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Introduction

Jane Austen was an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels, which interpret, critique and comment upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explore the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of favourable social standing and economic security. Her works critique the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism. Her use of biting irony, along with her realism, humour, and social commentary, have long earned her acclaim among critics, scholars, and popular audiences alike.

Austen has inspired a large number of critical essays and literary anthologies. Her novels have inspired many films, from 1940's *Pride and Prejudice* to more recent productions like *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Emma* (1996), *Mansfield Park* (1999), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), and *Love & Friendship* (2016).

Life

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire, on 16 December 1775. She was born a month later than her parents expected; her father wrote of her arrival in a letter that her mother "certainly expected to have been brought to bed a month ago". He added that her arrival was particularly welcome as "a future companion to her sister". The winter of 1776 was particularly harsh and it was not until 5 April that she was baptised at the local church with the single name Jane.

For much of Jane's life, her father, George Austen (1731–1805), served as the rector of the Anglican parishes at Steventon and at nearby Deane. He came from an old, respected, and wealthy family of wool merchants. Over the centuries as each generation of eldest sons received inheritances their wealth was consolidated, and George's branch of the family fell into poverty. He and his two sisters were orphaned as children and had

to be taken in by relatives. His sister Philadelphia went to India to find a husband and George entered St John's College, Oxford on a fellowship, where he most likely met Cassandra Leigh (1739–1827). She came from the prominent Leigh family; her father was rector at All Souls College, Oxford, where she grew up among the gentry. Her eldest brother James inherited a fortune and large estate from his great-aunt Perrot, with the only condition that he change his name to Leigh-Perrot.

George and Cassandra exchanged miniatures in 1763 and probably were engaged around that time. George received the living for the Steventon parish from the wealthy husband of his second cousin, Thomas Knight, who owned Steventon and its associated farms, one of which the Austen family rented to live in. Two months after Cassandra's father died they married on 26 April 1764 at St Swithin's Church in Bath, by licence, in a simple ceremony. They left for Hampshire the same day.

Their income was modest, with George's small per annum living; Cassandra brought to the marriage the expectation of a small inheritance at the time of her mother's death. The Austens took up temporary residence at the nearby Deane rectory until Steventon, a 16th century house in disrepair, underwent necessary renovations. Cassandra gave birth to three children while living at Deane: James in 1765, George in 1766, and Edward in 1767. Her custom was to keep an infant at home for several months and then place it with Elizabeth Littlewood, a woman living nearby to nurse and raise for twelve to eighteen months.

In 1768 the family finally took up residence in Steventon. Henry was the first child to be born there, in 1771. At about this time Cassandra could no longer ignore the signs that little George was developmentally disabled. He was subject to seizures, may have been deaf and dumb, and she chose to send him out to be fostered. In 1773, Cassandra was born, followed by Francis in 1774, and Jane in 1775.

According to Honan, the atmosphere of the Austen home was an "open, amused, easy intellectual" one, where the ideas of those with whom the Austens might disagree politically or socially were considered and discussed. The family relied on the patronage of their kin and hosted visits from numerous family members. Cassandra Austen spent the summer of 1770 in London with George's sister, Philadelphia, and her daughter Eliza, accompanied by his other sister, Mrs Walter and her daughter Philly. Philadelphia and Eliza Hancock were, according to Le Faye, "the bright comets flashing into an otherwise placid solar system of clerical life in rural Hampshire, and the news of their foreign travels and fashionable London life, together with their sudden descents upon the Steventon household in between times, all helped to widen Jane's youthful horizon and influence her

later life and works."

Education

In 1783, Austen and her sister Cassandra were sent to Oxford to be educated by Mrs Ann Cawley who took them with her to Southampton when she moved there later in the year. In the autumn both girls were sent home when they caught typhus and Austen nearly died. Austen was from then home educated, until she attended boarding school in Reading with her sister from early in 1785 at the Reading Abbey Girls' School, ruled by Mrs La Tournelle, who possessed a cork leg and a passion for theatre. The school curriculum probably included some French, spelling, needlework, dancing and music and, perhaps, drama. The sisters returned home before December 1786 because the school fees for the two girls were too high for the Austen family. After 1786, Austen "never again lived anywhere beyond the bounds of her immediate family environment".

The remainder of her education came from reading, guided by her father and brothers James and Henry. Irene Collins believes that Austen "used some of the same school books as the boys" her father tutored. Austen apparently had unfettered access both to her father's library and that of a family friend, Warren Hastings. Together these collections amounted to a large and varied library. Her father was also tolerant of Austen's sometimes risqué experiments in writing, and provided both sisters with expensive paper and other materials for their writing and drawing.

Private theatricals were an essential part of Austen's education. From her early childhood, the family and friends staged a series of plays in the rectory barn, including Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) and David Garrick's *Bon Ton*. Austen's eldest brother James wrote the prologues and epilogues and she probably joined in these activities, first as a spectator and later as a participant. Most of the plays were comedies, which suggests how Austen's satirical gifts were cultivated. At the age of 12, she tried her own hand at dramatic writing; she wrote three short plays during her teenage years.

Early manuscripts (1796-1798)

After finishing *Lady Susan*, Austen began her first full-length novel *Elinor and Marianne*. Her sister remembered that it was read to the family "before 1796" and was told through a series of letters. Without surviving original manuscripts, there is no way to know how much of the original draft survived in the novel published anonymously in 1811 as *Sense*

and Sensibility.

Austen began a second novel, *First Impressions* (later published as *Pride and Prejudice*), in 1796. She completed the initial draft in August 1797, aged 21; as with all of her novels, Austen read the work aloud to her family as she was working on it and it became an "established favourite". At this time, her father made the first attempt to publish one of her novels. In November 1797, George Austen wrote to Thomas Cadell, an established publisher in London, to ask if he would consider publishing *First Impressions*. Cadell returned Mr. Austen's letter, marking it "Declined by Return of Post". Austen may not have known of her father's efforts. Following the completion of *First Impressions*, Austen returned to *Elinor and Marianne* and from November 1797 until mid-1798, revised it heavily; she eliminated the epistolary format in favour of third-person narration and produced something close to *Sense and Sensibility*. In 1797, Austen met her cousin

(and future sister-in-law), Eliza de Feuillide, a French aristocrat whose first husband the Comte de Feuillide had been guillotined, causing her to flee to Britain, where she married Henry Austen. The description of the execution of the Comte de Feuillide related by his widow left Austen with an intense horror of the French Revolution that lasted for the rest of her life.

During the middle of 1798, after finishing revisions of *Elinor and Marianne*, Austen began writing a third novel with the working title *Susan* – later *Northanger Abbey* – a satire on the popular Gothic novel. Austen completed her work about a year later. In early 1803, Henry Austen offered *Susan* to Benjamin Crosby, a London publisher, who paid £10 for the copyright. Crosby promised early publication and went so far as to advertise the book publicly as being "in the press", but did nothing more. The manuscript remained in Crosby's hands, unpublished, until Austen repurchased the copyright from him in 1816.

Published author

At the time, married British women did not have the legal power to sign contracts, and it was common for a woman wishing to publish to have a male relative represent her to sign the contract. Like most women authors at the time, Austen had to publish her books anonymously. At the time, the ideal roles for a woman were as wife and mother, and writing for women was regarded at best as a secondary form of activity; a woman who wished to be a full-time writer was felt to be degrading her femininity, so books by women were usually published anonymously in order to maintain the conceit that the female writer was only publishing as a sort of part-time job, and was not seeking to

become a "literacy lioness" (i.e a celebrity).

During her time at Chawton, Jane Austen published four generally well-received novels. Through her brother Henry, the publisher Thomas Egerton agreed to publish *Sense and Sensibility*, which, like all of Jane Austen's novels except *Pride and Prejudice*, was published "on commission", that is, at the author's financial risk. When publishing on commission, publishers would advance the costs of publication, repay themselves as books were sold and then charge a 10% commission for each book sold, paying the rest to the author. If a novel did not recover its costs through sales, the author was responsible for them.

The alternative to selling via commission was the selling the copyright, where an author received a one-time payment from the publisher for the manuscript, which occurred with *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's experience with *Susan* (the manuscript that became *Northanger Abbey*) where she sold the copyright to the publisher Crosby & Sons for £10, who did not publish the book, forcing her to buy back the copyright in order to get her work published, left Austen leery of this method of publishing.[98] The final alternative, of selling by subscription, where a group of people would agree to buy a book in advance, was not an option for Austen as only authors who were well known or had an influential aristocratic patron who would recommend an up-coming book to their friends, could sell by subscription. *Sense and Sensibility* appeared in October 1811, and was described as being written "By a Lady". As it was sold on commission, Egerton used expensive paper and set the price at 15 shillings.

Reviews were favourable and the novel became fashionable among young aristocratic opinion-makers; the edition sold out by mid-1813. Austen's novels were published in larger editions than was normal for this period. The small size of the novel-reading public and the large costs associated with hand production (particularly the cost of handmade paper) meant that most novels were published in editions of 500 copies or less to reduce the risks to the publisher and the novelist. Even some of the most successful titles during this period were issued in editions of not more than 750 or 800 copies and later reprinted if demand continued. Austen's novels were published in larger editions, ranging from about 750 copies of *Sense and Sensibility* to about 2,000 copies of *Emma*. It is not clear whether the decision to print more copies than usual of Austen's novels was driven by the publishers or the author. Since all but one of Austen's books were originally published "on commission", the risks of overproduction were largely hers (or Cassandra's after her death) and publishers may have been more willing to produce larger editions than was normal practice when their own funds were at risk. Editions of popular works of non-fiction were often much larger.

Unknown to Austen, her novels were translated into French and published in cheaply produced, pirated editions in France. The literary critic Noel King commented that given the prevailing rage in France at the time was for lush romantic fantasies, it is remarkable that her novels with the emphasis on everyday English life had any sort of a market in France. However, King cautioned that Austen's chief translator in France, Madame Isabelle de Montolieu, had only the

most rudimentary knowledge of English, and her translations were more of "imitations" than translations proper, as Montolieu depended upon assistants to provide a summary, which she then translated into an embellished French that often radically altered Austen's plots and characters. The first of the Austen novels to be published that credited her as the author was in France, when *Persuasion* was published in 1821 as *La Famille Elliot ou L'Ancienne Inclination*.

Austen learned that the Prince Regent admired her novels and kept a set at each of his residences. In November 1815, the Prince Regent's librarian James Stanier Clarke invited Austen to visit the Prince's London residence and hinted Austen should dedicate the forthcoming *Emma* to the Prince. Though Austen disliked the Prince Regent, she could scarcely refuse the request. Austen disapproved of the Prince Regent on the account of his womanising, gambling, drinking, spendthrift ways and generally disreputable behaviour. She later wrote *Plan of a Novel*, according to hints from various quarters, a satiric outline of the "perfect novel" based on the librarian's many suggestions for a future Austen novel. Austen was greatly annoyed by Clarke's often pompous literary advice, and the *Plan of A Novel* parodying Clarke was intended as her revenge for all of the unwanted letters she had received from the royal librarian.

In mid-1815 Austen moved her work from Egerton to John Murray, a better known London publisher,^[k] who published *Emma* in December 1815 and a second edition of *Mansfield Park* in February 1816. *Emma* sold well but the new edition of *Mansfield Park* did poorly, and this failure offset most of the income from *Emma*. These were the last of Austen's novels to be published during her lifetime.

While Murray prepared *Emma* for publication, Austen began *The Elliots*, later published as *Persuasion*. She completed her first draft in July 1816. In addition, shortly after the publication of *Emma*, Henry Austen repurchased the copyright for *Susan* from Crosby. Austen was forced to postpone publishing either of these completed novels by family financial troubles. Henry Austen's bank failed in March 1816, depriving him of all of his assets, leaving him deeply in debt and losing Edward, James, and Frank Austen large sums. Henry and Frank could no longer afford the contributions they had made to support

their mother and sisters.

Illness and death

Austen was feeling unwell by early 1816, but ignored the warning signs. By the middle of that year, her decline was unmistakable, and she began a slow, irregular deterioration. The majority of biographers rely on Dr. Vincent Cope's 1964 retrospective diagnosis and list her cause of death as Addison's disease, although her final illness has also been described as resulting from Hodgkin's lymphoma. When her uncle died and left his entire fortune to his wife, effectively disinheriting his relatives, she suffered a relapse, writing, "I am ashamed to say that the shock of my Uncle's Will brought on a relapse ... but a weak Body must excuse weak Nerves".

She continued to work in spite of her illness. Dissatisfied with the ending of *The Elliots*, she rewrote the final two chapters, which she finished on 6 August 1816. In January 1817 Austen began *The Brothers* (titled *Sanditon* when published in 1925), and completed twelve chapters before stopping work in mid-March 1817, probably due to illness. Todd describes *Sanditon*'s heroine, Diana Parker, as an "energetic invalid". In the novel, Austen mocked hypochondriacs and though she describes the heroine as "bilious", five days after abandoning the novel she wrote of herself that she was turning "every wrong colour" and living "chiefly on the sofa". She put down her pen on 18 March 1817, making a note of it.

Austen made light of her condition, describing it as "bile" and rheumatism. As her illness progressed, she experienced difficulty walking and lacked energy; by mid-April she was confined to bed. In May Cassandra and Henry brought her to Winchester for treatment, by which time she suffered agonising pain and welcomed death. Austen died in Winchester on 18 July 1817, at the age of 41. Henry, through his clerical connections, arranged for his sister to be buried in the north aisle of the nave of Winchester Cathedral. The epitaph composed by her brother James praises Austen's personal qualities, expresses hope for her salvation and mentions the "extraordinary endowments of her mind", but does not explicitly mention her achievements as a writer.

Genre and style

Austen's works critique the sentimental novels of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism. The earliest English novelists, Richardson, Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett, were followed by the school of

sentimentalists and romantics such as Walter Scott, Horace Walpole, Clara Reeve, Ann Radcliffe, Laurence Sterne and Oliver Goldsmith, whose style and genre Austen rejected, returning the novel on a "slender thread" to the tradition of Richardson and Fielding for a "realistic study of manners". In the mid-20th century, literary critics F. R. Leavis and Ian Watt placed her in the tradition of Richardson and Fielding; both believe that she used their tradition of "irony, realism and satire to form an author superior to both".

Walter Scott noted Austen's "resistance to the trashy sensationalism of much of modern fiction - 'the ephemeral productions which supply the regular demand of watering places and circulating libraries'". Yet her rejection of these genres is complex, as evidenced by *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*. Similar to William Wordsworth, who excoriated the modern frantic novel in the "Preface" to his *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Austen distances herself from escapist novels; the discipline and innovation she demonstrates is similar to his, and she shows "that rhetorically less is artistically more." She eschewed popular Gothic fiction, stories of terror in which a heroine typically was stranded in a remote location, a castle or abbey (32 novels between 1784 and 1818 contain the word "abbey" in their title). Yet in *Northanger Abbey* she alludes to the trope, with the heroine, Catherine, anticipating a move to a remote locale. Rather than full-scale rejection or parody, Austen transforms the genre, juxtaposing reality, with descriptions of elegant rooms and modern comforts, against the heroine's "novel-fueled" desires. Nor does she completely denigrate Gothic fiction: instead she transforms settings and situations, such that the heroine is still imprisoned, yet her imprisonment is mundane and real - regulated manners and the strict rules of the ballroom. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen presents characters who are more complex than in staple sentimental fiction, according to critic Keymer, who notes that although it is a parody of popular sentimental fiction, "Marianne in her sentimental histrionics responds to the calculating world ... with a quite justifiable scream of female distress."

Richardson's *Pamela*, the prototype for the sentimental novel, is a didactic love story with a happy ending, written at a time women were beginning to have the right to choose husbands and yet were restricted by social conventions. Austen attempted Richardson's epistolary style, but found the flexibility of narrative more conducive to her realism, a realism in which each conversation and gesture carries a weight of significance. The narrative style utilises free indirect speech - she was the first English novelist to do so extensively - through which she had the ability to present a character's thoughts directly to the reader and yet still retain narrative control. The style allows an author to vary discourse between the narrator's voice and values and those of the characters.

Austen had a natural ear for speech and dialogue, according to scholar Mary Lascelles "Few novelists can be more scrupulous than Jane Austen as to the phrasing and thoughts of their characters." Techniques such as fragmentary speech suggest a character's traits and their tone; "syntax and phrasing rather than vocabulary" is utilised to indicate social variants. Dialogue reveals a character's mood – frustration, anger, happiness – each treated differently and often through varying patterns of sentence structures.

Austen's plots highlight women's traditional dependence on marriage to secure social standing and economic security. As an art form, the 18th-century novel lacked the seriousness of its equivalents from the 19th century, when novels were treated as "the natural vehicle for discussion and ventilation of what mattered in life". Rather than delving too deeply into the psyche of her characters, Austen enjoys them and imbues them with humour, according to critic John Bayley. He believes that the well-spring of her wit and irony is her own attitude that comedy "is the saving grace of life". Part of Austen's fame rests on the historical and literary significance that she was the first woman to write great comic novels. Samuel Johnson's influence is evident, in that she follows his advice to write "a representation of life as may excite mirth".

Her humour comes from her modesty and lack of superiority, allowing her most successful characters, such as Elizabeth Bennet, to transcend the trivialities of life, which the more foolish characters are overly absorbed in. Austen used comedy to explore the individualism of women's lives and gender relations, and she appears to have used it to find the goodness in life, often fusing it with "ethical sensibility", creating artistic tension. Critic Robert Polhemus writes, "To appreciate the drama and achievement of Austen, we need to realize how deep was her passion for both reverence and ridicule ... and her comic imagination reveals both the harmonies

and the telling contradictions of her mind and vision as she tries to reconcile her satirical bias with her sense of the good."

Sources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jane_Austen