

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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JANE AUSTEN

(1775-1817)

Works

preparatory

Juvenilia. (1787-1793) (short youthful works)

Lady Susan. (written text, without a conclusion) 1794

"Elinor and Marianne". (written; revised later as *Sense and Sensibility*) 1795

"First Impressions," begun. (later revised as *Pride and Prejudice*) 1796

"Susan" (written; later part of *Northanger Abbey*) 1798-99

The Watsons. (begun but not finished) 1804

major novels

Sense and Sensibility. 1811

Pride and Prejudice. 1813

Mansfield Park. 1814

Emma. 1816

Northanger Abbey 1818. (posthumous)

Persuasion. 1818. (posthumous)

letters

Jane Austen's *Letters* (ed. 2111, Oxford Univ. Press)

Biography

Jane Austen was born on 16 December, 1775, as the seventh child of a pastor and his wife, in a country rectory. She was raised in an atmosphere of open minded learning and discourse, in fact of old-fashioned closeness and fun and games, which reminds us of the childhood world of Emily Dickinson, in a comparable environment a bit later in the 19th century.

The key to the warm and creative family atmosphere seems to have been father the Rector, a hard working man, surrounded by good books and an atmosphere of respect for education. The children picked up on many an occasion for literary and other family fun; a close environment only reshaped when (in 1783) Jane and her sister were sent away to boarding school. By this time, Jane's talented delight in making and enacting stories had been fully shaped. During her early school years Jane continued to write a variety of plays and stories for delighted family consumption.

In 1795 Jane fell in love for the first and only documented time. The barrister to be, a neighbor, became a regular visitor at the Austen household; but unfortunately the young man's plans collapsed, against his parents' objection; it was premature, thought his goal oriented folks, for Tom to divert from his single-minded pursuit of a career. Jane's heartache is evident in letters to her sister.

At this point Jane returned home from her formal education, and began, within the bosom of the family once again, to write and act. She began the first drafts of what would become her most honored novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, published in 1813. She also began work on what would later, only after her death,

be published as *Northanger Abbey*. One sees how tenaciously she held to her long term purposes, even in her teen years.

In 1800, to the surprise of her family, Jane Austen's father retired from the clergy, and moved the family to Bath. (Jane had known no other home than Steventon, up this point.) In 1802, for the first time in her life, Jane received a proposal of marriage, from a childhood friend of the family. Conscious of the financial advantages an acceptance could bring, Jane Austen accepted the proposal and then, like a number of characters in her fiction, withdrew her acceptance the next day. She did not love the man! Instead she continued revising and remodeling her versions of what were to become her set of six major novels.

In 1805, to the great shock of the family, Jane's father died. It was necessary to move in with kindly siblings, then finally to settle in new private quarters, Chawton Cottage, where Jane, at the age of thirty-two, was able to launch a new stable period of fictions, and to begin to solicit some attention to her work among the wider public. This latter achievement, however, was not without its ups and downs, and unfortunate exposures, for Jane, to the manipulations of the commercial world. As we have seen, though, Jane's commitment to writing, and her stockpile of manuscripts in process, derived from her earliest youthful practices, so that in the leisure and domesticity of Chawton she was able to bring to fruition the major fictional projects she was involved with from *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) to *Emma* (1816).

By 1816 Jane was feeling unwell, although for some time she ignored the warning signals. (She was in fact, probably, slowly slipping into either Addison's disease or Hodgkin's lymphoma; to which was added the shock of her Uncle's will, which was left entirely to the man's wife, instead of to the Austen family.) Jane died in 1817, at the age of forty-one; her epitaph, in Winchester Cathedral, praises her 'extraordinary endowments of mind,' though without reference to her literary work.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Artistic purity. Jane Austen is renowned for her impeccable workmanship. Even after completing a work she would continue to fiddle with it for days, removing inconsistencies, errors in punctuation or spelling—or, more precisely, making superior choices among words and phrases. She is verbose only when she is putting words into the mouth of a verbose character.

Skill at grasping daily conversation. As a realist, Austen had an impeccable ear for the character of conversation among the middle class landed gentry.

"If my children are silly, I must hope to be always sensible of it."

"Yes---but as it happens, they are all of them very clever."

"This is the only point, I flatter myself, on which we do not agree. I had hoped that our sentiments coincided in every particular, but I must so far differ from you as to think our two youngest daughters uncommonly foolish."

Durability. What greater achievement could one ask than to write novels in the second decade of the nineteenth century which fascinate readers—not just movie or TV fans—two hundred years later? Part of this achievement derives from Austen's perfect sense of her range. She once wrote mockingly of how absurd it would be for her to write a romance—no more possible to her than to write an epic. She couldn't do it, she knew it. She could write with perfect accuracy about the interpersonal social relations of the landed gentry, of her time, and because those relations are full of implications, ironies, sufferings, and hopes, they carry directly over into our lives.

Positive attitude. Despite the fact that Austen's novels are full of tensions, the pulse of pain that runs through all social interactions, she not only shepherds her characters through to acceptably happy conclusions, but injects into the gentry life she describes a broad sense of value and purpose.

THEMES

Marriage. All of Jane Austen's novels are about marriage, in the ultimate sense; that is, about the ongoing fabric of society, and the transitions—especially from single to wedded—in the course of which love is tested and power put into practice. The plots of all of Jane Austen's novels revolve around matrimony—planning for it, watching it break up, and celebrating the consolidation of families. Marriage is not primarily about offspring, here, but about consolidation.

Morality. Many immoral behaviors flit through the pages of Austen's novels. Not all suitors can be relied on, and smart women learn to be cautious. Social satire is, furthermore, pervasive, with the result that the hypocrisies, malicious innuendos, and subtle social disclosures of polite social discourse are always being displayed for critical observation. Yet there are no great villains here, and nothing like the evil, that ripples through the pages of the Brontes or Wilkie Collins.

Religion. Jane Austen was raised in the Church of England, and has an ear attuned to the superb cadences of the Book of Common Prayer, as well as to the Bible, which in the King James version offered her every needed lesson in clarity, direct tone, and subtle thought. The aforementioned may be the main traces of Christian religion in Austen's work. On the page, for all her background as a clergyman's daughter, Jane Austen is a psychological and social realist, with an ear for what is, and no trace of mysticism.

Feminism. Jane Austen's universe, like that of Emily Dickinson across the channel, is a predominately social one, in which women establish many of the reigning values, and enact most of the leading roles. That said, however, the world of these fictions is not a feminist world—let's say, like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—but a world in which the fine tuning of society, with all its implications for wealth management, is in the hands of women. One might compare the world of Mme. de Sévigné, with her influential female salon, in the seventeenth century.

CHARACTERS

The fine texture of society has never been more intricately probed than in Jane Austen's novels, where the relatively routine events of nineteenth-century landed gentry daily life are shown to conceal a wide range of human emotions—conflicts and passions. Jane Austen herself, living a quiet country life among just the kinds of people she portrays, was an unparalleled observer of her own social texture. The way she downloaded her life experience, into character-vehicles, is perfectly illustrated by her earliest published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811.

The five characters representing Jane Austen, in this novel, are all drawn from landed gentry interplay, as it turns around the single crucial question of marriage; the question which is central to the novel *Sense and Sensibility*. Who will marry who? What kind of inheritance or dowry will be brought into play? Will there be happiness for the players, in the end?

Edward is a perfect example of Austen's fine touch in character portrayal. Early in the tale, before the Dashwoods have left their own home, Edward is viewed as an item, with the elder Dashwood daughter, **Elinor**. On a particularly careful occasion, Elinor, and her family, are discussing natural beauty and the skill involved in drawing it. Edward, who has just returned from a walk in the country, disclaims any ability at describing or portraying nature. The ladies accuse him of wanting to withdraw and not share his feelings. They are right on. Elinor, meanwhile, speaks out for the group, urging Edward out of his shell, then showing, in the way not long after she has to deal with Edward's leaving her, that she has mental coping mechanisms which amply support the description of her as a person of common sense.

Austen creates a brilliant portrayal of Elinor's peppy and romantic sister **Marianne**, who promises great success in the mating game, and who starts out strong with a dashing upper-class boyfriend, Willoughby. Austen cunningly arranges a social soiree at which Marianne, who has not heard from **Willoughby** for months, despite her many letters, learns that he is quite comfortably paired with another lady, and has forgotten his original love. It is in this way that we will realize that the dashing Willoughby, who seemed all

attentiveness to his lady, at the beginning of the novel, is a cad; not so fearful a cad, though, but what in the end we find him to be a mellowing married gentleman, with a benign perspective on his past.

Perhaps Austen's most complexly drawn figure, in the drawing room marital drama this novel enacts, is **Colonel Brandon**, a reserved and 'sad' gentleman, as we first meet him, longingly but rather hopelessly falling in love with the vivacious Marianne. We later understand this sadness, which has its roots in an earlier engagement Brandon had undertaken, with a Marianne-like lady who left him in the lurch. In the end the faithful and reliable Brandon wins Marianne for his own.

The great imaginative novelist, in this case a parson's daughter at the age of thirty, finds in herself what we call characters, images of her own insight, and is enabled to unroll trips of the polar psyche into two beguiling sisters, a classic cad, a shy artistic swain, and a sad gentleman, who in the end makes off with the pretty girl.