

An Introduction to: Jane Austen

Jane Austen (1775 to 1817), novelist gives her name to Austen House at The John Warner School. Austen House represents the academic discipline of *communications* and the school value of *creativity*.



Summary of Life

A happy childhood

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire in 1775. Her father, George Austen, was a rector in Anglican churches who came from an old, respected and wealthy family of wool merchants. Unfortunately, George's side of the family had fallen into poverty and they frequently faced tough times. Her mother, Cassandra Austen, came from a prominent family and her father was also a rector. Jane was the youngest of seven children and was particularly close to her sister Cassandra. Jane grew up in a loving, intellectual family who often discussed social and political issues. She attended church, socialised with friends and neighbours and read novels, including her own compositions

A disrupted education

Austen and her sister Cassandra were sent to school in Oxford to be educated, however, Austen nearly died of typhus in 1783 after which she was educated at home. In 1785 she entered a boarding school in Reading but had to return in 1786 because the fees were too high. The rest of her education was at home guided by her father and older brothers. Austen had access to lots of reading material and her father encouraged her to experiment in writing. Austen would stage plays with friends and family – mostly comedies, giving her an opportunity to develop the style of writing she would become famous for.

Early writing

From about the age of eleven, Austen wrote poems and stories which she shared with her family. These works, which brought huge joy to her family were later collected together in notebooks now referred to as *Juvenilia*. The stories are often boisterous and anarchic, involving fantasies of female power and high spirits, quite different from the formal and romantic style of writing that was popular at the time.

By the age of 17-18 Austen's writing had become more sophisticated and she started to consider writing professionally. Becoming a published female author in the late eighteenth century was not straightforward. The role of women was still very much seen as being centred on marriage and motherhood. Through a combination of circumstances and choice, these were issues that would become a barrier to Austen's literary contributions.

A brief romance

Austen met neighbour and trainee barrister, Tom Lefroy in 1795 aged 20. They spent considerable time together with Austen writing to her sister Cassandra, "Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together." 'Dancing' and 'sitting down together' would have been seen as quite intimate behaviours between an unmarried couple at the time. Austen described Lefroy as a "very gentlemanlike, good-looking, pleasant young man", however, the friendship did not last long as Lefroy had to move to London in 1796 for his training in law and they never saw each other again.

It is likely that, despite their affection for one another, Austen would probably not have been considered a suitable bride for Lefroy who had a promising legal career in front of him. For Austen, no other suitor would ever quite match up to Tom Lefroy and the topic of love and marriage would be a strong feature in many of her published novels.

A published author

Although it wasn't published until 1811, Austen had begun to write her first novel *Sense and Sensibility* as early as 1796. She would read her early manuscripts to her family and her father started to make efforts to get the work published, unsuccessfully to begin with.



This period of productive writing came to an end in 1800 when her father announced his retirement and decided to move the family to Bath which some suggest put Austen into a depression. During this period, she also received her only known marriage proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither which she initially accepted then withdrew. Although she could see the financial benefits of the marriage both for herself and the family, it seems she had the strength to refuse the proposal mainly due to the fact that by all accounts

he was a hard man to like. She would never marry. She advised a niece who asked for advice in 1814 about a relationship to "not commit yourself farther, and not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him." A recurring theme in her novels is the high ideal of love as well as the difficulties associated with women marrying unsuitable men.

In 1805 her father died suddenly leaving her mother, Austen and Cassandra in a precarious financial situation until 1809 when older brother Edward offered them a more settled life in Chawton village in Hampshire, allowing Austen the opportunity to have her work published. Like most women at the time, Austen would have to publish her novels anonymously "By a lady" as women were considered to be wives and mothers, not full-time writers. All of her books, except *Pride and Prejudice* were published 'on commission', which meant at the author's own financial risk. Fortunately, her novels got good reviews and became fashionable amongst young aristocrats often selling out of the copies produced. The six novels she had published were *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (posthumously in 1818).

She made £140 for *Sense and Sensibility* (nearly £7,000 in today's money) which gave her some independence. Unknown to Austen, her novels were translated into French and smuggled into revolutionary France. In 1815, Austen learned that the Prince Regent was an admirer of her novels and she was asked to dedicate *Emma* to him which she did even though she disliked him for his famous womanising, gambling, drinking and disreputable behaviour

Illness and death

By 1816 Austen was feeling unwell. It is believed she was suffering from Addison's disease which leads to chronic fatigue and low blood pressure. Austen continued to write despite her illness but was confined to her bed by April 1817.

She was taken to Winchester to receive treatment but died there on 18 July 1817.



Contribution and Significance

Jane Austen was a giant of English literature whose literary techniques and fabulous story lines have ensured her work has remained popular over many generations.

Austen was a critique of the sentimental novels of second half of the 18th century, but she also rejected the gothic horror genre that was also popular at the time, where the heroine was often stranded in a remote location – the damsel in distress trope. Austen's heroines are sometimes imprisoned, but their experience is more mundane and real than other authors.

Her characters are complex and often use free indirect speech, the first English novelist to do this extensively. Dialogue is used to reveal a character's frustration, anger or happiness. Her plots highlight women's traditional dependency on marriage. She uses comedy and irony to delve into the psyche of her characters.

Her books have now been translated into 35 languages and turned into major blockbuster movies, propelling her into international stardom over the last 20 years starting with Colin Firth's famous portrayal of Mr Darcy in the 1995 BBC adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. Sometimes her work has been used to feed off the nostalgia for a simpler, prettier and happier England, but this is neither historically accurate nor why Austen was writing.

Her novels were about poor but clever girls who get transformed into something. They were about love and virtue overcoming the injustice of society. Her novels were delightfully revolutionary without inciting aggression or anger. Often copied, but never bettered Jane Austen overcame the prejudice of the society she lived in to write beautiful novels that will last forever.