

Jane Austen

The author and her work



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Some of the finest English writers of the 19th century were women. Jane Austen, who wrote at the beginning of that century (and the very end of the previous one), was among the very best of these writers. She is now one of the most famous of all English authors. But although she wrote at least five novels which are among the greatest in all English literature, Austen was not famous during her own lifetime.

In England during most of the 19th century, women who were well educated did not have paid jobs. Many of them enjoyed writing, and they often had lots of time to do it. They wanted to have their books published so that other people could read them. But there were two problems. One problem was that publishing companies were controlled by men, and many of these men did not believe that women wrote as well as men. The other problem was that middle and upper-class people thought it was not 'respectable' for women to publish books. Earning money by writing was like doing a job, and it was shameful for a man if it looked like his wife or daughter had to earn money. It was shameful if people thought that they *had* to earn money, even if this was not true.

Right from the beginning of the 19th century, there were women who published books, but they usually did this anonymously – their own names did not appear on their covers. On the title-pages, these books were often described simply as being 'by a Lady'. Another way of overcoming the problem was for them to use male names. If publishers thought that a book had been written by a man, they were more likely to publish it. Then, if a book was a success and its publisher later found out that it was by a woman, he would not stop printing copies of it!

Jane Austen suffered from the same problems as other women writers of her time. She completed six novels. Four of these novels were published in her lifetime anonymously. These books were the masterpieces *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park* and *Sense and Sensibility*. A little later in the century, the Brontë sisters published novels using male pseudonyms – false names. Anne, Charlotte and Emily Brontë called themselves Acton, Currer, and Ellis Bell when they first published their novels, which included famous books like *Wuthering Heights* (Emily) and *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte). Like Austen, the Brontës were the daughters of a clergyman and they had loved reading and writing from a very early age.

Later still, another great woman novelist, George Eliot, also used this trick of adopting a male name. Although George is a man's name, 'George Eliot' was a woman. Her real name was Mary Anne Evans. The first half of the 19th century was a difficult time for English woman writers!

Jane Austen was born on December 16th, 1775, in Steventon, Hampshire. Hampshire is a coastal county in the south of England. Jane's father was the clergyman at Steventon. Although she was almost the youngest of eight children, Jane had a good education for a girl at that time. She learned French and Italian and she also read a lot of English literature from the previous centuries.

Steventon was a very small place, but in 1801, the family moved to Bath, in the south-west of England. Bath was a large and fashionable town. Rich people went to Bath to drink the water

from a spring there. They believed the water cured their illnesses. There were theatres in Bath, and there were dances every night. Jane enjoyed watching and meeting people there. But although Jane met many young men, she never married and she always lived with her family.

After her father died in 1805, the family moved again, first to the large port town of Southampton and then, in 1809 to Chawton. Chawton was a small village, but it wasn't far from the town of Winchester. Winchester was one of Hampshire's most important towns. It was quite a large place, with a great cathedral.

Jane had started writing novels in her early twenties, but it was only when she was living in Chawton that she succeeded in getting any of them published. *Sense and Sensibility* was published in 1811, and *Pride and Prejudice* was published two years later, also anonymously. Both these books had been written some years previously. As a result of the success of these

two novels, Jane published two more novels: *Mansfield Park* (published in 1814) and *Emma* (published in 1815). These novels are marvellously accurate observations of the home life of the minor aristocracy and comfortable middle class citizens of the south of England. They are clever and funny and they appealed to quite a large readership.

But Jane's health was never strong. After a long illness, she died, on July 18th, 1917, at the age of 41. Soon after her death, two more novels – *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* – were published. Finally, her publishers put her name on all her books. She was no longer an anonymous writer.

More recently, a number of examples of Jane's youthful writing have been published, but she is remembered today because of the six famous novels mentioned above. Many films have been made of them, from the early days of Hollywood up to the present day.

A selection of works by Jane Austen

- (1811) *Sense and Sensibility*
- (1813) *Pride and Prejudice*
- (1814) *Mansfield Park*
- (1815) *Emma*
- (1818) *Northanger Abbey*, *Persuasion* and *Sanditon* (unfinished)

(For a list of Jane Austen's novels that have been simplified for the Macmillan Readers Series, see a copy of the current Readers catalogue.)