

Jane Austen : A Short introduction

Jane Austen occupies a high rank among English novelists. She was the younger daughter of a Hampshire clergyman, rector of Steventon. She was born on December 16, 1775. Her father, George Austen, was a scholarly type of man; and her mother Cassandra Austen was a keen gardener.

Her father's house at Steventon remained Jane Austen's abode for a quarter of a century. The Austen family was at that time reasonably well off, mixed in the best society of the neighbourhood, and owned a carriage and a pair of horses. For their education, Jane and Cassandra depended largely on their father and brothers, the cultured atmosphere of their home, and their contacts with relatives. Jane Austen began to write short stories early. Some of her early works survive in three note-books entitled Volume the First, Volume the Second and Volume the Third, containing short novels, plays etc.. all written before she was sixteen. By 1796, she had written a novel called *Elinor and Marianne*, in the form of a series of letters modelled on Richardson. This was afterwards recast and rewritten in 1797, and became *Sense and Sensibility*. *Pride and Prejudice*, which shows her at the height of her powers, was written in 1796-97. In 1798, she wrote *Northanger Abbey*, which was bought by a publisher in 1803, but not published by him. *Mansfield Park* was begun in 1811 and it appeared in 1813. *Emma* was begun in 1814 and published in 1815. *Emma* was the last of her novels that Jane Austen was to see in print. In 1816, she completed *Persuasion* which she had begun a year before. *Persuasion* too appeared posthumously in 1817. Between January and March 1817, she was at work on the fragment known as "Sanditon". Another fragment, *The Watsons*, was written by her during the years she spent in Bath and Southampton.

Regarding the writings of Jane Austen, Caedman writes —

"The novels of Jane Austen deal almost wholly with the restricted circle of human life, and round it all social interests are gathered. The atmosphere is one of provincial calm with a very limited outlook where the extremes of wealth and poverty are unknown."

Another Critic writes about Jane Austen's art of Characterization —

"Jane Austen shows an intuitive understanding of human character. Her intuition is so natural and supple that it appears absolutely simple. She reads the inner minds of her characters as if those minds were transparent."

J.W. Beach opines about Jane Austen —

"Jane Austen may be regarded as the chief exponent of the 'daily island life' of the English at the turn of the nineteenth century. It is not the daily life of the peasant or commoner, nor the life of factory or counting-house, of the London slums or the labour unions which were to be exploited later by Mrs Gaskell, Charles Reade, and Dickens."

Until 1816, there had been no sign of Jane Austen being ill, but early in that year her health was somewhat impaired. She still wrote cheerful letters to her relatives, but she became less and less active. In May 1817, she and Cassandra went to Winchester to get medical aid but there was no hope of a cure. She became seriously ill and died on July 18, 1817, in the arms of her sister. She was buried on the 24th July 1817, in the cathedral church of Winchester.

Jane Austen had a lovable character and temperance. "Of personal attractions she possessed a considerable share. Her stature was that of true elegance. It could not have been increased without exceeding the middle height. Her carriage and deportment were quiet, yet graceful. Her features were separately good. Their assemblage produced an unrivalled expression of that cheerfulness, sensibility and benevolence, which were her real characteristics. Her complexion was