

Saadaoui, Nada (2025) For Jane Austen and her heroines, walking was more than a pastime – it was a form of resistance. The Conversation UK (online) .

Downloaded from: <https://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/8943/>

***Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.***

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available [here](#)) for educational and not-for-profit activities

**provided that**

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

**You may not**

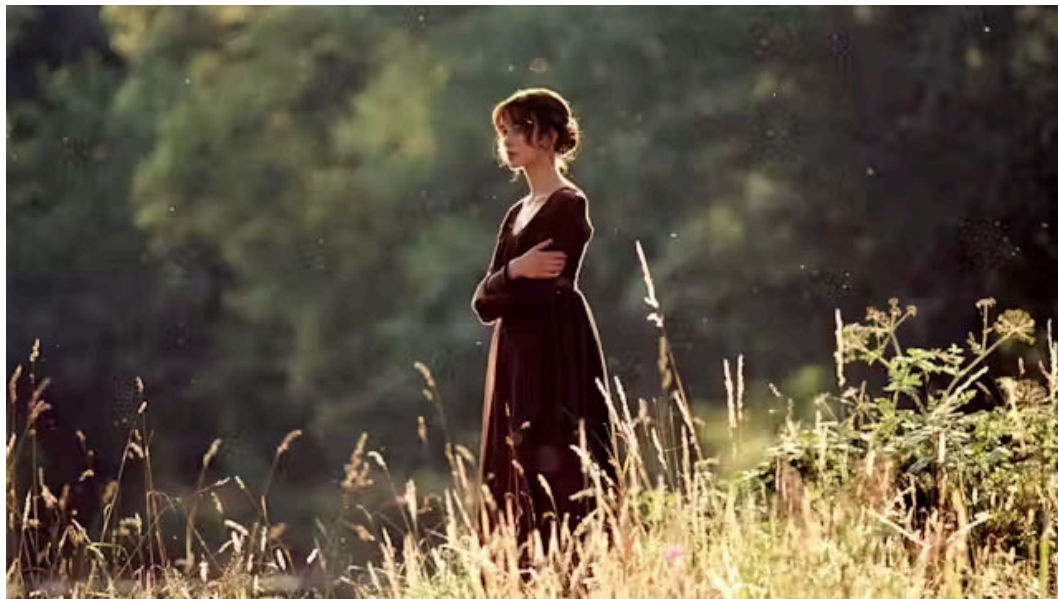
- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found [here](#).

Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing [insight@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:insight@cumbria.ac.uk).

# THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Keira Knightley in a scene from *Pride & Prejudice* (2005). Cinematic/Alamy Stock Photo

## For Jane Austen and her heroines, walking was more than a pastime – it was a form of resistance

Published: June 26, 2025 2.08pm BST

**Nada Saadaoui**

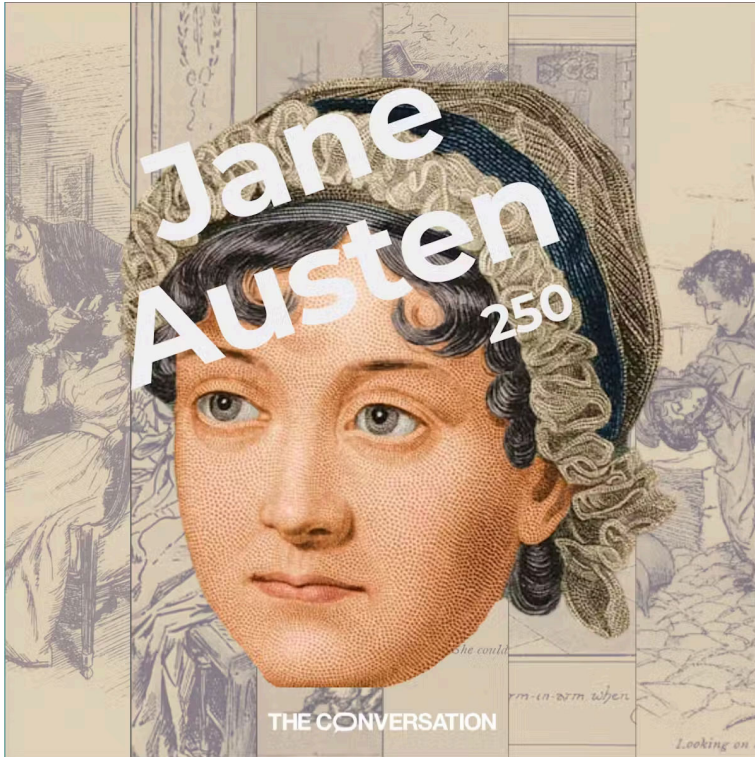
PhD Candidate in English Literature, University of Cumbria

In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), when heroine Elizabeth Bennet arrives at Netherfield Park with “her petticoat six inches deep in mud”, she walks not only through the fields of Hertfordshire, but into one of literature’s most memorable images of women’s independence.

Her decision to walk alone, “above her ankles in dirt”, is met with horror. “What could she mean by it?” sneers Miss Bingley. “It seems to me to show an abominable sort of conceited independence.” And yet, in that walk – unaccompanied, unfashionable, unbothered – Elizabeth reveals more about her spirit and autonomy than any parlour conversation could.

For Austen’s heroines, independence – however “abominable” – often begins on foot. Elizabeth may be the most iconic of Austen’s pedestrians, but she is far from alone. Across Austen’s novels, women are constantly in motion: walking through country lanes, walled gardens, shrubberies, city streets and seaside resorts.

These are not idle excursions. They are socially legible acts, shaped by class, decorum, and gender – yet often quietly resistant to them.



*This article is part of a series commemorating the **250th anniversary of Jane Austen's birth**. Despite having published only six books, she is one of the best-known authors in history. These articles explore the legacy and life of this incredible writer.*

---

Fanny Price, the often underestimated heroine of Mansfield Park (1814), is typically seen as timid and passive. Yet beneath her reserved exterior lies a quiet but determined spirit.

“She takes her own independent walk whenever she can”, remarks Mrs Norris disapprovingly. “She certainly has a little spirit of secrecy, and independence, and nonsense about her.” Austen’s choice of “nonsense” here is revealing: Fanny’s desire for solitude and self-direction is not revolutionary, but it is gently subversive. In a world offering women little room for self-assertion, her steps become acts of resistance.

When Jane Fairfax, constrained by class and circumstance in Emma (1815), declines a carriage ride, she asserts: “I would rather walk ... quick walking will refresh me.” It’s a seemingly modest decision, but one layered with significance. To walk is to control your own movement, to maintain autonomy and resist the genteel suffocation of being constantly observed or helped.



Anne (played by Dakota Johnson in the Netflix adaptation) takes in the coastal air of Lyme Regis in *Persuasion*. Courtesy of Netflix

In *Persuasion* (1817), Anne Elliot's story shows walking as a path to renewal. Reserved and long burdened by regret, Anne finds restoration in the coastal air of Lyme Regis. As she walks along the Cobb, Austen notes that "she was looking remarkably well ... having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind ... and by the animation of eye which it had also produced".

Her emotional reawakening is framed as a physical one. Walking becomes not only therapeutic but transformative – a way back to herself.

Not all of Austen's walks are reflective or restorative. Some are decidedly social. Lydia and Kitty Bennet's frequent walks to Meryton in *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, are driven as much by shopping as by the hope of romantic encounters.

Austen notes the "most convenient distance" of the village, where "their eyes were immediately wandering up in the street in quest of the officers". These girls were more interested in uniforms than in bonnets.

Yet even this behaviour hints at something subtler. For young, unmarried women, shopping and social errands were among the few socially sanctioned reasons to move independently through public space. These excursions offered moments of visibility, mobility, and the possibility of courtship – however frivolously pursued.

## Lizzy meets Mr. Wickham - Pride & Prejudice (1995) subs ES/PT-...



Kitty and Lydia walk to Meryton in order to encounter the officers.

Catherine Morland of [Northanger Abbey](#) (1817), a devoted reader of gothic fiction, fuses her walks with imagination. As she strolls along the Avon River with the Tilneys, she muses: “It always puts me in mind of the country that Emily and her father travelled through in [The Mysteries of Udolpho](#).” Walking becomes an act of imaginative projection, where the boundaries between fiction and reality blur in the mind of a heroine learning to navigate both the world and herself.

### **Jane Austen the walker**

Austen’s fiction draws much of its vitality from her own experiences. She was, by her own admission, a “desperate walker”, rarely deterred by weather, terrain or propriety.





A watercolour of Jane Austen by her sister Cassandra, showing her looking out to sea. It was painted while they were on holiday in Lyme Regis in 1804. Wiki Commons

Her letters, written from Bath, Steventon, Chawton and elsewhere, capture the physicality and pleasure of walking in vivid, often playful detail. These glimpses into her daily life reveal not only her attachment to movement but also the quiet autonomy it afforded her.

In 1805, Austen writes from Bath: “Yesterday was a busy day with me, or at least with my feet & my stockings; I was walking almost all day long.” Several years later, in 1813, she reports with unmistakable relief: “I walked to Alton, & dirt excepted, found it delightful ... before I set out we were visited by several callers, all of whom my mother was glad to see, & I very glad to escape.”

Perhaps most revealing is an earlier letter from December 1798, in which Austen describes a rare solitary excursion: “I enjoyed the hard black frosts of last week very much, & one day while they lasted walked to Deane by myself. I do not know that I ever did such a thing in my life before.” The comment registers the novelty and boldness of a woman walking alone.

In an age where walking is once again praised for its physical and mental benefits, Austen’s fiction reminds us that these virtues are not new. Her characters have been walking for centuries – through mud, across class boundaries and against expectation.

They walk in pursuit of clarity, connection, escape and self-hood. Their steps – measured or impulsive, solitary or social – mark turning points in their lives. And in a world designed to keep them stationary, their walking remains a radical act.

*This article features references to books that have been included for editorial reasons, and may contain links to [bookshop.org](https://bookshop.org). If you click on one of the links and go on to buy something from this website, The Conversation UK may earn a commission.*