

Why Jane? Why Now?

MASTERPIECE brings the complete works of Jane Austen to television at a moment when interest in the author—both her works and her quiet, early-19th century life—may never have been greater. Since the 1940s, full-length film productions of Jane Austen’s novels have been turned out at a steady rate of three to seven per decade. Today, Austen “mania” is everywhere, from two new Hollywood features inspired by her life and works, to Jane’s image featured on the cover of *Newsweek*, to Facebook and YouTube. Her novels and books about her novels crowd the bestseller lists. Nearly two hundred years after the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen still has enormous appeal for contemporary readers and viewers. What accounts for the continuing popularity of Jane Austen? Why Jane, and why now?

At first glance Austen’s popularity is hard to fathom. Austen wrote about the problems and pressures of 19th century courtship and marriage. Action and adventure are limited to a walk in a rainstorm or a ride in an open carriage without a chaperone; powerful feelings and desires are expressed indirectly, if at all; conversation is a high art, flavored with ironic wit and the discussion of weather. Her characters’ behavior and life choices are dictated by standards and values that can seem utterly foreign in a world as rapidly changing as our own.

Perhaps modern readers and viewers continue to be drawn to Austen’s work because of the very limitations that may make us wary at first. The physical and social landscape within her work is restricted, but the field of themes, emotions, and even desires she explores there is deep and broad. How, her novels ask, does a person do the hard work of creating a good, happy, balanced life? Catherine Morland is a naïve girl with a fanciful imagination; how will she learn to distinguish reality from fantasy and come of age? What does it feel like to be Anne Elliot, disappointed by life before the age of twenty, and how will she find the courage to redeem the mistakes of her past? And why, we might ask Fanny Price, do love, respect, and affection not go to those who deserve them? Finally, all the novels ask a question that resonates today as powerfully as it did in Austen’s time: What chance do the needs of the heart and mind have in a world dominated by money? The world of Jane Austen’s novels may be small, but it is not simple.

Austen's other great appeal is that spending time in her world is fun. Her world is different from ours, and the films and novels transport us there. We can travel through Regency England (approximately 1800–1820) as tourists, free to enjoy what is glittering and entertaining. Thanks to her deft sense of humor, we delight in her characters, with all their faults. We return home, remembering the pleasures of her world and think about how that world reflects upon our own, with its sharp differences and its subtle and surprising similarities.

Jane Austen first made her way onto standard U.S. high school and college reading lists because she is a great novelist. She remains there because she has proven herself to be a timeless one. Each generation, including the one that you are now teaching, “rediscovers” Austen. Chances are that at the end of the 21st century, we will still be asking “Why Jane? Why Now?”

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