

# JANE AUSTEN BIOGRAPHY

**BIRTH DATE:**

December 16, 1775

**DEATH DATE:** July 18, 1817**PLACE OF BIRTH:** Steventon, Hampshire, England**PLACE OF DEATH:** Winchester, Hampshire, England

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**LIFE**

Jane Austen was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, was rector. She was the second daughter and seventh child in a family of eight: six boys and two girls. Her closest companion throughout her life was her elder sister, Cassandra, who also remained unmarried. Their father was a scholar who encouraged the love of learning in his children. His wife, Cassandra (*née* Leigh), was a woman of ready wit, famed for her impromptu verses and stories. The great family amusement was acting.

Jane Austen's lively and affectionate family circle provided a stimulating context for her writing. Moreover, her experience was carried far beyond Steventon rectory by an extensive network of relationships by blood and friendship. It was this world—of **the minor landed gentry and the country clergy**, in the village, the neighbourhood, and the country town, with occasional visits to Bath and to London—that she was to use in the settings, characters, and subject matter of her novels.

In 1802 it seems likely that Jane agreed to marry Harris Bigg-Wither, the 21-year-old heir of a Hampshire family, but the next morning changed her mind. There are also a number of mutually contradictory stories connecting her with someone with whom she fell in love but who died very soon after. Jane Austen's own novels provide indisputable evidence that their author understood the experience of love and of love disappointed.

The earliest of her novels, *Sense and Sensibility*, was begun about 1795 as a novel-in-letters called “Elinor and Marianne,” after its heroines. Between October 1796 and August 1797 Austen completed the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*, then called “First Impressions.” In 1797 her father wrote to offer it to a London publisher for publication, but the offer was declined. *Northanger Abbey*, the last of the early novels, was written about 1798 or 1799, probably under the title “Susan.” In 1803 the manuscript of “Susan” was sold to the publisher Richard Crosby for 10. He took it for immediate publication, but, although it was advertised, unaccountably it never appeared.

Up to this time the tenor of life at Steventon rectory had been propitious for Jane Austen's growth as a novelist. This stable environment ended in 1801, however,

when George Austen, then aged 70, retired to Bath with his wife and daughters. For eight years Jane had to put up with a succession of temporary lodgings or visits to relatives, in Bath, London, Clifton, Warwickshire, and, finally, Southampton, where the three women lived from 1805 to 1809. In 1804 Jane began *The Watsons* but soon abandoned it. In 1804 her dearest friend, Mrs. Anne Lefroy, died suddenly, and in January 1805 her father died in Bath.

Eventually, in 1809, Jane's brother Edward was able to provide his mother and sisters with a large cottage in the village of Chawton, within his Hampshire estate, not far from Steventon. The prospect of settling at Chawton had already given Jane Austen a renewed sense of purpose, and she began to prepare *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* for publication. She was encouraged by her brother Henry, who acted as go-between with her publishers. She was probably also prompted by her need for money.

Two years later Thomas Egerton agreed to publish *Sense and Sensibility*, which came out, anonymously, in November 1811. Both of the leading reviews welcomed its blend of instruction and amusement. Egerton published *Pride and Prejudice* in January 1813, and later that year there were second editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. *Pride and Prejudice* seems to have been the fashionable novel of its season.

Meanwhile, in 1811 Austen had begun *Mansfield Park*, which was finished in 1813 and published in 1814. By then she was an established (though anonymous) author. Between January 1814 and March 1815 she wrote *Emma*, which appeared in December 1815. In 1816 there was a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, published, like *Emma*, by Lord Byron's publisher, John Murray. *Persuasion* (written 1815–1816) and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously in December 1817.

The years after 1811 seem to have been the most rewarding of her life. She had the satisfaction of seeing her work in print and well-reviewed and of knowing that the novels were widely read. They were so much enjoyed by the Prince Regent (later George IV) that he had a set in each of his residences; and *Emma*, at a discreet royal command, was “respectfully dedicated” to him. The reviewers praised the novels for their morality and entertainment, admired the character drawing, and welcomed the homely realism as a refreshing change from the romantic melodrama then in vogue.

For the last 18 months of her life while battling a fatal illness, she was busy writing. Until August 1816 she was occupied with *Persuasion*, and she looked again at the manuscript of “Susan” (*Northanger Abbey*). In January 1817 she began *Sanditon*, a robust and self-mocking satire on health resorts and invalidism. This novel remained unfinished owing to Austen's declining health.

She supposed that she was suffering from bile, but the symptoms make possible a modern clinical assessment that she was suffering from Addison's disease. Her

condition fluctuated, but in April she made her will, and in May she was taken to Winchester to be under the care of an expert surgeon. She died on July 18, and six days later she was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Her authorship was announced to the world at large by her brother Henry, who then supervised the publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*.

Upon her death, there was no recognition at the time that regency England had lost its keenest observer and sharpest analyst; no understanding that a miniaturist (as she maintained that she was and as she was then seen), a “merely domestic” novelist, could be seriously concerned with the nature of society and the quality of its culture; no grasp of Jane Austen as a historian of the emergence of regency society into the modern world.

During her lifetime there had been a solitary response in any way adequate to the nature of her achievement: Sir Walter Scott's review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* for March 1816, where he hailed this “nameless author” as a masterful exponent of “the modern novel” in the new realist tradition. He wrote, “*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.*”

## NOVELS

Jane Austen's three early novels form a distinct group in which a strong element of literary satire accompanies the comic depiction of character and society.

*Sense and Sensibility* tells the story of the impoverished Dashwood sisters. Marianne is the heroine of “sensibility”—*i.e.*, of openness and enthusiasm. She becomes infatuated with the attractive John Willoughby, who seems to be a romantic lover but is in reality an unscrupulous fortune hunter. He deserts her for an heiress, leaving her to learn a dose of “sense” in a wholly unromantic marriage with a staid and settled bachelor, Colonel Brandon, who is 20 years her senior. By contrast, Marianne's older sister, Elinor, is the guiding light of “sense,” or prudence and discretion, whose constancy toward her lover, Edward Ferrars, is rewarded by her marriage to him after some distressing vicissitudes.

*Pride and Prejudice* describes the clash between Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich and aristocratic landowner. Although Austen shows them intrigued by each other, she reverses the convention of “first impressions”: “pride” of rank and fortune and “prejudice” against Elizabeth's inferiority of family hold Darcy aloof; while Elizabeth is equally fired both by the “pride” of self-respect and by “prejudice” against Darcy's snobbery. Ultimately, they come together in love and self-understanding. The intelligent and high-spirited Elizabeth was Jane Austen's own favourite among all her heroines and is one of the most engaging in English literature.

*Northanger Abbey* combines a satire on conventional novels of polite society with one on Gothic tales of terror. Catherine Morland, the unspoiled daughter of a

country parson, is the innocent abroad who gains worldly wisdom: first in the fashionable society of Bath and then at Northanger Abbey itself, where she learns not to interpret the world through her reading of Gothic thrillers. Her mentor and guide is the self-assured and gently ironic Henry Tilney, her husband-to-be.

In the three novels of Jane Austen's maturity, the literary satire, though still present, is more subdued and is subordinated to the comedy of character and society.

In its tone and discussion of religion and religious duty, *Mansfield Park* is the most serious of Austen's novels. The heroine, Fanny Price, is a self-effacing and unregarded cousin cared for by the Bertram family in their country house. Fanny emerges as a true heroine whose moral strength eventually wins her complete acceptance in the Bertram family and marriage to Edmund Bertram himself, after that family's disastrous involvement with the meretricious and loose-living Crawfords.

Of all Austen's novels, *Emma* is the most consistently comic in tone. It centres on Emma Woodhouse, a wealthy, pretty, self-satisfied young woman who indulges herself with meddlesome and unsuccessful attempts at matchmaking among her friends and neighbours. After a series of humiliating errors, a chastened Emma finds her destiny in marriage to the mature and protective George Knightley, a neighbouring squire who had been her mentor and friend.

*Persuasion* tells the story of a second chance, the reawakening of love between Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth, whom seven years earlier she had been persuaded not to marry. Now Wentworth returns from the Napoleonic Wars with prize money and the social acceptability of naval rank; he is an eligible suitor acceptable to Anne's snobbish father and his circle, and Anne discovers the continuing strength of her love for him.

## ASSESSMENT

Although the birth of the English novel is to be seen in the first half of the 18th century in the work of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, and Henry Fielding, it is with Jane Austen that the novel takes on its distinctively modern character in the realistic treatment of unremarkable people in the unremarkable situations of everyday life. In her six novels—*Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Persuasion* – Austen created the comedy of manners of middle-class life in the England of her time, revealing the possibilities of “domestic” literature. Her repeated fable of a young woman's voyage to self-discovery on the passage through love to marriage focuses upon easily recognizable aspects of life.

Brian C. Southam Ed.

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