

# Jane Austen

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**Jane Austen**



1870 engraving of Jane Austen, based on a portrait drawn by her sister Cassandra.

**Born:** 16 December 1775  
Steventon, Hampshire, England

**Died:** 18 July 1817 (age 41)  
Winchester, Hampshire, England

**Occupation:** Novelist

## Jane Austen (16



1873 engraving of Jane Austen, based on a portrait drawn by her sister Cassandra.

December 1775 – 18 July 1817) was an English novelist whose works include *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion*. Her social commentary and masterful use of both free indirect speech and irony eventually made Austen one of the most influential and honoured novelists in English literature. Her novels were all written and set around the Regency Era. She never married and died at age 41.

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## Life

Jane Austen was



Jane Austen's family coat of arms.

born in 1775 at a rectory in Steventon, Hampshire, one of two daughters of the Reverend George Austen (1731–1805) and his wife Cassandra (née Leigh) (1739–1827). Her brothers James and Henry followed in their father's path and joined the Anglican clergy

(the latter towards the end of his life after a successful career as a banker), while her brothers Francis and Charles both pursued naval careers. There was also a disabled brother, George, who did not live with the Austens. Her sister was named Cassandra, like their mother, and Austen tended to follow this naming practice in her novels, with eldest daughters named after their mothers.

She was very close to her sister Cassandra

throughout her life. The abundant correspondence between them provides historians with the greatest insight into Jane's thoughts. It is regrettable that Cassandra destroyed many letters after Jane's death; no one is certain why. Cassandra drew the only undisputed life portrait of Jane, a somewhat rudimentary, coloured sketch that currently resides in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

In 1783, Austen was educated briefly by a relative in Oxford, then in Southampton; finally, from 1785–1786, she attended the Reading Ladies boarding school in the Abbey gatehouse in Reading, Berkshire.

She began her first novel in 1789. Her family life was conducive to writing; the Austen family often enacted plays, which gave Jane an opportunity to present her stories. They also borrowed novels from the local library, which influenced her writing. She was encouraged to write, especially by her brother Henry, who wrote a little himself. Her stories took as their theme the limited provincial world in which she lived for the first twenty-six years of her life. Jane loved to write her novels in peace and she only shared them with her family when they were performing plays.

In 1796, Jane Austen had a flirtation with Tom Lefroy, later Lord High Justice of Ireland, who was a younger relative of a friend of hers. Jane Austen wrote two letters to Cassandra mentioning him. In a letter dated 9 January 1796, she wrote:

"After I had written the above, we received a visit from Mr. Tom Lefroy and his cousin George. The latter is really very well-behaved now; and as for the other, he has but one fault, which time will, I trust, entirely remove—it is that his morning coat is a great deal too light. He is a very great admirer of *Tom Jones*, and therefore wears the same coloured clothes, I imagine, which he did when he was wounded". "

On 16 January 1796, there is another mention:

"Friday. -- At length the day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, and when you receive this it will be over. My tears flow as I write at the melancholy idea".<sup>[1]</sup>

It does not seem to have been a serious relationship and the love affair did not last long. However, it

has been suggested that Austen might have had him in mind when she created the character Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

In 1801, following her father's retirement, the family moved to the fashionable spa city of Bath, which provides the setting for many of her novels.

[2] However, Jane Austen, like her character Anne Elliot, seemed to have "persisted in a disinclination for Bath." Her dislike may have been influenced by the family's precarious financial situation and from being uprooted from her settled existence in the country.

In 1802, Austen received a marriage proposal from a wealthy, but "big and awkward" man named Harris Bigg-Wither, the younger brother of her friends Catherine and Alethea Bigg, and six years her junior.<sup>[3]</sup> The marriage would have freed her from some of the constraints and dependency she experienced as a spinster. She initially accepted his offer, only to change her mind and refuse him the following day.

After the death of  
her father in

1805, Austen, her sister and her mother lived in Southampton with her brother Frank and his family

for several years, before moving to Chawton in 1809. Here, her wealthy brother Edward had an estate with a cottage, where his mother and sisters lived. This house is now a museum and is a popular site for tourists and



"Chawton Cottage" where Jane Austen lived during the last 8 years of her life (today a museum).

literary pilgrims alike. Austen wrote her later novels there. It wasn't until 1811, six years before her death, that a novel she had written, *Sense and Sensibility*, was published, and it was at the expense of her brother Henry and his wife Eliza.

In 1816, she began to suffer from ill health. In May 1817, she moved to Winchester to be closer to her doctor. Jane's condition worsened, and on 18 July 1817, she died at the age of forty-one and was buried in Winchester Cathedral. It is now thought by some that she may have suffered from Addison's disease, a failure of the adrenal glands that was common in the 19th century due to its being a frequent complication of tuberculosis. The



disease was at that time unnamed. Others, such as biographer Carol Shields, have hypothesized that she died from breast cancer.

## Works

England's first truly important female novelist, Jane Austen had difficulty in establishing a reputation for herself, despite the fact that she counted the Prince Regent among her admirers of the time. A novelist of manners, her work dealt with a limited social circle in society—that of the provincial gentry and the upper classes. As she stated in a letter to her niece, Anna: 'Three of four families in a country village are the very thing to work on.' She explored their relationships, values and shortcomings with detachment and irony, and her restrained satire of social excesses of the period was perhaps nearer to the classically minded moralizing of the eighteenth century than to the new age of Romantic rebellion and potential sentimentalism.<sup>[4]</sup>

Austen's best-known work is *Pride and Prejudice*, which is viewed as an exemplar of her socially astute novel of manners. Austen also wrote a satire of the popular Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe,

*Northanger Abbey*, which was published posthumously in 1818. Adhering to a common contemporary practice for female authors, Austen published her novels anonymously; this kept her out of leading literary circles.

Austen's novels of manners, especially *Emma*, are often cited for their perfection of form. Modern critics continue to unearth new perspectives on Austen's keen commentary regarding the predicament of unmarried genteel English women in the late 1790s and early 1800s, a consequence of inheritance law and custom, which usually directed the bulk of a family's fortune to eldest male heirs.

Although Austen's career coincided with the Romantic movement in literature, she was not an intensely passionate Romantic and the social turbulence of early nineteenth-century England was barely touched upon in novels which concentrated on the everyday life and ostensibly trivial aspects of genteel society—balls, trips, dances, and an unending procession of marriage proposals. Thus, it could be argued she was more neo-classical in outlook. Passionate emotion usually carries danger in an Austen novel: the young woman who exercises twice a day is more likely to find real happiness than one who

irrationally elopes with a capricious lover. Austen's artistic values had more in common with David Hume and John Locke than with her contemporaries William Wordsworth and Lord Byron.

Within her limited field, however, she did create a memorable range of characters whose dealings with love, marriage, courtship and social or personal rivalries were treated with a remarkable degree of objectivity and psychological depth. Although Austen did not promote passionate emotion as did other Romantic movement writers, she was also sceptical of its opposite—excessive calculation and practicality often leads to disaster in Austen novels (for example, Maria Bertram's marriage of convenience to the wealthy but dull Mr. Rushworth has an unhappy conclusion). Her close analysis of character displayed both a warm sense of humour and a hardy realism: vanity, selfishness and a lack of self-knowledge are among the faults most severely judged in her novels (e.g. in the case of Wickham and the flighty Lydia in *Pride and Prejudice*).

### **Literary Influences**

Among Austen's influences were Henry Fielding,

Samuel Richardson, Walter Scott, Samuel Johnson, William Cowper, George Crabbe and Fanny Burney.

Austen owed much in particular to both Richardson and Fielding with regard to her concept of the novel. Her first work, *Elinor and Marianne*, (later modified and published as *Sense and Sensibility*) was epistolary in technique. Her choice of a third-person omniscient narrator showed the influence of Fielding but, unlike the latter, she did not allow the narrator to intrude so much during the course of the story. Indeed, direct comments on the part of the narrator are rare, Austen preferring to let subtle nuance and dialogue illuminate her attitude to the characters and unfolding events. Verbal and situational irony are frequently combined with superbly structured dialogues to reinforce judgments which would otherwise have to be made explicitly. Criticized for being repetitive, her plots are nonetheless well structured, and reveal a sincere love of perfection and minutiae of detail that she believed was one of the prerogatives of any potential writer.<sup>[5]</sup>

## **Criticism**

Austen's novels received only moderate renown when they were published, though Sir Walter Scott in particular praised her work:

"That young lady has a talent for describing the involvements of feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with."

In Austen's final novel, *Persuasion*, several characters read a work by Scott and praise it, but Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* had already counted Scott as one of her favorites.

Austen also earned the admiration of Macaulay (who thought that in the world there were no



In 1816, the editors of the *New Monthly Magazine* did not see *Emma* as an important novel.

compositions which approached nearer to perfection), Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Sydney Smith, Edward FitzGerald, and the Prince Regent, who told his chaplain to give her a guided tour of his London residence Carlton House's library. He also gave "permission" (effectively a command) for *Emma* to be dedicated to him. Twentieth century scholars rank her among the greatest literary geniuses of the English language, sometimes even comparing her to Shakespeare. Lionel Trilling and Edward Said have both written treatises on Austen's works. Said referred extensively to *Mansfield Park* in his 1993 work, *Culture and Imperialism*.

Trilling wrote in an essay on *Mansfield Park*:

"It was Jane Austen who first represented the specifically modern personality and the culture in which it had its being. Never before had the moral life been shown as she shows it to be, never before had it been conceived to be so complex and difficult and exhausting. Hegel speaks of the "secularization of spirituality" as a prime characteristic of the modern epoch, and Jane Austen is the first to tell us what this involves. She is the first novelist to represent

society, the general culture, as playing a part in the moral life, generating the concepts of "sincerity" and "vulgarity" which no earlier time would have understood the meaning of, and which for us are so subtle that they defy definition, and so powerful that none can escape their sovereignty. She is the first to be aware of the Terror which rules our moral situation, the ubiquitous anonymous judgment to which we respond, the necessity we feel to demonstrate the purity of our secular spirituality, whose dark and dubious places are more numerous and obscure than those of religious spirituality, to put our lives and styles to the question ..."

Negative views of Austen have been notable, with severe detractors frequently accusing her writing of being unliterary and middle-brow. Charlotte Brontë criticized the narrow scope of Austen's fiction:

"Anything like warmth or enthusiasm, anything energetic, poignant, heartfelt, is utterly out of place in commending these works: all such demonstrations the authoress would have met with a well-bred sneer, would have calmly scorned as 'outré' or extravagant. She does her business of

delineating the surface of the lives of genteel English people curiously well. There is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy, in the painting. She ruffles her reader by nothing vehement, disturbs him with nothing profound. The passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy sisterhood... What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores... Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not *senseless*) woman, if this is heresy—I cannot help it."

Mark Twain's reaction was revulsion:

"Jane Austen? Why, I go so far as to say that any library is a good library that does not contain a volume by Jane Austen. Even if it contains no other book."

Rudyard Kipling felt differently, going so far as to write the short story "The Janeites" about a group of soldiers who were also Austen fans, as well as



two poems praising "England's Jane" and providing her with posthumous true love.

Austen's literary strength lies in the delineation of character, especially of women, by delicate touches arising out of the most natural and everyday incidents in the life of the middle and upper classes, from which her subjects are generally taken. Her characters, though of quite ordinary types, are drawn with such firmness and precision and with such significant detail as to retain their individuality intact through their entire development, and they are uncoloured by her own personality. Her view of life seems largely genial, with a strong dash of gentle but keen irony.

Some contemporary readers may find the world she describes, in which people's chief concern is securing advantageous marriages, unliberated and disquieting. During her time, options were limited, and both women and men often married for financial considerations. Female writers worked within the similarly narrow genre of romance. Part of Austen's reputation rests on how well she integrates observations on the human condition within a convincing love story. Much of the tension in her novels arises from balancing financial necessity against other concerns: love,

friendship, honor and self-respect. It is also important to point out that, at the time, romance novels were seen as a clever modern variation on the knightly romances of medieval times; these were damsels engaged in adventure, seeking their fortunes and carrying out quests.

There are two museums dedicated to Jane Austen. The Jane Austen Centre in Bath is a public museum located in a Georgian House in Gay Street, just a few doors down the street from number 25 where Austen stayed in 1805. The Jane Austen's House Museum is located in Chawton cottage, in Hampshire, where Austen lived from 1809 to 1817.

## References

1. ^ Letters of Jane Austen, available online: [1]. Retrieved 5/14/07.
2. ^ The Jane Austen Centre website celebrates her time in Bath.
3. ^ Harris Bigg-Wither 1781-1833
4. ^ *Words, Words, Words*, English Literature: The Romantics and the Victorians, La Spiga languages, 2003
5. ^ *Words, Words, Words*, English Literature: The Romantics and the Victorians, La Spiga languages, 2003

6. ^ BBC News. 2004. Rare Austen manuscript unveiled

## Bibliography

### Novels

- *Northanger Abbey* (1798) - a satire of the Gothic novel
- *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)
- *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
- *Mansfield Park* (1814)
- *Emma* (1816)
- *Persuasion* (1818) posthumous

### Shorter works

- Lady Susan (novella)
- The Watsons (incomplete novel; Austen's niece, Catherine Hubback, completed *The Watsons* and published it under the title *The Younger Sister* in the mid-nineteenth century.)
- Sanditon (incomplete novel)

### Juvenilia

- The Three Sisters

- Love and Freindship [the misspelling of "friendship" in the title is famous]
- The History of England
- Catharine, or the Bower
- The Beautifull Cassandra

## Filmography

In popular culture, Austen's novels have been adapted in a great number of film and television series, varying greatly in their faithfulness to the originals.

### Pride and Prejudice

- *Pride & Prejudice (2005 film)*, starring Keira Knightley as Elizabeth Bennet and Matthew Macfadyen as Mr. Darcy. Knightley's performance earned an Academy Award nomination, and the film was nominated for three additional categories (Original Score, Art Direction and Costume Design).
- *Pride and Prejudice: A Latter-Day Comedy (2003)*, a modern-day independent film adaptation.
- *Bride & Prejudice (2004)*, a Bollywood adaptation.

- *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), a modernized loose novel adaptation by Helen Fielding, which was made into a movie starring Renée Zellweger in the Elizabeth-inspired role of Bridget; Colin Firth, literally as Mr. (Mark) Darcy; and Hugh Grant as the Wickham-inspired Daniel. The 1995 BBC TV film is specifically reference in the book and subsequent movie, intentionally naming Mr. Darcy after the *Pride and Prejudice* character. Zellweger's performance in the movie earned an Academy Award nomination.
- *Pride and Prejudice (1995 TV serial)*, BBC TV series starring Jennifer Ehle as Elizabeth Bennet and Colin Firth as Mr. Darcy.
- *Pride and Prejudice (1980 TV serial)* (1980), BBC TV series starring Elizabeth Garvie as Elizabeth Bennet and David Rintoul as Mr. Darcy.
- **First Impressions** (1959), a Broadway musical adaptation.
- *Pride and Prejudice (1952 TV serial)*, starring Ann Baskett as Elizabeth Bennet and Peter Cushing as Mr. Darcy.
- *Pride and Prejudice (1940 film)*, starring Greer Garson as Elizabeth Bennet and Laurence Olivier as Mr. Darcy.

See also List of artistic depictions of and related to Pride and Prejudice.

## **Emma**

- *Emma (1996 film)*, 1996 film directed by Douglas MacGrath and starring Gwyneth Paltrow as Emma and Jeremy Northam.
- *Emma (1996 TV drama)*, 1996 UK TV film starring Kate Beckinsale as Emma.
- *Clueless, 1995 film modernization of the novel starring Alicia Silverstone in a California high school setting, directed by Amy Heckerling.*
- *Emma (1972 TV serial)*, 1972 UK TV film starring Doran Godwin as Emma.
- *Emma (1960 TV serial)*, starring Diana Fairfax as Emma.
- *Emma (1948 film)*, starring Judy Campbell as Emma.

## **Sense and Sensibility**

- *Sense and Sensibility (2007 TV serial)*, BBC series starring as Hattie Morahan as Elinor Dashwood and Charity Wakefield as Marianne Dashwood
- *Kandukondain Kandukondain (2000)*, a

contemporary Indian film set in the present, based on the same plot, starring Tabu as Sowmya (Elinor Dashwood), Aishwarya Rai as Meenakshi (Marianne Dashwood), with Ajit as Manohar (Edward Ferrars), Abbas as Srikanth (Willoughby) and Mammooty as Captain Bala (Colonel Brandon).

- *Sense and Sensibility (1995 film)*, film starring Emma Thompson as Elinor Dashwood, Kate Winslet as Marianne Dashwood, with Hugh Grant as Edward Ferrars and Alan Rickman as Colonel Brandon. Directed by Ang Lee, this film was hugely successful.
- *Sense and Sensibility (1981 TV serial)*, BBC series starring Irene Richard as Elinor Dashwood and Tracey Childs as Marianne Dashwood
- *Sense and Sensibility (1971 TV serial)*, BBC series starring Joanna David as Elinor Dashwood and Ciaran Madden as Marianne Dashwood

## **Persuasion**

- *Persuasion (2007 TV drama)*, film, filmed in Bath in September 2006 for ITV, with Sally Hawkins as Anne, Rupert Penry-Jones as Wentworth, and Anthony Stewart Head as

Sir Walter Elliot, and Julia Davis.

- *Persuasion (1995 film)*, made-for-television film (which was released in US theatres by Sony Pictures Classics) starring Amanda Root as Anne and Ciarán Hinds as Captain Wentworth.
- *Persuasion (1971 series)*, BBC miniseries starring Anne Firkbank as Anne and Bryan Marshall as Captain Wentworth.
- *Persuasion (1960 series)*, BBC miniseries starring Daphne Slater as Anne and Paul Daneman as Captain Wentworth.

## **Mansfield Park**

- *Mansfield Park (2007 TV drama)*, based on the novel, directed by Iain B. MacDonald. With Billie Piper as Fanny
- *Mansfield Park (1999 film)*, based on the novel, directed by the Canadian Patricia Rozema, and starring Frances O'Connor, Embeth Davidtz, Sheila Gish and Harold Pinter.
- *Mansfield Park (1983 TV serial)* based on the novel, starring Sylvestra Le Touzel, Nicholas Farrell, and Anna Massey in 1983

## **Northanger Abbey**



- *Northanger Abbey* (2007 TV drama), based on the novel, directed by Jon Jones and released in 2007, starring Felicity Jones as heroine Catherine Morland and JJ Feilds as dashing Henry Tilney.
- *Northanger Abbey* (1986 film), based on the novel, directed by Giles Foster and released in 1986, starring Peter Firth in the role of Henry Tilney.

## Non-book based

- The 1980 film *Jane Austen in Manhattan* is about rival stage companies who wish to produce the only complete Austen play "Sir Charles



Jane Austen in *Becoming Jane*

Grandison" (from the Richardson novel of the same title), which was rediscovered in 1980.<sup>[6]</sup>

- A semi-biographical 2007 film *Becoming Jane*, was directed by Julian Jarrold and stars Anne Hathaway as Jane. The film is based around her factual romance with young Tom Lefroy, who later became Lord High Justice of Ireland, played by James McAvoy. It is based loosely around the few facts that are available from this period of her life, mainly from letters to her only sister Cassandra.

## Further reading

- Bautz, Annika. *Reception of Jane Austen and Walter Scott: A Comparative Longitudinal Study*. Continuum, 2007. ISBN 0-826-49546-X, ISBN-13 978-0826495464
- Bagchi, Barnita. 'Instruction a Torment?: Jane Austen's Early Writing and Conflicting Versions of Female Education in Romantic-Era 'Conservative' British Women's Novels', *Romanticism on the Net*, 2005 [2]
- Knox-Shaw, Peter. *Jane Austen and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. ISBN 0521843464
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- Richard Handler, Daniel A. Segal  
*Hierarchies of Choice: The Social Construction of Rank in Jane Austen*  
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- *My Dear Cassandra: The Letters of Jane Austen*. Selected by Penelope Hughes-Hallett.
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- Daniel A. Segal, Richard Handler *Serious Play: Creative Dance and Dramatic Sensibility in Jane Austen*, *Ethnographer* Man, New Series, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Jun., 1989), pp. 322-339 doi:10.2307/2803309
- Southam, Brian, *Jane Austen and the Navy*, London, Hambledon & London, 2000. ISBN 1852852917

## External links

### Works

- Works by Jane Austen at Project Gutenberg

- Jane Austen: e-books in easy-to-read HTML format.
- Printable PDF ebooks
- Free downloads in HTML, PDF, text formats at [ebooktakeaway.com](http://ebooktakeaway.com)
- Jane Austen at [ITV.com](http://ITV.com)

## **Author information**

- The Jane Austen Museum
- The Jane Austen Centre
- About Jane Austen
- A Google Earth Tour of Jane Austen's Life & Works
- Memoir of Jane Austen, by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh. 1871 edition, from Project Gutenberg.
- Jane Austen at the Open Directory Project

## **Fan sites and societies**

- The Republic of Pemberley: the largest Jane Austen site on the web.
- The Jane Austen Society of Australia
- The Jane Austen Society of North America
- The Jane Austen Society of the United Kingdom
- Jane Austen's World: a comprehensive blog about Jane Austen and the world she lived

in.

- Austenfans.com

## Miscellaneous

- Jane Austen font: font based upon Austen's handwriting.
- Jane Austen Centre online magazine
- The Jane Austen Festival in Bath
- Walking tours of Jane Austen's Bath
- The Jane Austen Season at itv.com
- Lesson plans for *Pride and Prejudice*, more at Web English Teacher
- A collection of answered questions about Austen
- Jane Austen at Find-A-Grave

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