

# An Overview of Jane Austen's Life & Novels

Compiled by Roz Foster 10/1/2025

Jane Austen was born in Steventon, Hampshire England, daughter of George and Cassandra Austen. Her father served as the rector of the Anglican parishes of Steventon and Deane and was from a wealthy family of wool merchants. However,



as each generation of eldest sons received inheritance, George's branch of the family fell into poverty. Cassandra was from the prominent Leigh family, and her father was rector at All Souls College, Oxford where she grew up among the gentry. George and Cassandra met while he was attending St. John's College in Oxford and were married in 1764 in Bath. Their income was modest with his small per annum living from Steventon parish and her expectation of a small inheritance upon her mother's death. They took up temporary residence in Dane rectory where three children were born: James 1765,

George 1766 & Edward 1767. In 1768, the family moved into the refurbished Steventon rectory and Henry was the first child born there in 1771. About this time, Cassandra realized that little George was developmentally disabled, having seizures and may have been deaf and mute and chose to send him to be fostered. In 1773 Cassandra was born, followed by Francis 1774 and Jane December 16, 1775.

In 1783 Jane and Cassandra were sent to Oxford to be educated and after catching typhus, of which Jane nearly died, were sent home. They were then home educated until they attended boarding school at the Reading Abbey Girls' School from early 1785 where they were taught French, spelling, needlework, dancing (which Jane excelled at) music and drama. The sisters returned home sometime before December 1786 because the school fees were too high for the Austen family to pay. After 1786, Jane never lived anywhere beyond the bounds of her

immediate family environment. Her education came from reading some of her brother's schoolbooks and having access to her father's and his friend Mr. Hastings's, large and varied libraries. Her father encouraged both girls to write and draw and provided expensive paper and other materials and tolerated Jane's sometimes risqué writing experiments. From Jane's early childhood private theatricals were staged with family and friends in the rectory barn, prologues and epilogues written by elder brother James. Most were comedies, which suggest how Austen's satirical gifts were cultivated, and at the age of twelve she tried her own hand at dramatic writing and wrote three short plays during her teenage years. She exaggerated mundane details of daily life full of anarchic fantasies of female power, license, illicit behavior, and general high spirits. Jane compiled copies of twenty-nine early works from 1787-1793 bound into three notebooks, now referred to as the *Juvenilia*. Among these works is a satirical novel in letters titled "Love and Friendship," written when aged 14 in 1790. Not long after, Jane decided to "write for profit, to make stories her central effort," to become a professional writer. When she was around 18 years old, she began to write longer, more sophisticated works. Between 1793-1795 (aged 18-20) Jane wrote "Lady Susan", a short novel, describes the heroine as a sexual predator who uses her intelligence and charm to manipulate, betray and abuse her lovers, friends, and family. This novel is usually considered as her most ambitious and sophisticated early work.

When Jane was twenty, she met a young man by the name of Tom Lefroy who visited Steventon from December 1795 - January 1796. He had just finished a university degree and was moving to London for training as a barrister. They most likely were introduced at a ball or other neighborhood social gathering. Jane wrote several letters to her sister Cassandra describing Tom as, "very gentlemanlike, good looking, a pleasant young man," and that they were spending a lot of time together. She wrote that she expected an "offer" from her "friend" and that, "I shall refuse him, however, unless he promises to give away his white coat. I will confide myself in the future to Mr. Tom Lefroy, for whom I don't give a sixpence and refuse all others." The next day she wrote: "The day will come on which I flirt my last with Tom Lefroy and when you receive this it will be all over. My tears flow as I write at this melancholy idea." Jane often wrote sentimental romantic fiction in her letters, some about Lefroy may have been ironic although it was clear she was genuinely attracted to him and other suitors never measured up

to him. The Lefroy family intervened and sent Tom away at the end of January knowing that marriage was impractical and Jane never saw Tom again.

After finishing "Lady Susan," Jane began her first full-length novel "Elinor and Marianne." Cassandra remembered that it was read to the family before 1796 and was told through a series of letters. In 1796, Jane began her second novel, "First Impressions" (later published as "Pride and Prejudice") and completed the initial draft in August 1797 at the age of twenty-one. Following her completion of "First Impressions" she returned to "Elinor and Marianne" and from November 1797 until mid-1798, revised it heavily; she eliminated the epistolary format in favor of third-person narration and produced something close to "Sense and Sensibility." 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." During the middle of 1798, after finishing revisions of "Elinor and Marianne," Austen began writing her third novel with the working title of "Susan" (later "Northanger Abbey") and completed it a year later. In early 1803, brother Henry offered "Susan" to Benjamin Crosby, a London publisher who promised early publication and advertised the book publicly as being "in the press" but did nothing more. The manuscript remained in Crosby's hands for several years unpublished.

In December 1800, Jane's father unexpectedly announced his decision to retire and moved the family to Bath where Jane became depressed and lost interest in writing. She made some revisions to "Susan," but nothing like her productivity during the years of 1795-1799. She frequently moved, travelled southern England, and enjoyed the social life that Bath had to offer, which were distractions from writing. She sold the rights to publish "Susan" to Crosby & Company who advertised but never published the novel.

In 1802, Jane received her only known proposal of marriage that she accepted because the marriage would offer many financial advantages and social standing for her family. The man was not attractive, stuttered with aggressive conversation and was almost completely tactless. By the next morning, she realized she had made a mistake and withdrew her acceptance.

In 1804, while living in Bath, Jane began a new novel, "The Watsons," and then stopped working on it after her father died in January 1805 because her personal circumstances resembled those of her characters too closely for her comfort. Her father's death left Jane, mother and sister Cassandra in a precarious financial situation and her three brothers pledged to make annual contributions for support. They left Bath in June 1805 and visited family in Steventon and in the autumn moved to the seaside resort of Worthing. It was here at Stanford Cottage Austen is thought to have written her fair copy of "Susan" and added its "Conclusion." In 1806, the family moved to Southampton where they shared a house with Frank Austen and his new wife. During this period was spent visiting various branches of the family.

In April 1809, about three months before the family moved to Chawton, Jane wrote an angry letter to publisher Richard Crosby offering him a new manuscript of "Susan" to secure the immediate publication of the novel if needed, and if not requesting the return of the original so she could find another publisher. Crosby replied that he had not agreed to publish the book by any particular time or at all, and that she could repurchase the manuscript for the same money he had paid her and find another publisher. Jane didn't have the resources at that time but was able to buy back the copyright of "Susan" in 1816.

In July 1809 Jane, Cassandra and mother moved to Chawton cottage that was part of brother Edward's nearby estate property in Chawton Village. During her time at Chawton, Jane published four generally well-received novels.

Through the efforts of Jane's brother Henry, publisher Thomas Egerton published "Sense and Sensibility" in October 1811, and it was credited as being written "By a Lady". Reviews were favorable and the novel became fashionable among young aristocratic opinion-makers, and the 750 copies of the edition sold out by mid-1813. Jane had agreed to publish this book by commission and was able to obtain some financial and psychological independence from the proceeds of this novel. After the success of "Sense and Sensibility," all of Jane's subsequent books were billed as written "By the author of Sense and Sensibility." Egerton published "Pride and Prejudice" in January 1813 (a revision of First Impressions) with Jane selling the copyright to him. He advertised the book widely and it was an immediate success, garnering three favorable reviews and selling well. If Jane had

sold "Pride and Prejudice" on commission, she would have made the equivalent of twice her father's annual income. By October 1813, Egerton was able to begin selling a second edition. In May 1814, Egerton published "Mansfield Park," which was ignored by reviewers but was extremely popular with readers and all copies were sold within six months. Jane's earnings on this novel were larger than any of her other novels.

Mid-1815, Jane moved her work from Egerton to John Murray, a better-known publisher in London. Murray 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 Jane Austen's novels to be published during her lifetime. While Murray prepared "Emma" for publication, Jane began writing "The Elliots," later published as "Persuasion," and completed her first draft in July 1816. Shortly after "Emma" was published, brother Henry repurchased the copyright of "Susan" from Crosby. Jane was forced to postpone publishing either of these completed novels due to family financial troubles, and the brothers could no longer afford to contribute to the financial support of their mother and sisters.

Jane's name never appeared as author of her books during her lifetime. Books written by women were published anonymously because at the time it was regarded as a secondary form of activity for women, and a full-time woman writer was seen as degrading her femininity. Another reason was that the novel was still seen as a lesser form of literature compared with poetry, and many female and male authors published novels anonymously, whereas works of poetry, both female and male writers were almost always attributed to the author.

Without Jane's knowledge or approval, her novels were translated into French and published in cheaply produced, pirated editions in France. The chief French translator had only rudimentary knowledge of English and her translations were more of "imitations" than proper translations, with embellished French that often radically altered Austen's plots and characters. The first of 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".

By early 1816 Jane was feeling unwell but ignored the warning signs, and by the middle of that year her decline was unmistakable, and she began a slow, irregular deterioration. In spite of her illness Jane continued to work. Dissatisfied with the ending of "The Elliots," she rewrote the final two chapters which she finished on August 6, 1816. In January 1817 Jane began "The Brothers" ("Sanditon" when published in 1925), completing twelve chapters before stopping work due to her illness. She put down her pen on March 18, 1817, making a note of it.

Austen made light of her condition although as her illness progressed. She experienced difficulty walking and lacked energy, and by mid-April was confined to bed. In May, Cassandra and Henry took her to Winchester for treatment, which by this time Jane was suffering from agonizing pain and welcomed death.

Jane Austen died in Winchester July 18, 1817, at the age of forty-one. Many biographers rely on retrospective diagnosis and list her cause of death as Addison's Disease, although her final illness has also been described as a result of Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Henry, through his clerical connections, arranged for Jane 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.

In the months after Jane's death, Cassandra and Henry with publisher Murray, arranged for the publication of "Persuasion" and "Northanger Abbey" as a set. Henry contributed a biographical note dated December 1817, which for the first time identified his sister, Jane Austen, as author of the novels. Sales were good for a year – only 321 copies remained unsold at the end of 1818.

Although Austen's six novels were out of print in England in the 1820s, they were still being read through copies housed in private and circulating libraries. In 1832 Richard Bently purchased the remaining copyrights to all of Jane's novels, and over the following winter published five illustrated volumes as part of his "Standard Novels" series. In October 1833 Bently released the first collected edition of Jane's works. Since then, Jane Austen's novels have been continuously

in print. In 1869 her nephew published “A Memoir of Jane Austen”. Her work has inspired a large number of critical essays and has been included in many literary anthologies. Her novels have been adapted in numerous films, including *Sense & Sensibility* (1995), *Pride & Prejudice* (2005), *Emma* (2020) and an adaptation of *Lady Susan, Love & Friendship* (2016) as well as the film *Persuasion* and the miniseries *Pride & Prejudice*, both released in 1995 by BBC.