

Personal Statement

Student #1

As an Austen scholar I am always asking “How is Austen a product of the British master narrative?” This question triggered a string of countless others regarding Austen and whether or not she was “written” by her time. My original inquiries into the subject have become dogged determination to read Austen from a cultural and historical perspective to explain her popularity from an academic point of view. In the spring of 2007 I began my first independent study of Austen. I focused on reading Austen in a cultural context and a new historical approach has become my lens for looking at Austen’s work.

I researched a great deal into Austen’s predecessors and contemporaries in order to place her into a cultural context. To establish a framework for understanding Austen’s influences, I read several Gothic texts including *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. These texts provided a great perspective for examining *Northanger Abbey*. My thesis has evolved based on my reading of other Austen critics, such as Lloyd Brown, Claudia Johnson and Charles Hinnant. Essays by these critics greatly aided the development of my own thesis on social stereotypes and their influence on character relationships.

Since my first independent study with Dr. Chesley I have guest-lectured in his classes and those of other Aquinas professors on Austen’s cultural impact, one of them being a sophomore level honors class. In this instance, I elaborated on the cultural significance of “the ball” as a social tool in *Mansfield Park*. After showing the film version, I explained the changes made to accommodate a modern audience and engaged the class in discussion on modern cultural influences of literature. I have also guest-lectured in Dr. Chesley’s “Intro to Fiction” course during his section on *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. I will be returning to that course in the spring

to revisit the topic, exploring its relationship with *Pride and Prejudice* as a popular update of the text. I also introduce the students in this course to elementary literary theory, encouraging them to grapple with New Historicism!

The most significant work on Austen I have done in the classroom, however, is the development of EH 401- Jane Austen as Aquinas' senior level seminar class for honors students. The previous research from my first independent study served as a basis for my work on this class. Contemporary criticism on Austen's work is being utilized in the class on the basis of my research as well as the inclusion of John Wiltshire's book *Recreating Jane Austen*. As the student assistant in this class I have given guest lectures on my own criticism of Austen's work.

The writing sample I have submitted is the culmination of this research and presents my theoretical interpretation of Austen's novels from a cultural and historical perspective. Great confusion arises within prospective mate relationships due largely to some misconception or assumption made by one or both parties involved. The vehement misinterpretation of character is the basis of *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth and Darcy's relationship is predicated on their misunderstanding of one another's character based on what is expected of each of them socially. Darcy is expected to be congenially aware of his eligible status and consequent social obligation to interact with the opposite sex, likewise Elizabeth is entirely too outspoken and choosy when it comes to a mate. Similarly, Anne and Wentworth's relationship in *Persuasion* is sidelined for years entirely by the opinions of others. Anne should have borrowed some of Elizabeth's spunk but instead allows her only chance at marriage to be sabotaged by relatives dubbing Wentworth beneath her in social standing. What then is the social stereotype these characters are taught to aspire to and search for? I want to develop this work at the graduate level, including it in the greater chronology of Western literature, which I believe is necessary.

As an undergraduate I have studied numerous eras of literary history but I am focusing that knowledge on how Austen's work was shaped by and shapes the culture in which she existed and in the chronology of Western literature. On a larger scale, where does Austen's work fit in relation to other novelists in Britain and in America? We know Austen read popular fiction of her time by Samuel Richardson, Francis Burney and other shapers of the novel form. At this point in the late 18th century, however, American authors are creating their own variation of the novel. American novels such as *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* drift from the British focus on manners and social critique toward sentimentalism. From a new historical perspective, how is the literature of these two nations speaking to each other? At the graduate level, I want to answer these questions through a transatlantic study of literature in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This knowledge can then be carried into the classroom, exploring Austen's modern cultural phenomenon and how the study of literature is affected by it.

In familiarizing myself with the intricacies of Washington University's English program I have been thrilled to discover the work of William McKelvy on Victorian literature. I believe my focus on late 18th and early 19th century literature will make a valuable contribution to the cultural-historical dialogue between these periods. While Austen has been my focus in recent years I hope to focus on transcontinental literature of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, examining the communication between British and American literature from a New Historical perspective.

I am greatly interested in Washington University's distinguished faculty because of their work in British and American literature. I would very much like to study under such direction and engage in an exciting discourse between these branches of Western literature and Austen's place within them!