

Doctoral (PhD) dissertation thesis booklet

Constancy and amiability

**The relationship between virtue and happiness in Jane Austen's
novels**

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Aim of the Dissertation and Delimitation of the Topic

In my PhD thesis, I undertook a primarily moral-philosophical and partly aesthetic reading of Jane Austen's novels. In the course of their analysis, I emphasised the problematic relationship between happiness and virtue. Since my topic required a theoretical and historical overview, I explored why Austen can be seen as one of the defining female voices of the cult of sensitivity, whose works are an imprint of Regency England. I have argued that the 18th and 19th centuries provided Austen with the opportunity, although pseudonymously, to voice her critical views on society, fiction, history, and human character, all while writing fiction herself. I outlined the eccentric education and family support she received as a woman, which were essential for her to become one of the most popular authors in England at the time, and how her six completed novels are still considered classics of world literature and have been adapted in many ways. I also emphasised the importance of her youthful writings in her oeuvre.

One of the starting points for my examination was Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of Austen, which can be read mainly in *After Virtue* and tangentially in *A Short History of Ethics*. MacIntyre sees the writer as one of the last representatives of the classical tradition of virtues and compares her mainly with Aristotle.¹ MacIntyre makes several remarkable statements about the author, the most relevant to my analysis being that amiability and constancy seem to be the two most fundamental Austenian virtues. I agree with MacIntyre; I argued that Austen's characters can only be called ethical if they possess these two basic virtues. We can also read from MacIntyre that: “what Aristotle treats as the virtue of agreeableness (a virtue for which he says there is no name)”,² based on Austen, is only a copy of amiability as an actual virtue. In my analyses of Austen's novels, I emphasised that I also believe that agreeableness appears as a kind of substitute in her works.³ Some characters try to cover up their lack of that particular true virtue – amiability – with agreeableness, because they do not “have a certain real affection for people as such”.⁴ I have highlighted several times in my thesis how certain individuals try to deceive the protagonists with agreeableness. I approached these as a kind of test: as if the protagonists could only call themselves truly moral if they

¹ MacIntyre, Alasdair (2007): *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press. p. 243

² MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 183

³ MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 183

⁴ MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 183

were able to see through those who were not virtuous, trying to hide this from others with mere superficial agreeableness and charm. Among Austen's heroines, those who seemed to me to be the most morally unshakable were the ones who seemed incapable of such agreeableness themselves. They only possess actual virtue – amiability – and thus are quicker to recognise those around them who (almost) completely lack it.

Constancy is another virtue that MacIntyre highlights, saying that in Austen's novels, constancy “is a virtue the possession of which is a prerequisite for the possession of other virtues”.⁵ For someone who is not persistent, to some extent, the other virtues lose their meaning. I have provided numerous examples of why I believe that constancy plays an important role in her works. I have also emphasised my view that, to be of such great merit, the term must encompass loyal attachment to particular persons, firm determination to certain principles and resolutions, and persistence in the way of life that these persons, principles, and resolutions demand. I have outlined the negative consequences in Austen's novels of not being sufficiently persistent in a very important decision.

In my paper, I argued that I agree with MacIntyre's reading of Austen in many respects; nevertheless, I also emphasised my view that Austen did not always represent the classical tradition of virtues. I mainly took issue with MacIntyre's statement that: “When Jane Austen speaks of 'happiness', she does so as an Aristotelian.”⁶ I demonstrated how adequate it is in Austen's novels for the protagonists to be able to put the happiness of others before their own.

Research Design and Methods

I have studied Jane Austen's works from a moral-philosophical and aesthetic perspective, keeping MacIntyre's reading of Austen in mind throughout. However, since I do not believe that the writer fully identified with the views of any philosopher, I have opened an analogy with several philosophers to explore and understand her own philosophical aspects when analysing her novels. I have repeatedly compared certain of Austen's ethical and aesthetic insights with those of Immanuel Kant. Based on the reception history, it is customary to attribute Jane Austen's aesthetic aspects mainly to David Hume – I have done so myself in several cases. In analysing Austen's irony, I relied partly on MacIntyre's insight into Austenian irony and partly on Søren Kierkegaard's approach to irony, since Austen, like

⁵ MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 183

⁶ MacIntyre: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 240

Kierkegaard, relies on a boundary-setting, restrictive understanding of irony. In analysing Austen's views on education, I have drawn on the insights of Mary Wollstonecraft and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In addition, I have also included insights from Aristotle, Lord Shaftesbury, Roland Barthes, and Friedrich Schlegel.

When analysing the author's works, I followed a chronology based on the order in which Austen wrote her six completed novels. I also considered this major because I studied these texts by selecting motifs that were important to my broader topic and that I judged to be most evident in one specific work of the writer, while also reflecting on the similarities in the basic ideas of her novels. Taking the chronological order of the writing of the stories as a basis also allowed me the opportunity sometimes to emphasise the changes and developments in Austen's methods.

In addition to the two already mentioned Austenian virtues, I examined such topics as happiness, scruple, the search for home, self-development, self-knowledge, self-esteem, irony, deception, education, judgment, and the importance of politeness in the writer's works. Despite the fact that I approached the novels primarily from a moral-philosophical and partly aesthetic perspective, and emphasised analysing their content, I also touched on their form, as far as I felt it was relevant to my exploration. For example, I highlighted and analysed the writer's ironic voice in several cases. I also emphasised that Austen struck a self-reflective narrative tone in her early novels, which caricature sentimental and Gothic novels; I also highlighted how authorial narrative structure and indirect speech act can be seen in her novels. I also touched on the importance of letter writing (especially letters from male protagonists).

A Thesis-Style Summary of Results

I have argued that Jane Austen was better read and more economically competent than most 18th- and 19th-century (British) women, as reflected in her novels. Since women in this period generally learned about current economic situations through novels, Austen's works may have improved the economic outlook of their contemporary female readers. Jane Austen took advantage of her keen observation of people's behaviour and character: she expressed her insights and criticisms in her works of fiction. Austen's novels are primarily about two extremely universal themes: human character and human social behaviour. The writer was very aware of the need to explicitly address contemporary historical and economic issues in her novels. I believe the reason why Austen's stories are still extremely popular today and are

among the most adopted British novels (and the most enduring one of the Regency era) is that they are more universal than if they were only intended for contemporary readers. Through problems, situations, successes, failures, and life paths spanning the ages, Austen showed in her oeuvre what qualities she believed we should possess to claim to be moral.

The first step for her is proper upbringing and education: acquiring and practising our abilities, and then utilising them properly. If this was not necessarily given to us through our parents, then we can also train ourselves (even with the help of others) to reach the level of being worthy of the humanity that resides within us. However, this requires that we sometimes feel doubt about ourselves and our environment, then insight, to acknowledge our shortcomings, and to want to do something about them. And for all this, good judgment (or the tendency to it) is an essential condition. It is also important for Austen to not only consider ourselves to be superficially agreeable and charming, but to be amiable despite all our faults. She never portrayed flawless protagonists: both her female and male protagonists need to develop (some more, some less), and if they have made this progression, they have reached the level of truly knowing themselves and each other, as a reward, they can enter into a marriage that is financially, rationally and emotionally satisfying for them.

Her characters' homesickness (which is tied to specific people rather than places) runs through the plot of her novels—even if sometimes the characters themselves are unaware that this is partly the underlying motive for their actions. If the main motivation behind the actions of some Austen characters is to achieve their own happiness, they will either have to go through very serious character development, or they will set an example for positive characters of what not to be. Those who are unable to put the happiness of others before their own and to be steadfast are, according to Austen, unlovable and will never truly be able to feel happiness; if they are, then they are not only capable of true happiness, but they deserve it.

I concluded that Jane Austen was a philosopher in her own way: she had a philosophical approach to life, and she examined people's character and behaviour from a philosophical perspective. However, instead of writing theoretical texts or creating her own philosophical system, she chose the novel genre, which received her attention, as a form of communication. Nor can any of her works be identified with the thoughts of a particular philosopher, since Austen's oeuvre reflects the writer's own views from both moral and aesthetic perspectives. It is as if Austen did not strive to constantly renew herself as a creator, to have a diverse writing repertoire, but rather to test her cherished moral-philosophical, aesthetic, social and

educational theoretical views again and again, in situations which are similar but different in their details. The genre definition of Austen's novels can also be problematic for this reason: we can approach them as Bildungsroman, romantic literature, social prose, novel of manners, and even some as Gothic or sentimental writings.

Most 19th-century (British) women may have read Wollstonecraft, but they probably did not read Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Kierkegaard, Shaftesbury or Rousseau; however, Jane Austen's novels were more likely to be known by these women. The author's novels, in ethical and aesthetic terms, provide opportunities for such strong interpretations that they may recall the thoughts of the aforementioned renowned philosophers. Based on the fact that Anne Elliot recommends the works of excellent moralists to Captain Benwick in *Persuasion*, we can conclude that Austen also read such authors. If not the exact ones I used in my dissertation (Kierkegaard, for example, was only three years old when Austen died), or if not the texts I used, the insights of these thinkers permeated the intellectual spirit of the time, which Austen sought to master. And she incorporated her knowledge and views into her novels in such a way that she developed the aesthetic and ethical taste of contemporary women, in addition to their economic insight. The ironic tone that Jane Austen struck in them, and with which she entertained her readers, hides such a deep and diverse content from which we, people of the 21st century, can also learn.

In my examination of Austen's novels, I did not encounter any contradictions: on ethical issues, the more mature writer's opinions did not change compared to her early works. Nevertheless, I saw progress when analysing her completed novels in chronological order. When writing *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen was still searching for her own writing voice, so her mocking of contemporary female protagonists played a much greater role in them, and she shows how novels and poetry can shape young girls in a (possibly bad) direction. In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen explicitly describes the methods she criticised in contemporary novels. It was mainly the passivity, excessive perfection, and vulnerability of the heroines that she parodied here and directly opposed.

Nevertheless, I already detected in them the germ of those moral views and social-critical insights that were expressed more realistically in her later novels. The great character development that many of Austen's heroines must undergo is not as closely tied to a specific journey as is the case with Catherine Morland in her first completed novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Travel (both mental and physical) seems to be a requirement for Austenian virtue. Furthermore, it is in this Austen novel that the irony of parallel narration is most striking.

Sense and Sensibility, as Austen's first published novel, laid the foundations of the Austenian novel type, and can thus be seen as a forerunner to the author's subsequent novels, and Elinor as a precursor to such Austen heroines as Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* and Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*. Furthermore, Colonel Brandon is the character who served as a model for the male protagonist of *Emma*, Mr. Knightley. *Sense and sensibility* represents, for example, the relationship between aesthetic appreciation and moral sensitivity, according to Austen; the importance of moderating our ignorance and unfettered freedom; or how the right marriage can be both an emotionally and rationally correct decision. Furthermore, the relevance of balancing common sense and “sentimental” emotion is also evident in the story.

I consider *Pride and Prejudice* to be a transition between Austen's early and more mature novels. The self-reflective narrative voice that the author used a lot in her previous two novels is pushed into the background; however, compared to her later three completed works, we cannot yet discover the indirect speech act as an explicit device in it. *Pride and Prejudice* places a strong emphasis on the motif of doubt, the proper education of our virtues (and their absence), to the possible uncertainty of first impressions, and the importance of good judgment and letters written by male characters. Furthermore, Mr. Bennet, who at first seems amusingly ironic, represents in it that if mockery and irony are combined with unethical behaviour, then they can be downright offensive, which in certain situations hinders the head of the family's clear-sightedness.

Mansfield Park is perhaps the author's most divisive novel because, due to its less popular heroine (and to some extent its protagonist), its moral and aesthetic values have not been as effective for all readers and critics as in other Austen works. Yet Fanny Price, with her characteristic steadfastness, loving-kindness, and excellent powers of observation, is a model of morality and stability. Although she may seem quiet and apathetic, it is through her that *Mansfield Park* is saved from collapse. In both ethical and aesthetic terms, she is the one who is capable of the most correct distinctions and clarity, but she must learn to adequately enforce these. In Austen's works, sometimes certain settings play not only topographic but also semantic roles; this can be seen several times in this novel, one example of which is the symbolic significance of the castle itself: the location also serves to convey Fanny's attachment to the Bertram family, the estate, and how she changes as a person.

Based on my analyses, I judged that Jane Austen's last two completed novels, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, are the ones in which the writer used narrative devices and created characters that, together, resulted in her being able to more plastically present her moral, aesthetic,

educational, and social-critical views. The structures of her novels themselves also became increasingly clearer. In the analysis of *Emma*, I focused on the male protagonist, Mr. Knightley, whose views and his instructive behaviour towards the heroine were in many ways paralleled by the moral philosophical views of Immanuel Kant. For example, George Knightley repeatedly puts the happiness of others before his own, and he seeks to advance *Emma's* moral well-being. Furthermore, the importance of the inescapability of our conscience also plays a significant role in *Emma*. In my opinion, Mr. Knightley is a landed aristocrat who lives a moral, virtuous life befitting a Regency gentleman, and who also fits Austen's moral expectations. *Persuasion* represents the virtue of perseverance and the topos of self-improvement and self-discovery more explicitly than any other Austen novel. In addition, the importance of discipline and persuasion, as well as the importance of the theme of rediscovery, also emerge. The writer's most prominent social criticism also comes to the fore in this work: her appreciation of the merits of sailors over landed aristocrats. The protagonist, Anne, is much nobler than her family members, who try to become respected members of aristocratic society through appearances, due to her natural and sincere character.

It is thanks to these that the analyses of Jane Austen's last two novels were the ones through which I was able to best present my view that constancy and amiability are the most important virtues in Austen's novels, and how self-improvement, self-education, judgment, doubt, homesickness, character development, happiness, and presence of mind are important in the writer's oeuvre, and how they are interconnected. However, these two novels alone would not have been enough to give me a comprehensive picture of the significance, philosophical, and aesthetic relevance of Austen's oeuvre. The way in which the main Austenian topos appeared in the writer's various works nuanced and complemented my points of analysis, and confirmed that Austen herself was constant in her own views.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (2)

1. **Kunkli, E.:** Önmagunkkal szembeni kétely: A szépség szerepe a Büszkeség és balítélet főhőseinek morális jellemfejlődésében.
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2. **Kunkli, E.:** Jane Austen munkássága mint a Régens korszak Angliájának lenyomata.
In: Reprezentáció : Esztétika és ideológia. Szerk.: Tánczos Péter, Kovács Máté Városi Művelődési Központ és Könyvtár, Hajdúszoboszló, 142-163, 2023, (Libertas Libri, ISSN 3057-8388 ; 1) ISBN: 9786158248808

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

3. **Kunkli, E.:** Az önfejlesztés és otthonkeresés szerepe Jane Austen utolsó befejezett regényében.
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8. **Kunkli, E.:** Az úton-levés mint a jellemfejlődés metaforája Jane Austennél.

In: XXVI. Tavasz Szél Konferencia 2023 : Tanulmánykötet I. kötet. Szerk.: Molnár Dániel, Molnár Dóra, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Budapest, 193-202, 2023. ISBN: 9786156457370

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In: A PEME XXIV. PhD - Konferenciájának előadásai. Szerk.: Koncz István, Szova Ilona, Professzorok az Európai Magyarországért Egyesület, Budapest, 210-218, 2022. ISBN: 9786155709173

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