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# Childhood and Education in Jane Austen's Era

Jane Austen wrote and published her novels at a time when ideas about childhood and education were at a crossroads, and Austen engaged with all of them. I will break this overview into two parts: ideas about childhood, and education of boys and girls.

## I. ⇒ Childhood

⇒ As Marilyn Butler has observed, *Sense and Sensibility* is all about nature vs. nurture— ⇒ whether Marianne's attempt to be genuine and natural or Elinor's attempt to follow the cultural norms in which she has been schooled and nurtured is the better guide to living. The same debate was of course applied to children as well: should they be nurtured and taught to know and do what adults did, or should their natural childlike abilities be allowed to flourish?

⇒ On the side of nurture, ⇒ John Locke had argued at the end of the seventeenth century that a child was born with a mind like a ⇒ blank slate (tabula rasa). Children were unformed and needed to be taught and civilized to prepare them for adulthood. ⇒ The Puritan tradition emphasized the moral aspect of the need for education—children were bad and needed to be taught to be good. ⇒ On the other side, there were those in favor of nature, like ⇒ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. ⇒ Opposed to Locke's metaphor of a blank slate that needed to be inscribed with adult knowledge was Jean-Jacques Rousseau's metaphor of a plant that would grow naturally unless stifled (Postman 59-60). Rousseau, writing in the eighteenth century, suggested that children's education should nurture the child's natural inclinations, and warned that the child's innate capacity could

be deadened by adult literacy and shame. At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, Jane Austen's contemporaries, the Romantic poets, took Rousseau's ideas a step further. ⇒ William Wordsworth, for example, published *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood* in 1807, four years before Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. In it he describes the child as a "prophet" born with memories from a past existence, "trailing clouds of glory" as it comes from heaven. This inborn wisdom is the opposite of Locke's blank slate, and the whole ode suggests that growing up is not about gaining wisdom from experience, but about loss.

⇒ This Romantic idea of the child not only opposed Locke's idea of the child's need for adult knowledge and culture, but also the Puritan idea of a child's original sin, its need for moral improvement. Drawing on other Christian traditions (Pifer 20), the Romantics adopted the notion of original innocence, that children are good in the beginning but are corrupted from the outside.

⇒ As you can see, the two sides are fairly symmetrically opposed, both concerning knowledge and virtue. (This chart is also in your handout.)

Some scholars have argued that the notion of childhood "innocence," that children are untouched by adult culture and knowledge, is not as positive as it sounds—that it treats children as more primitive and incompetent than they are (Boas, Gubar) or is even a way for adults to manipulate children into gratifying adult desires such as nostalgia (Rose, Kincaid). Some of these scholars see the side of nurture as representing a more positive idea of competent children.

⇒ Austen confronts the debate about childhood directly in *Sense and Sensibility*. Lady Middleton describes her young daughter as a perfect angel, but the child screams

over and over after a slight scratch, and shrewdly waits to quiet down until after receiving her favorite treat. This child certainly sounds more competent than innocent, but is her misbehavior the result of original sin or adult corruption? ⇒ Adult nostalgia and adult desire are also central to the role of children—the charm of a small child twice lures Elinor and Marianne's male relatives into reserving an inheritance for a young male heir instead of for the family of Elinor and Marianne.

Before we assume that all Austen's children are simply bad, though, consider the empathy Austen invites for Fanny Price. Juliet McMaster has argued that there are glimmers of empathy even for the brats in *Sense and Sensibility*—though you may or may not agree.

## II. ⇒ Education

How, then should children be brought up and educated? Our ideas about what children are like may shape the way we educate children, but the way we educate children also shapes the way we understand childhood—Neil Postman has even argued that our whole idea of childhood as distinct from adulthood is based upon print-based education, and the distinction between uneducated children and educated adults.

(I would like to not that I will be focusing on the education of the aristocracy and gentry.)

⇒ For both boys and girls, education was supposed to begin with their mother. This was one of the principal arguments put forward for improved education for women: how else could they teach their sons (Smith, Wollstonecraft)? Thus Mrs. Dashwood

exclaims of her daughter of about fourteen,[1] "Margaret and I… shall go on so quietly and happily together with our books and our music! You will find Margaret so improved when you come back again!" (*S&S* ch. 25). Education was, however, often outsourced to tutors, governesses, and schools. ⇒ In *Pride and Prejudice*, even the Bennets, who lack a governess and a drawing master, still "had all the masters that were necessary." Even so, Lady Catherine de Bourgh fears that without a governess, their mother would have to be "quite a slave to [their] education" (*P&P* ch. 29).

In "Jack and Alice," a story Austen wrote in her teens, Lady Williams, nicknamed Kitty, relates how she grew up in a wealthy family. When her mother dies, their father has to ⇒ redistribute the children to continue their educations. The boys go to "Schools suitable to their Ages," the younger girls remain with a nurse, and young Kitty herself could be sent to school but is instead entrusted to a governess.

Boys could be kept at home with tutors, or they might go to school, the most prestigious of course being the great public schools, places like Eton, Harrow, Rugby, Westminster, and Winchester. After public school the boys of great landed families might go to university at Oxford or Cambridge, or they might go into the military—usually not both (Barbara English 18, 23-4, 26). The emphasis of such elite boys' education was on Latin and Greek, and by Jane Austen's day there was a growing sense that this emphasis was not the best way to prepare the gentry and aristocracy for their roles as societal and political leaders. ⇒ Two years before *Sense and Sensibility* was published, Sidney Smith published an essay in "the most important review of its day" (Demata & Wu 3), the *Edinburgh Review*, called "Too Much Latin and Greek."

[1] This is December 1797 (Moody 320); Margaret was 13 in February 1797 (Moody 313), 10 months earlier.

⇒ Girls did not have the same pressure to pursue the classics, which were considered male territory, but they were expected to be "accomplished." "Accomplishments" usually included "music, drawing, dance, and needlework," but also sometimes modern languages (de Bellaigue 173). ⇒ Mr. Darcy and Miss Bingley list all these, and add that truly accomplished women must also have "a certain something" in her manner of carrying herself, and must read extensively. Lizzie Bennet retorts that she knows no "really accomplished" women by this impossible standard, so we have reason to doubt that such thorough education was common, but perhaps the impossible expectations were there nonetheless.

The purpose of accomplishments was, of course, to impress and attract potential suitors, but many writers on education, including Sidney Smith, objected to this goal. ⇒ Hannah More, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, similarly criticized fashionable instruction in posture and music as a deplorable scheme to make women fetch a better price on the marriage market (More "Slave" 395)—such an education, she wrote, was part of a ⇒ "White Slave Trade" (More's title; cf. Bermingham 192).

Girls' education did extend beyond these ornamental skills, however. ⇒ In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price learns French and history with the Bertram sisters, and the sisters brag about their knowledge of geography, "mythology, and all the metals, semi-metals, planets, and distinguished philosophers" (ch. 2). ⇒ Girls' schools of the period often taught subjects like "history, arithmetic, geography, and grammar," and were actually ahead of boys' schools in their emphasis on the natural sciences, especially botany (de Bellaigue 167, 176), since botany was strongly associated with women (Allen 28, 48-49). Those families with the knowledge or the resources could even have their

daughters taught traditionally male subjects. Lady Oxford, for example, was a clergyman's daughter and learned Latin and Greek. Lady Byron and her daughter, Ada, Countess of Lovelace, both studied mathematics. These were exceptional cases, but girls of the right class really often received quite thorough educations, sometimes more practical ones than their brothers received.

⇒ Unfortunately, Austen does not give us the details of Margaret's education in *Sense and Sensibility*, but given the fact that girls were often taught geography at the time, Margaret's interest in the atlas makes sense as a choice in Emma Thompson's screenplay adaptation. Geography lacked the prestige of the classics, but it had enough practical value, as her father jokes in the screenplay, for her to become a pirate.

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