York University

Unessay Option—

A Great Deal Too Light

A short story

By Cody Poisson

Kintbury: Friday 8 January 1796

To my dearest sister,

I received your letter yesterday very much eager to hear how you've got on since the last time we had parleyed with one another. In the first place, I'm still greatly sad at how we ought to depart in the most unfavorable of circumstances; but then again, to us, I think there never would be a *favorable* valediction to our friendship, I suppose, when one of us ought to leave the graces of the other's company so suddenly. If I had the choice, I would make certain that no-one would leave, however much the occasion would demand it, and that each would remain with the other as much as life would wish it to be so.

After this necessary preamble, I shall proceed to inform you that we had an exceedingly great journey—the weather was mild, the skies were blue, and not a cloud was seen for the whole duration of our trip. Mr. Fowle was particularly handsome when he arrived the other day, his white shining curls and fair complexion were immaculately contrasted on his green coat. This is not to say his usual ensemble is ill-kept, but it is merely to admit that his present condition was shockingly good-looking. We were so terribly good as to keep a steady trot that we reached his estate sooner than expected. I must admit, even after you and I had said our momentary farewells, I was hugely excited at seeing his residence again: it is so much larger than the rectory at home that you can sit in any one chamber by yourself and remain undisturbed for hours on end.

Heed but one request for me: find your quietude when you can my dear sister. I know how loud and cramped it can get at the rectory with all those delinquent brothers of ours screaming their heads off, not excluding the gentleman's' children listening to Father recite Cowper, but I trust your talents will find a way to cultivate solitude. Promise me you'll continue to write. Father thinks there is so much potential in your writing: that is the very reason he purchased the writing desk last year for your birthday. Cherish it as if the desk were

me. It's probably best if you steal yourself away within Father's library when you have a moment to spare. It's quieter, I conjecture, than any room in the house.

In addition to my arrival, I'm pained to confess that all my elation was shortly dispensed with a day after we had reached his estate. At breakfast, he confided to me that he must sail to San Domingo on behalf of the Navy in a few weeks' time. On hearing this I tried to persuade him off such an untimely desertion; however, his resolve on the matter was too great to dissuade from obligation. I relate all these minute happenings for the sake of pre-empting your despair at discovering my later return than otherwise planned. I expose this truth, however, only for your benefit, because he leaves the country soon after a fortnight, on which day I will not see him for another four months. It strikes me as important to say that everyone is extremely anxious if I will make return or not. As I will stay here not longer than a fortnight, you can expect a return from me in and around that time. At the present moment, I already feel the loss of this most agreeable man exceedingly and shall have nothing to console me till my arrival in Steventon.

On the brighter end of things, I heard from Caroline that you are attending the ball at Deane House after all. Being three years your elder, I'm delighted to hear such things as I'm constantly reminded of your unwillingness to partake in such profligacies. A woman of your delicate age and tender sensibilities ought to start considerations of what man she will eventually engage. It will upset me a great deal if I receive word, of any kind, of your lack of attendance and I'm therefore impatient to hear about whom you will dance with. I encourage all the best with Caroline at the ball and with Father at the home. I expect to hear amazingly improper things in another letter soon.

Forever yours,
C.A.

Anyone who had ever seen Steventon Rectory in the countryside of Hampshire, would have never supposed the place to be a boarding school. Its herds of cows, the private gardens, the homestead side barns and water troughs, were all excessively symbolic of the bucolic farmer.

The proprietor was a vicar, without being guileful or negligent, or overbearing, and was a respectable man who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty in a patch of cucumbers, though his name was George. He had a considerable taste for literature, besides his many professions, his favorite writers being Alexander Pope, John Dryden, Ann Radcliffe, and especially William Cowper—and he was not in the least interested in writing.

His youngest daughter was a woman of extraordinary common sense, practicality, wit, and studious rationality, with a round face, hazel eyes, a small nose and mouth, and, what is more remarkable, with an unshakable affinity for the written word. She spent most of her time inside her father's library, sheltered away from the household; and instead of milking cows or doing her chores, as anybody would expect of a farmhand, she sought the pleasure in writing her own plays and novels, even started to complete a first series of short stories, to see if she could create fictions as grand as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. The very thought of writing at such altitudes titillated her mind: that she, a lowly country girl, could enjoy a similar literary notability as her favourite authoress Ann Radcliffe, a thought she inexorably fought to make a reality.

A family of eight children will always be called a large family, even if the heads and arms seemed in excess; but George had little stress over such multitudes, for he was in general very amiable, a fine scholar himself, and his youngest daughter, for many years of her youth, as scholarly as any.

She had a tall and slender figure, a step light and firm, well-formed features, and brown hair forming natural curls around a closed face—so much was her person, and not less

quixotic for fancy was her mind. She had a fondness of boys' play and greatly preferred long-mile walks to gowns, but to the more inward pursuits of intellectual endeavour: scribing a poem, mimicking an author, or framing an exchange in dramatic dialogue were such intellectual fascinations. Indeed, she had neither taste nor want for ballrooms; and if she ever engaged in country dancing, it was chiefly for pleasure of mischief. Such were her habits of personhood—her abilities to write were quite extraordinary.

She never thought or acted in the same way as other girls her age; and sometimes in her solitude, she was often susceptible to fleets of the imagination, and occasionally bethought herself a medieval heroine.

Her father was many years in teaching her to recite Cowper ad verbatim; and sometimes in the evenings, it was not at all uncommon to hear a line of verse at the dinner table. She was better at reciting than any of her siblings, not because they were stupid, but because she was extraordinarily attentive to the social world.

She tried her hand at gardening and could not bear it—and George, who did not insist on his daughters liking flowers in spite of the temperamental difference, allayed his instructions to leave her off. Farmwork and housework she was taught by her older brothers, knitting by her sister Cassandra: the proficiency she had in either was nothing remarkable, and she skirted her chores in whatever way she could. What a troublesome, ingenious character indeed! She was neither loud nor disobedient, was, if ever, obdurate, verily well-mannered, and scarcely condemnatory of her brothers' shenanigans, with few breeches of propriety; she was moreover honest but internally wild, enjoyed reading but hated confinement, balked at cleanliness, and wanted more than anything else in the world to venture barefoot across the heaths of Hampshire.

But wait, my reader! Here comes my unabashed heroine in question. In addition to what has already been said about my heroine's personal and mental endowments, she is about

to be launched onto a journey unlike anything she has hitherto partaken in—she is, according to the letter preceding my narration, going to attend a ball with her niece Caroline at the luxurious residence of Deane House. It may be stated, for the reader's own conscience, lest the subsequent pages should fail in lending any insight into what her intentions are meant to be, that she is affectionate in heart, though unstudious in etiquette, inept at the formalities of dinning, country dancing, and the boulangerie, and is therefore uninitiated in the pleasantries as the female mind at twenty usually is.

When the hour of Caroline's visit drew near, the natural anxiety of my heroine will be supposed to be most outlandish. Her father leapt for joy at the idea and readily gave his approval, anything to allow his daughter to experience the customs enough for a girl her age, but she on the other hand was unbelievably hesitant—she vexed her good father thoroughly, pleaded to him in earnest, to not attend the ball in the evening, for she rather preferred to remain indoors and finish a few manuscripts that she stored away in her writing desk; but he would entertain no such complaints, without any discernible presentiments of malice, and steadfastly informed her of the importance and applicable nature this occasion had on her maturation. Cautions against the violence attended to such women were the primary means of argument, and yet he would hear none of it. "I beg you, father," my heroine cautioned, "that you won't abet these machinations of Caroline's. She is known to be reckless at such balls and has her heart set on scandal."

"My child," her father raised himself and took off his hat, his white curls shining, "a taste for dancing is always desirable in your sex, as a means of getting you out of doors, and tempting you to more frequent exercise than you would otherwise take."

It took the concerted effort of both Caroline and Cassandra, through constant bombardment by post, over many days, to persuade her from her obstinacy. Now, with the

hour of Caroline's arrival drawing near, she did everything she could, as far as she was capable of performing, to avoid the inevitability of attending a ball with her niece.

A strident knock came upon the entrance of Steven Rectory, and an irremovable shudder ricocheted down the spine of my heroine. She ran toward the main parlour windows and peered through the curtains, through which she saw the little Caroline, in front of the doorway, whose figure was draped with a thin, lacy gown and a headdress garlanded in flowers. The dread she had felt in that moment was palpable, inconvertible, and permanent: through some sick process of coercion, she was now forced to make faces of endearment with lords and baronets—what horrific, unaccountable realities! What destructions of solitude! The prospects of marriage were bashing on her library door, with both Cassandra and Caroline, clothed in their matrimonial gowns, readied at hand with baskets of love from those *potential* suitors. Another knock came upon the entrance door. What dread!

"Come on, Aunt Jane. We don't want to be late," Caroline cried.

With little choice in the matter, Jane begrudgingly gathered her belongings, wrapped her hands with gloves, and unlatched the door. In front of her stood Caroline with everything most joyful and spry in a woman. Her smile was most irrefutable to the weaker parts of her aunt. They held each other in embrace for some time till they grew tired of the affection that they had heretofore enacted of late.

"This is the gown you have chosen?" Caroline said, her eyes preening each aberration.

"I don't own much of what you'd call *proper evening wear*."

"This is indeed so." Caroline grimaced and observed her feet. "At least put on some pattens. No lord shall dance with you if you arrive with a soiled dress."

And a lecture on social manners immediately followed, in which her instructions were so clear that her aunt soon began to see the practicality in everything admired by Caroline, though she never fully understood the rationale behind pampering oneself so generously.

Once she returned with her pattens, both women leisurely started toward Deane House for the anticipated town ball.

"Why must we, as women, dress in such uncomfortable garments? I have perfectly agreeable dresses, without the strain of use, that easily allow for movement," Jane fretted.

"A woman especially, if she has the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can." My heroine knew too well what the former assertation entailed, a reality she had often experienced when she had tried to relate with the opposite sex—How wise, well-learned a girl was her delicate niece! For women, if it will aid the knowledge of my reader, have very little in what many call *personal say* in all matters of public life, especially in matrimonial decisions: and by that pronouncement the reader must allow that in both man has the advantage of choice, women only the power of refusal. Concealment of intention was a women's greatest tool if she sought to advance her position, a lesson my heroine is slowly coming to realize.

"Your father," Caroline jumped in, "must have been awfully excited with your departure from the rectory."

"He was seemingly too delighted."

"Don't sound so burdened. He is merely enthused about seeing his daughter become a lady. It's a shame he never came out to greet me."

"There's no need in worrying. His love is more than intact for you. Today he is absorbed in teaching Cowper to the gentleman's children."

Each tendency to laugh or reveal a smirk affected Caroline so. "It's probably for the better. If he greeted us, we'd have to endure his didactics on the monarchy till nightfall."

The girls shared so earnestly a well-needed guffaw at George's wry sense of humour, natural to his scholar's mind, for how he remained so jovial, even in life's darker moments, was always a mystery to them. His mind, it seemed, was endowed with an innate principle of

general curiosity, and therefore unconcerned with the accumulation of wealth and status of urbanized living, or a desire for finery—this child-like wonder he zealously lived by was without any resentments, present in most ordinary people, to those who acquired more material advantages than him. The office of the mind was the only material advantage worth pursuit, and Steventon Rectory was the physical manifestation of George's overweening passion for the arts: a passion he intently instilled into his youngest daughter.

And so they were off, down the marshy roadway to Deane House, with lanterns in hand and spirits high. Caroline seemed unaffected by the lampless country roads, unafraid of the cold darkness that particularly arises between those nighly hours of eight or nine. Her body glowed with the warmth of her spry age: she was like an ember glistening amid a wintry fire, or a taper fluttering amid an obscured chamber. One would suppose, at first glance, that she had the innate gift to emanate goodness, zest, and liveliness wherever she so went, but in fact she learnt this virtue of hers through an incomparable fondness for the world.

My heroine was regrettably the opposite character to her niece, for she neither had the mental stamina to dance for long periods of time nor the want for social exchanges that was normal for girls her age. She loved exploring the layout of the land, took pleasure in taking long-mile hikes around the heaths of Hampshire, but she had an irrepressible dislike of social formalities. Matter of fact, she much preferred a soiled dress to a clean one—How unbecoming a girl was she! All attempts to encourage her aunt, despite the ardency in Caroline's behaviour, were futile. "Think of the adventure in the occasion." She sparked with excitement. "It's like one of those Radcliffe novels you're always reading: a young maiden, helpless in her upbringing, is catapulted into high-society living where she meets a dashing lord in his castle." Jane rolled her eyes from the ignorance.

"The women in her novels are most assuredly imprisoned in that castle, disaffected from love and family."

"With such gloom," Caroline teased, "you'll surely never reach perfect felicity."

With that admonition, the anxiety, which in this state of her reluctance, was hardly abated, I fear, from the present course it was on, and will therefore continue in the tell-tale compression of the pages below, till she unmistakably realizes the error in her initial assessment. For what she lacked in courage, she will make up for in prose. She is an Austen, after all.

Some miles down, they reached a fork in the road: on the left side was the beginnings of an entrance way to a large manor, whereas on the right side was a carriage path stretching further into darkness. Caroline gently yanked the wrist of her aunt toward the left side. Before her stood the most marvelous structure she had ever seen, a gigantic facade of engineered precision. Newly built at the time, Dean House was an architectural miracle in every which way conceivable: it was owned by a John and Alice Hardwood, two wealthy business owners from London, who converted the original structure from a smaller, dingier rectory to a mass manor of bricks. Large chimney stacks were placed in every part of the house while a fanned stairway descended the front entrance and ended somewhere in the front lawn, as though the opulence spilled out from inside like resplendent honey…

Postface

Sometimes, with extraordinary authors, the dividing lines between fiction and reality, the work issuing from the mind and the person living within reality, immeasurably blur as to confound the distinctions of the authorial persona from the real-to-life author present behind a written text. Between her life and work, Jane Austen lived a fulsome life marked by some extraordinary transitions, contrasts, passions, indulgences, and inevitably tragedies, the former of which I found utterly thrilling as I partook in the, sometimes, insurmountable task of researching one of the most influential writers in the English language—all for the sake of writing a single short story in honour of such a remarkable woman. The story I happened upon was a seemingly innocuous occasion in which Jane Austen, at the tender age of twenty, attended her first ball at a neighbour's residence (Deane House) in her home village of Steventon, Hampshire. On the surface, nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary whilst I sifted through the collections of letters and the biographical texts; till, on one late evening, I stumbled on a series of correspondences between Austen and her older sister Cassandra, describing a failed love-proposal with an aristocratic neighbour Tom Lefroy.

The boy himself was a law student, well-off, and was described as 'gentlemanlike, good-looking, and pleasant' with a prosperous family owning estates on mass plots of land. Being the nephew of Ann Lefroy, a close friend of Austen's, Tom became a not-infrequent topic of social discussion between the woman invited to Ann's estate at Ash Rectory, a large house directly down the street from Deanne House. To kill the boredom of the quiet, country life in Hampshire, the owners of such large residences would arrange balls for their friends, family, and local neighbours to indulge in country dancing, drinks, food, and of course the underlying motivation behind all this—the intrigues of coquetry. To us, it may seem almost silly to think balls with country dancing are somehow salacious get-togethers, but to the more decorous sensibilities of the 18th-century person, it was truly a racy scene to behold in the

countryside. The excitement found in encountering others at balls was also a major source of attraction for those poorer locals longing to taste the luxury unobtainable to them under normal circumstances. These chances to indulge in grandeur opened the doors for someone like Austen, a poorer resident of Steventon, to peer into a world inaccessible to her. During this period of her life, around the age of twenty, she and Tom Lefroy met over a ball dance at Deanne House, a time in which my story gains its inspirational fodder.

I first looked over the letters she wrote during her flirtations with Tom. Surprisingly, there were only two letters from Austen detailing the events between January 9 and 15, 1796, both of which hint at a steadfast demise of their ballroom titillations; moreover, the letters themselves are the first records of her personal correspondences, and therefore any letter before 1796 was either destroyed or lost to time in some way. Because of the historical gaps in the record, I became irresistibly drawn to the mystery of what happened between a young Austen and a young, rich boy Tom; in other words, since the records were scant and suggested an ill-fated proposal, the letters left a momentous question in my head: why was the flame of these star-crossed lovers, an intimacy with 'everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together,' extinguished in less than a week's time? Certainly, they loved each other for they danced two or three more times at both Deane House and Ash Rectory, excluding any private 'meetings' they might have had with each other, and visited one another's homes, it appears, according to some allusions in the second letter Austen sent to her sister. Another point of fascination was the alteration in her character after she received no offer of a proposal from Tom Lefroy. It is undoubtedly the case that such a seminal event would, for anyone, affect their worldview of life and alter their perceptions of others, especially those whom one regards with intimacy; but it is also the case that Austen, at this point in her life, started contemplating on the largest theme predominating her novels: the economy of marriage. Before Tom, she was green and uninitiated to the

business of matrimony, naïve to the mores imposed upon women in 18th-century England; for all intents and purposes, she lived a relatively simple homestead existence at her father's rectory (i.e., Steventon Rectory) where she was isolated from and uninformed of much of the outside world. Being introduced to the luxuries of high society through her attendance at balls showed her the cost of having such opulence often outweighed the benefits—that is to say, she recognized that money often came before love and that families, to maintain said wealth and positions within society, would pre-arranged marriages for their sons and daughters in order that no financial precarity would occur.

In delving into that specific time in her life, I began to see the connections between her burgeoning interests, be it the economy of marriage, the financial disparities between people, or the idea of unmitigated love, and the characters and themes inhabiting her novels. Characters such as Catherine Morland in her novel *Northanger Abbey* almost mirror the coming-of-age (the *bildungsroman*) story of Austen's own life. Both women, in their youth, 'hate confinement and cleanliness,' are quixotic in their worldview, and prefer to be out in nature, but as soon as they are introduced into society their 'love for dirt gave way to an inclination for finery.' Even though this goes beyond the boundaries of my narrative, it's no coincidence, I think, that both Austen and Catherine essentially learn the ins and outs of public life by attending balls in various high-society gatherings. Each woman is an ingenue and transitions from their places of safety and comfort into cities, with mores, unfamiliar to them (in the case of both women, it would eventually be the city of Bath). This coming-of-age story is such a predominant fascination in many of her novels because it bespeaks the realizations, discoveries, heartaches, and missteps she faced at this pivotal point in her life with Tom; more so, the realizations that both women make during their respective stories is ultimately an understanding of how a woman is supposed to function in 18th-century England, which, it seems, is always tied to the economy of marriage.

Out of all the letters Austen wrote, the ones addressed to her sister Cassandra are the most personal, confessional, numerous, and confiding, lending the greatest insight into her as a writer of fiction as well as a woman at odds with 18th-century sensibilities. Because my research was guided by her letters and novels, I thought it only fitting to scaffold my short story within an epistolary form, given her voice was so palpable to my ear while I read her, to suit the coming-of-age narrative between her and Tom Lefroy. After reading "A Great Deal Too Light", one undoubtedly discovered countless allusions, quotes, sentiments, and tricks of the trade, used in *Northanger Abbey*, that are as well used within the short story. The intention, other than wanting to create an entertaining/beautiful work of art, was to pay tribute to the masterpiece she has left for us, as well as to accentuate the more common threads between her life and her art. Certain themes in the novel, like the satirizing of gothic conventions, or the advocation of the novelist, have been subtly omitted from this first draft, partly because the form of a short story forces me to omit any extraneous detail. The essence of this story, I felt, wasn't found in gothic conventions or novelist digressions, but in the theme of marriage. This coming-of-age story has hopefully illumined Austen's life, concerns, fixations, disappointments, as well as her developments as a writer of English prose. Above all, I hope you've gained some knowledge of the young authoress endowed with that faculty of creative power.

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