

Reflections

reading notes

NOVEMBER 2004—*Virtue and Happiness*

The value of good literature is that it incarnates truth. Good books tell us the truth. Bad books lie, to echo the sentiments of Walker Percy.

Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, initially titled *First Impressions*, is one such book that incarnates truth. It tells us the truth about the sort of things that happen.

I want to focus your attention on one particular episode. Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of the story, has a sister—Lydia. Her lack of good sense is evidenced when she leaves home with a man who has proven himself to be less than honorable, a womanizer, a man named Wickham. Such behavior was scandalous in the early 1800's in England.

As Elizabeth reflects on her sister's behavior, Miss Austin writes that she "...had no difficulty in believing that neither her virtue nor her understanding would preserve her from falling an easy prey" (Book 3, Chap 4). Wickham was a charming devil and Lydia was defenseless without the proper desires navigating her ship.

A few chapters later (Book 3, Chap 8), Elizabeth, again reflecting on the scandal her sister has created, concludes, "how little of permanent happiness belongs to a couple who were only brought together because their passions were stronger than their virtue." Elizabeth is not without her flaws. But once she recognizes her prejudices and makes the necessary corrections, she allows virtue to govern her relations.

Virtues are passions, or desire, but the good sort, like prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. It is the other sort of desire that got Lydia into trouble. How often have you heard people say, "I don't understand how so and so could have done such and such!" It is precisely this other sort of desire that gets us all in trouble. Jane Austin knew of the connection that exists between virtue and happiness, and illustrates it, among other things, in her fine story.

Important lessons can be learned from reading good literature.

Steven Lloyd

