

This essay won Second Prize in the High School Essay Contest jointly sponsored by KCTS Channel 9 PBS television station in Seattle, WA, and the Puget Sound Chapter of the Jane Austen Society of North America in 2008. Andrew wrote this essay while a Junior homeschool student.

WHAT DOES JANE AUSTEN'S WRITING MEAN TO ME? – ANDREW J. BELL

What makes a good story? Is it action? Plot? Drama? Suspense? Description? As a writer, I am always on the lookout for good stories, and for what makes them good. Having tried and failed to write good stories based off of plot, or action, or description, I have often found myself baffled as to what the secret ingredient great writers put into their stories. I learned the answer about a year ago, from a writer by the name of Jane Austen. In this essay, I'll answer the question "What does Jane Austen's writing mean to me," by examining my quest for the secret ingredient of great stories, as revealed to me in reading Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.

As soon as I had first finished reading *Pride and Prejudice*, I knew it was a great story. But I was not content simply to put it down as a great book; I wanted to know why it was great. So I began a much closer examination of the book while re-reading it. Initially, I thought I had enjoyed the book primarily because of Austen's wit and humor. It certainly seemed like a breath of fresh air, coming at a time when I had just finished reading *Frankenstein* and *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. But on second examination, I realized that while wit and humor featured prominently in *Pride and Prejudice*, they were largely packaging for the story. They weren't the meat of the book, and since I'm a reader who likes meat, I knew they couldn't be the reason I loved the work.

Next I looked for elements like description. As a reader, I enjoy a good description; it's part of the reason I like books like *The Lord of the Rings*, which is loaded with description. But *Pride and Prejudice* is comparatively sparse in its descriptions. This couldn't be the source of its greatness. Likewise, the book has relatively little action, in the common understanding of the word. That could not be what attracted me to it.

Plot, drama, and suspense the book has. But as I examined these elements I realized that a book could be written with the same plot as *Pride and Prejudice*, and not be half so interesting. This is when I realized what makes a great story.

Pride and Prejudice has a good plot. But its plot, concerned primarily with who marries whom, would be rather dull, but for one thing: the characters. The only thing that makes the plot so interesting is that we care about the characters. Consequently, we take great interest in their affairs, just as we might take interest in the doings of our friends and relations. Jane Austen devotes the majority of her work to the task of developing her characters. As we learn the intricacies of each, their hopes, their fears, their feelings, we come to think of them as real people, and from that, to love them. It is because of these strong, well-developed characters that the plot of *Pride and Prejudice* comes to life. Who cares what happens to Lizzy and Darcy if you don't know who they are? In fact, I would posit that it is on the strength of Jane Austen's characters alone that her success rests.

This lesson of characters is one I will never forget. When I sit down to write a story, I begin by sketching out my characters. This is what Jane Austen and her works mean to me: they remind me of that one crucial lesson of writing; that the line that separates the good story from the great story, is a line crossed by characters.