

Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature

Overview

Though virtually unknown in her own lifetime, Jane Austen's humorous novels of love and manners are now celebrated as among the best of British literature. Her work, which stands between the melodramatic style of the eighteenth century and the realism of the later nineteenth century, uses humor and social commentary to reflect on a woman's place in English life. Austen wrote about a world in which women had no rights and no importance outside of marriage. Still, her attention to detail, unforgettable characters, and lively, humorous tone make her novels much more than drawing-room romances. Indeed, they are among the most beloved works in the English language.

Works in Biographical and Historical Context

Born in Steventon, Hampshire, England, on December 16, 1775, Jane Austen was the seventh of eight children. She was the daughter of George Austen and Cassandra Leigh, who came from a prominent English family. Though her father had suffered financial hardship as a child, he was able to improve his place in life through education and ambition and married into the wealthy Leigh family before settling down as an Anglican rector and priest. Austen would grow up in a close-knit, large family of six brothers and one older sister. Her family's support led not only to her education, but her success as a writer.

Ambitious Education List for an Aspiring Female Writer Though Austen and her beloved sister Cassandra had little in the way of formal education, they grew up in a house where learning was valued. They attended school briefly but had to leave because their father could not afford to continue their studies. Instead, they studied at home under the supervision of their father and brothers. Austen was an enthusiastic reader with access to classics by William Shakespeare, John Milton, Alexander Pope, David Hume, Ben Johnson, Daniel Defoe, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Such a challenging reading list was considered highly ambitious, even inappropriate, for a young lady of Jane



Austen's time. Though she also studied sewing, music, and drawing (accomplishments expected of a young lady of her class), she developed a lifelong love of reading and began writing at a young age.

Austen's early work tended to imitate or poke fun at the literary forms of the eighteenth century. For example, she imitated epistolary novels (novels written in letter format); in fact, her first two published novels were initially written in this style. However, Austen abandoned this approach as her skills surpassed its benefits.

An Age of Revolution One aspect of Austen's work that has intrigued readers and critics is the surprising lack of mention of the revolutionary and tumultuous world events that marked the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in her novels. Austen was born just one year before the beginning of the American Revolution, an event of momentous importance in British and world history. She was a teenager when the French Revolution began, and must certainly have followed the anti-aristocratic actions of the French revolutionaries with interest and concern. By the first decade of the nineteenth century, almost every European power, including Britain, was locked in a desperate struggle with France's self-appointed-- and seemingly unstoppable-- Emperor Napoleon. Only after Napoleon overextended himself by invading Russia in 1812 did his fortunes sour and the tide turn in favor of Britain and its allies. Austen lived through a period of social and political upheaval unlike any other in history, but Austen chose to place her stories in a local context into which the events of the world seemed not to intrude. It seems that personal, social, and artistic considerations likely influenced Austen to avoid even fictional commentary on world events.

Thwarted in Love, Focused on Writing Austen's life was restricted by distinct expectations of a woman's proper role in society. Upper-class women in England were entirely legally dependent on their male relatives for financial support, and they were expected to marry well and be dutiful wives and mothers. Despite these social constraints, Austen did have some unconventional female role models during her childhood and youth. Her Aunt Perrot, a maternal relative, defended herself successfully in court after a shoplifting allegation that was probably true. Her intelligence and independence left a lifelong impression on Jane, as did the lively wit of her cousin, Eliza, Comtesse de Feuillide.

Austen fell in love with Tom Lefroy, a neighbor's nephew, when she was twenty-one years old. However, the romance was not to be-- his family did not like the match, and he was sent away from the neighborhood. Her writing, which had initially been for the amusement of family and friends, became more focused during this period and she completed early drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* in the late 1790s. She also completed a draft of *Northanger Abbey* in those early years, but that work would not be published until after her death.

In these early novels, Austen played with contrasts-- city versus country, money versus poverty, common sense versus sentimentality. She also focused on character, creating lively, humorous heroines and intelligent heroes. Her heroines tend to overcome almost insurmountable obstacles in their determination to marry for love instead of money or social status, though the material pleasures of a comfortable living are never ignored.

In 1800, Austen's father unexpectedly announced his retirement and his intention to move the family to Bath. This upset Austen greatly (she is said to have fainted upon hearing the news), and she

disliked the urban environment of the spa town. While visiting friends, she received her first and only proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither, an unattractive man who was the heir to significant property. Austen initially accepted him, aware that his money would allow her to live comfortably and provide for her parents in their old age, but she soon realized her mistake and withdrew her acceptance. Her refusal to marry a man for convenience rather than love would be reflected over and over again in her heroines.

From Financial Ruin to Professional Success Austen's father died in 1805, and that event devastated the family emotionally and financially. The Austen women were forced to rely on the other men in the family for financial assistance, which led to their leaving Bath to live with an older brother in Southampton from 1806 to 1809. After that, they settled in a small cottage at Chawton in Austen's beloved Hampshire. There, Austen's period of relatively low production ended. She worked hard editing *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and began *Mansfield Park*.

Sense and Sensibility appeared in 1811; however, early editions did not include Austen's name, only that the book had been written by "A Lady." The novel was well received and the print run sold out by 1813. Not only did her success please her, but the money Austen earned from *Sense and Sensibility* afforded her a certain independence. *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813, was an immediate success, garnering more favorable reviews. *Mansfield Park* failed to impress the critics, but had popular success, outselling any of Austen's other novels during her lifetime.

Excited by her success (which was recognized by public figures such as the Prince Regent who was said to have kept a set of her books at each of his residences), Austen kept working. In 1815 she published *Emma*, a book about a matchmaking heroine who is unlucky in love, and began work on *Persuasion*, a mature novel about a woman who gets a second chance.

Widespread Recognition After Death Austen remained productive, but her health began to suffer. Her brother Henry, who had persuaded her publishers to take on her first novels, had arranged for *Northanger Abbey's* publication, but his bank failed and he was plunged into financial ruin. The entire family suffered and the brothers were no longer able to afford to care for their female relatives. Though Austen had played down her physical symptoms, it soon became apparent that she was quite ill. By 1817, she was confined to her bed.

Historians suspect that Austen suffered from Addison's disease, a condition that affects the adrenal glands. Though she was hard at work on her unfinished last novel, *Sanditon*, her physical symptoms soon forced her to stop writing. Nursed by her beloved sister Cassandra, she died on July 18, 1817.

Ironically, Austen's death meant the beginning of her recognition as an author. Her obituaries identified her as the author of her popular novels, and *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were both published after her death. While critics of the nineteenth century were unsure how to assess Austen's literary success, her reputation as an author and one of England's most important literary voices grew steadily throughout the twentieth century.

Works in Literary Context

Jane Austen was influenced by the books she read while under her father and brothers' educational care. Though she read serious works by authors like Shakespeare, Joseph Addison, William Cowper, and Samuel Richardson, she was also heavily influenced by such authors as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Frances Burney, and Maria Edgeworth. The influence of Austen's own work on future generations of writers is almost impossible to estimate; her work affected writers from Henry James to contemporary writers like Helen Fielding.

Sentiment and Immoral Literature While Austen may have enjoyed the sentimental or Gothic novel, which combined horror and romance, she also was its greatest critic. Many of her works, most notably *Northanger Abbey*, point to novels as a dangerous moral downfall for young girls whose parents fail to adequately protect them from their dangerous content. Though part of this critique was probably tongue-in-cheek, Austen referred to immoral plays and novels as a way of pointing out the loss of virtue she saw in her own society.

Relationships Between Women Austen's novels all center around a female heroine and feature vivid, descriptive passages that depict close relationships between females. Given Austen's own close relationship with her sister and the inspiration she gained from other women in what was often a closed society, it is not surprising that her works should celebrate and investigate relationships between women. Though Austen does show close friendships and supportive sister pairings (such as Jane and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* and Marianne and Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*), she also shows the potentially destructive character of female relationships. For example, in *Mansfield Park*, the mild-mannered Fanny is preyed upon by the lively Mary Crawford, an immoral woman who uses her friendship to get closer to her cousin. The title character of *Emma* is not a good friend to Harriet, whose life she tries to control through faulty matchmaking attempts.

Not content to only show friendships, Austen also examined family relationships between women. She often uses a silly or selfish older female character as a foil for her heroine. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth's romantic future is constantly jeopardized by her mother's meddling ways, and in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny is made unhappy by the whimsical demands of her aunts. Though older women are often depicted as conniving or standing in the way of love, women in Austen novels generally have to band together to survive in a man's world.

Marriage and Social Rank In Austen's fiction, marriage is the ultimate goal and the primary source of conflict. Ironically, Austen was a spinster throughout her life, but she saw firsthand the perils of relying on a male relative for financial support. Since women at the time were not allowed to own property and there were no lucrative professions for women, women had to rely on family members and marry as soon as possible in order to live comfortably. This created the "marriage of convenience," in which a woman would marry for money or social standing. However, Austen, who herself turned down a man who was not her intellectual equal, stands firmly on the side of love in marriage. While secondary characters often enter into matches of convenience, Austen's heroines wait for love.

Battle of the Sexes Austen specializes in strong, humorous female characters. Though her female characters are often flawed, they are placed in contrast to male characters who are immoral, silly,

conniving, or otherwise threaten their happiness. For example, *Mansfield Park's* Fanny Price must fend off the advances of Henry Crawford, a playboy she cannot love. Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* must endure the attentions of Mr. Collins, a ridiculous cleric who tries to win her hand, and has her happiness threatened by Wickham, a dashing but immoral suitor who eventually elopes with her sister. While men often threaten women's social position and future happiness, they also provide entertainment and moral support. The lively exchanges between Elizabeth Bennet and William Darcy are among literature's most entertaining and humorous dialogues, and readers will not soon forget such sympathetic male characters as Captain Wentworth of *Persuasion* and Mr. Knightley in *Emma*.

Works in Critical Context

Contemporary responses to Austen's work were few. Because she published anonymously, her true identity was unknown to most, and though her books sold well, they received few positive reviews. Her real critical heyday came after her death when her books took on a critical stature on par with Shakespeare and other major writers in the English language.

Early Admirers Among Austen's early admirers were writers Richard Whately and Sir Walter Scott. Both praised Austen's realistic descriptions and her lively representations of life. Though the Victorians preferred more sweeping romance and natural depictions of strong emotion, the praise of Scott and Whately created a foundation for future critical response.

The growing literary elite of the nineteenth century considered Austen's work to be sophisticated and tasteful, which prevented it from spreading to the masses. However, the publication of a memoir by Austen's niece and a series of low-cost printings contributed to Austen's growing popularity near the end of the nineteenth century. It became popular to idolize Austen. This "Austenolatry" created a backlash in the literary community, and elite "Janeites" like Henry James told themselves they were the only people who really understood Austen's complex body of work.

Modern Appraisals Whomever Austen's work "belonged" to, it could no longer be ignored by critics. From the end of the nineteenth century on, her work was increasingly scrutinized. Mark Twain and Richard Simpson were among these early critics, but the literary world would have to wait until the twentieth century for the meatiest study of Austen's body of work.

In 1911, A.C. Bradley, a Shakespearean scholar, presented "Jane Austen: A Lecture." In it, Bradley praised Austen's narrative skill and compared her to Samuel Johnson. An academic edition of Austen's works followed in the 1920s, but Mary Lascelles's *Jane Austen and Her Art* (1939) marked the real start of serious Jane Austen scholarship.

A new wave of academic interest in the author came in the 1960s and 1970s, when feminist critics turned their attention to Austen's life and heroines. Critics like Margaret Kirkham reexamined Austen as a subversive force dedicated to the rights of women and placed her in a context of eighteenth-century feminist ideals. More recently critics like Moira Ferguson have examined Austen's work through a postcolonial lens, looking at her use of female characters as a critique of imperial and colonial English society.