were her wonderful powers of observation fully recognized. Her novels possessed no startling qualities calculated to set the whole country discussing them, and it was only by very gradual degrees that they insinuated themselves into recognition as works of superlative craftsmanship. Their veracity to nature was the first thing to claim attention. It attracted the notice, as also the enthusiastic appreciation, of Scott. He, at least, could appreciate the carefulness of detail and the kindly humour and satire on which the novels were based. The skilful little touches by which the characters were introduced and then maintained in the picture was little short of marvellous. As it has been already remarked, the novels of Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne were all distinguished for the excellence of their character sketches, but the novels of Jane Austen, though dealing with the more sober aspects of life, do not lag behind them in this respect. She is, indeed, superior to Smollett, for his characterization suffered somewhat from exaggeration, as was the case with that partial imitator of his method, Dickens, whilst Sterne worked upon too small a canvas to bring himself greatly into comparison with her.

The types of character that Jane Austen has portrayed, however, are absolutely convincing. There is no trace of exaggeration about them, and they are generally as true to-day as they were at the time when she wrote. No other novelist was more free from exaggeration than Jane Austen.

Especially noticeable is the manner in which she depicted the various aspects of *family life*. The custom of the earlier novelists had generally been to take a hero and conduct him through a series of adventures among a varied class of characters

(often quite unconnected with each other) and to let the interest of the narrative centre entirely around him. Just a few slender threads held him to his home and relations, and the importance of that connection was small. Fielding attempted the portraiture of family life, to a certain extent, in his "Amelia," but the interest of that novel is chiefly due to the scenes of prison-life and to the lengthy histories of some of the minor characters that it contains, so that the interest in the fates of Amelia and her husband becomes rather overshadowed. In each of Jane Austen's novels, however, we find ourselves engrossed in the home-life of some particular family. In "Northanger Abbey," it is the Tilney family; in "Sense and Sensibility," the Dashwood family; in "Pride and Prejudice," the Bennet family; in "Mansfield Park," the Bertram and Price families; in "Emma," the Woodhouse family; and in "Persuasion," the Elliott and Musgrove families.

The life that Jane Austen depicts for us, too, is a smoothly flowing one. In it there is rarely any place for tragedy. The fate of Maria Bertram of "Mansfield Park" is the nearest approach to it that her novels contain. Her general outlook upon life, indeed, is particularly genial and happy. Nearly all her characters dwell in easy circumstances. No spectre of poverty comes to haunt them with painful problems. They meet, talk, and amuse themselves with careless indifference to what the working part of the world is doing. Their interests are centred in the little trivial affairs of everyday life; in little speculations upon the motives and comments upon the actions of their acquaintances and relatives; in little loves and little jealousies. Life is not a thing to take too seriously or to be filled with troublesome thoughts upon the graver problems of humanity. The world is rather a place in which to spend one's holiday-time in careless indifference to anything save that which is nearest. Social obligations, then, become paramount in this state of *dolce far niente*. Time has to be killed, and therefore the incidents in these novels mainly centre around a series of house-to-house visits and meetings. The serenity of the life

depicted by Jane Austen has a peculiarly restful effect upon readers of her pages. There are no shocks and no surprises, and it is rarely, even, that we read of any serious illness to cause us anxiety on behalf of any of her characters. The case of Marianne Dashwood is an exception; yet, even here, we feel that the puling, love-sick girl will ultimately recover. Jane Austen's own life was passed in tranquillity, and she sketched scenes and events of a nature with which she was familiar. Possibly, too, she shrank from painting the harder aspects of life.

Her manner of writing, despite its cleverness and great charm, was still a little superficial, for we find in it none of that minute probing into processes of thought, and none of that subtle psychological tracing of the sequence of motive and action such as we encounter in the novels of Balzac, for instance. That is left to the reader's fancy to supply. Jane Austen gives us a history of events, but not of the subtle currents and by-currents of the thoughts that led up to them.

Speaking generally, too, her novels may be said to be lacking in emotionalism. They flow on placidly, and our deeper feelings are not stirred. Love, which occupies so prominent a place in the thoughts of most of her characters, takes the form of mild sentiment. It is rarely allowed to become an inconvenience; when it does, it degenerates into mawkishness, as in the case of Marianne Dashwood. Nearly all Jane Austen's young women characters give one the impression that they consider marriage to be the paramount aim in life. Their thoughts are always directed towards it, but they always love genteelly and with reserve, and are never carried away upon waves of passion. Probably the authoress would have considered such lack of restraint on their part "unladylike." It was left to a later woman-writer, Charlotte Brontë, to show more vividly the stirrings of love in a woman's heart, as it was left to George Eliot to depict the more serious phases of the social life of our country.

As it has been before mentioned, however, no one was a

truer copyist of character, as it appeared on the surface, than was Jane Austen, and it was in portraying the amusing traits and idiosyncrasies of her own sex that she excelled. Her male characters were less convincing; still, no one is likely to forget the hearty country gentleman, Sir John Middleton, and the disagreeable husband, Mr. Palmer, of "Sense and Sensibility," the cynical Mr. Bennet and the self-satisfied Mr. Collins of "Pride and Prejudice," the upright, kindly Sir Thomas Bertram of "Mansfield Park," the fussy hypochondriac, Mr. Woodhouse, and the calmly sensible Mr. Knightley of "Emma," and the vain Sir Walter Elliott of "Persuasion"; but these are all eclipsed by the wonderful gallery of women portraits that she has created. The careful and illuminating details that go to make up the various pictures of that gallery are manœuvred with a master-hand. Who can think of the vulgar, but generous-hearted Mrs. Jennings and the "Mark Tapley" like Mrs. Palmer of "Sense and Sensibility," the delightfully coy Elizabeth Bennet and her inquisitive, match-making mother of "Pride and Prejudice," the ungenerous Mrs. Norris and the negligent Mrs. Price of "Mansfield Park," and the self-important Mrs. Elton and the kindly, voluble Miss Bates of "Emma," without a smile of grateful recognition of their creator's genius arising to the lips?

Jane Austen may be regarded, in many respects, as a pioneer in favour of the novel of manners as opposed to the novel of action. Certainly, Samuel Richardson had preceded her with his "Pamela," "Clarissa Harlowe," and "Sir Charles Grandison," but though these novels contained much subtle psychological analysis of character, they were very dull affairs. The reader is satiated with their excess of sentiment long before the end of them is reached, and the writer's lack of humour places his novels in a much lower category than those of the creator of "Pride and Prejudice," "Emma," and "Persuasion."

To sum up, Jane Austen may be ranked as the first really *great* woman-novelist. One other woman-writer had preceded her whose fame had been very widely spread — namely,

Mrs. Radcliffe, the authoress of "The Mysteries of Udolpho," "The Romance of the Forest," and "The Italian." Her novels showed great fertility of invention, and, by reason of their gruesome horrors, found great favour with the public; but as works of art they cannot be taken very seriously. Jane Austen herself, in "Northanger Abbey," satirized the first of these novels to a certain extent. Many women-writers have gained fame since Mrs. Radcliffe and Jane Austen began to write, but the latter's position in English literature cannot be dislodged; for Jane Austen, upon her own ground, is unapproachable. Though the range of her knowledge was limited and the canvas upon which she painted was a miniature one, her genius itself was not of the miniature order. She was a great reformer of morals, a marvellous reader of character, a humorist, and a stylist, and in an age when morbid ideas and sensationalism are rampant, the geniality of her style and the saneness of her mental outlook stand out like an oasis in a dreary desert.