

Jane Austen (1775-1817)

Jane Austen was born on 16 December 1775 (beginning of the American War of Independence) in the rectory of Steventon (Hampshire), where her father was a vicar, a distinguished classical scholar. Jane's mother was a keen gardener, mother of eight children and proud of her aristocratic relations and heritage. Jane was the sixth child, her only sister Cassandra, named after her mother, was two years older than Jane. The second son was fostered out to a family in a neighbouring village because he suffered fits. The boys received a classical education while the girls were schooled in household management. In 1784 both sisters went to Abbey School at Reading for two years. Before the age of sixteen Jane had filled three notebooks with stories, poems and plays. By 1796 she had completed *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*. In 1801 the family moved to Bath where the sisters were not happy. Jane is said to have fallen in love with a man whose sudden subsequent death dealt her a blow from which she never fully recovered. (Her sister Cassie told her niece Anna whose daughter recollected the story; Speculation has ranged from the suggestion that he was a clergyman, to that he was Captain John Wordsworth, brother of the Lakeland poet, who drowned at sea.) With her father's death in 1805 financial

worries became a constant problem. The sisters and their mother moved with their brother Frank to Southampton and later to Chawton where Jane devoted herself to writing. To all outward appearances she seemed no more than just another refined spinster gentlewoman; she dressed in the style of an older woman, generally wearing a cap, symbol of middle-age. She spent her time in the kitchen garden and at her embroidery, a routine only broken by visits from relatives, nieces and nephews, to whom Jane was an amusing, interesting and animated speaker.

In 1811 she published her first book *Sense and Sensibility*, followed by *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814). Her health deteriorated and she began to suffer from fatigue (Addison's Disease). She died in 1817 at 41 years of age. Jane Austen made her own restricted social world the centre of her writing. Her novels have a unique and subtle charm, with an unprecedented mixture of sharpness, fun, wit and wisdom. Critics have accused Jane Austen of being peculiarly oblivious to the great events occupying the world stage in her lifetime (American War of Independence; Napoleonic Wars, Waterloo 1815...) Jane Austen's view of the world and of human nature was rooted in the 18th century. In Britain the 18th century turned its back on the excesses of the previous century that had led to civil war. Order, and the management of life -both social and individual- according to the dictates of reason rather than emotion was considered necessary to hold in check Man's violent, corrupt and fundamentally

volatile nature. Using the material, she had at first hand, Jane Austen fashioned her art. Almost all her action reported in dialogue, that is conversation. When anything dramatic upsets the order and calm lives of her characters, elopements, duels, death, it occurs off-stage, belonging to a realm beyond her experience.

Jane Austen prized accuracy of detail and what she called credibility. Such qualities give her novels great realism, the feeling that you have seen the places she describes and known her characters personally. She depicted the domestic life of the Regency period with photographic realism. She can be considered a modern novelist because she concentrated on human beings and their mutual reactions.

Austen's novels are far from being openly didactic, but they have a moral purpose that cannot be overlooked, even if her subject-matter is in a sense trivial (a young woman's finding a husband). It was from the 18C novelists that Austen derived her conception of the novel. She owed much to Richardson and Fielding; her novels represent a feminisation of Fielding's. She relied more on dialogue and, as with Fielding, the comment is not direct but implicit in the turn of the sentence. Both are examples of the moralist as satirist. She owes much of her elegant prose, simple and witty, occasionally stiff, to Addison and Steele. She has a special gift for dialogue, especially comic dialogue.

Works: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Persuasion* (1818).

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