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Jane Austen, (born December 16, 1775, Steventon, Hampshire, England—died July 18, 1817, Winchester, Hampshire), English writer who first gave the novel its distinctly modern character through her treatment of ordinary people in everyday life. She published four novels during her lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). In these and in *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* (published together posthumously, 1817), she vividly depicted English middle-class life during the early 19th century. Her novels defined the era's novel of manners, but they also became timeless classics that remained critical and popular successes for over two centuries after her death.

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; neither Jane nor Cassandra married. 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.

Her earliest known writings date from about 1787, and between then and 1793 she wrote a large body of material that has survived in three manuscript notebooks: Volume the First, Volume the Second, and Volume the Third. These contain plays, verses, short novels, and other prose and show Austen engaged in the parody of existing literary forms, notably the genres of the sentimental novel and sentimental comedy. Her passage to a more serious view of life from the exuberant high spirits and extravagances of her earliest writings is evident in *Lady Susan*, a short epistolary novel written about 1793–94 (and not published until 1871). This portrait of a woman bent on the exercise of her own powerful mind and personality to the point of social self-destruction is, in effect, a study of frustration and of woman's fate in a society that has no use for her talents.

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. Since Austen's novels are so deeply concerned with love and marriage, there is some point in attempting to establish the facts of these relationships. Unfortunately, the evidence is unsatisfactory and incomplete. Cassandra was a jealous guardian of her sister's private life, and after Jane's death she censored the surviving letters, destroying many and cutting up others. But 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 published during her lifetime, *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 age 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, the *Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, welcomed its blend of instruction and amusement.

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; Egerton had 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. 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 August 1815–August 1816) was published posthumously, with *Northanger Abbey*, 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 domestic realism as a refreshing change from the romantic melodrama then in vogue.

For the last 18 months of her life, Austen was busy writing. Early in 1816, at the onset of her fatal illness, she set down the burlesque *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters* (first published in 1871). Until August 1816 she was occupied with *Persuasion*, and she looked again at the manuscript of “Susan” (*Northanger Abbey*).