

Jane Austen's Life

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hile the literary art of Jane Austen is remarkable, the facts of her biography, at first glance, are not. The contrast has long intrigued Austen readers and Austen scholars, and interest in her life is today almost as keen as interest in her works.

Dating back to her own time, when Austen's first four novels were published anonymously, we have her letters (those her sister Cassandra did not destroy after her death), and *A Memoir of Jane Austen* written by her great-nephew J.E. Austen-Leigh in 1869. What these sources reveal is that while Austen did lead the quiet life of an unmarried clergyman's daughter, she found early encouragement for her art within her family circle and a starting point for her novels in her personal and family history.

Born in 1775 to George and Cassandra Austen in the English village of Steventon, Jane Austen grew up in a highly literate family. Jane's father was an Oxford-educated clergyman and her mother was a humorous, aristocratic woman. Educated only briefly outside of her home, Jane Austen read freely in her father's library of 500 books, which left her better educated than most young girls of the time. While her family never anticipated she would be a published writer (not considered an appropriate profession for a young lady of her background), within the walls of their household she was encouraged to write. In this lively intellectual household the 15-year-old Jane Austen began writing her own novels; by age 23 she had completed the original versions of *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. Her own delight in reading and her ironic mocking of its impact on young girls comes alive in *Northanger Abbey*.

After Austen's father died in 1805, Jane, her mother, and sister Cassandra lived in a small house provided by her then-wealthy brother Edward in the village of Chawton. When Jane Austen received a proposal from the wealthy brother of her close friends, for whom she felt no affection, she initially accepted him, only to turn him down the next day. This was a painful decision for her, as she understood deeply that marriage was the sole option women had for social mobility; she further understood the vulnerability of single women without family estates who depend on wealthy relatives for a home. This subject is at the heart of *Sense and Sensibility*.

Austen keenly observed the shifting of social class during her day. Two of her brothers were in the Royal British Navy and she saw first-hand the rise of naval officers in class-conscious British society. Those who returned from the Napoleonic wars with both wealth and notoriety were able to break through class barriers that were previously impenetrable. She wrote elegantly about this sea change in her last novel, *Persuasion*.

Jane Austen died on July 18, 1817, at age 41. She never wrote a memoir, sat for an interview, or recorded whether she had herself felt the joys and disappointments of love. The biographical facts may never adequately explain the quick wit, the sharp insight, and the deep emotional intelligence she brought to her novels. Perhaps that is impossible; it is likely that the novels will continue to transcend our understanding of where they came from. 

Family and Money

As a keen observer of social class, Jane Austen translated the life choices made by her family into the conflicts at the heart of her novels. This is particularly true for money and its impact on families. The Austens were country gentry, and were accepted socially by wealthier families in the neighborhood, but they were not wealthy. They had enough to live on, and a few household servants, which made them the equivalent of middle class. Like Mr. Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, George Austen could give his daughters little to marry on, and had little property to leave to his sons. Jane Austen saw her beloved brother Edward adopted by a wealthier family, the Knights of Kent. As Austen biographer Park Honan notes in *Jane Austen: Her Life*, "The lasting, subtle effect of the adoption was to make [Jane Austen] more fully aware of how money, land, inheritance, and social advantage easily take precedence . . . over family love."

