

Jane Austen (born December 16, 1775, Steventon, Hampshire, England—died July 18, 1817, Winchester, Hampshire) was an English writer who first gave the novel its distinctly modern character through her treatment of ordinary people in everyday life. She published four novels during her lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). In these and in *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* (published together posthumously, 1817), she vividly depicted English middle-class life during the early 19th century. Her novels defined the era's novel of manners, but they also became timeless classics that remained critical and popular successes for over two centuries after her death. These works reflect her enduring legacy.

Life



Novelist Jane Austen Jane Austen, pencil-and-watercolor sketch on paper by her sister, Cassandra Austen, c. 1810; in the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Jane Austen was born in the [Hampshire](#) village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, was rector. She was the second daughter and seventh child in a family of eight—six boys and two girls. Her closest companion throughout her life was her elder sister, Cassandra; neither Jane nor Cassandra married. Their father was a scholar who encouraged the love of learning in his children. His wife, Cassandra (née Leigh), was a woman of ready wit, famed for her [impromptu](#) verses and stories. The great family amusement was

Jane Austen's lively and affectionate family circle provided a stimulating [context](#) for her writing. Moreover, her experience was carried far beyond Steventon rectory by an extensive network of relationships by blood and friendship. It was this world—of the minor landed gentry and the country clergy, in the village, the neighborhood, and the country town, with occasional visits to [Bath](#) and to [London](#)—that she was to use in the settings, characters, and subject matter of her novels.



[Jane Austen's life and literary achievements](#) Questions and answers about Jane Austen.

Her earliest known writings date from about 1787, and between then and 1793 she wrote a large body of material that has survived in three manuscript notebooks: *Volume the First*, *Volume the Second*, and *Volume the Third*.

These contain plays, verses, short novels, and other prose and show Austen engaged in the [parody](#) of existing literary forms, notably the [genres](#) of the [sentimental novel](#) and [sentimental comedy](#). Her passage to a more serious view of life from the exuberant high spirits and extravagances of her earliest writings is evident in *Lady Susan*, a short [epistolary novel](#) written about 1793–94 (and not published until 1871). This portrait of a woman bent on the exercise of her own powerful mind and personality to the point of social self-destruction is, in effect, a study of frustration and of woman's fate in a society that has no use for her talents.

In 1802 it seems likely that Jane agreed to marry Harris Bigg-Wither, the 21-year-old [heir](#) of a Hampshire family, but the next morning changed her mind. There are also a number of mutually contradictory stories connecting her with someone with whom she fell in love but who died very soon after. Since Austen's novels are so deeply concerned with love and marriage, there is some point in attempting to establish

The earliest of her novels published during her lifetime, [*Sense and Sensibility*](#), was begun about 1795 as a novel-in-letters called “Elinor and Marianne,” after its heroines. Between October 1796 and August 1797 Austen completed the first version of [*Pride and Prejudice*](#), then called “First Impressions.” In 1797 her father wrote to offer it to a London publisher for publication, but the offer was declined. [*Northanger Abbey*](#), the last of the early novels, was written about 1798 or 1799, probably under the title “Susan.” In 1803 the manuscript of “Susan” was sold to the publisher Richard Crosby for £10. He took it for immediate publication, but, although it was advertised, unaccountably it never appeared.

Up to this time the tenor of life at Steventon rectory had been propitious for Jane Austen’s growth as a novelist. This stable [environment](#) ended in 1801, however, when George Austen, then age 70, retired to Bath with his wife and daughters. For eight years Jane had to put up with a succession of temporary lodgings or visits to relatives, in Bath, London, Clifton, [*Warwickshire*](#), and, finally, [*Southampton*](#), where the three women lived from 1805 to 1809. In 1804 Jane began *The Watsons* but soon abandoned it. In 1804 her dearest friend, Mrs. Anne Lefroy, died suddenly, and in January 1805 her father ~~died in Bath.~~

Eventually, in 1809, Jane's brother Edward was able to provide his mother and sisters with a large cottage in the village of Chawton, within his Hampshire estate, not far from Steventon. The prospect of settling at Chawton had already given Jane Austen a renewed sense of purpose, and she began to prepare *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* for publication. She was encouraged by her brother Henry, who acted as go-between with her publishers. She was probably also prompted by her need for money. Two years later Thomas Egerton agreed to publish *Sense and Sensibility*, which came out, anonymously, in November 1811. Both of the leading reviews, the *Critical Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, welcomed its blend of instruction and amusement.

Meanwhile, in 1811 Austen had begun [*Mansfield Park*](#), which was finished in 1813 and published in 1814. By then she was an established (though anonymous) author; Egerton had published *Pride and Prejudice* in January 1813, and later that year there were second editions of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*. *Pride and Prejudice* seems to have been the [fashionable novel](#) of its season. Between January 1814 and March 1815 she wrote [*Emma*](#), which appeared in December 1815. In 1816

there was a second edition of *Mansfield Park*, published, like *Emma*, by [Lord Byron's](#) publisher, [John Murray](#). *Persuasion* (written August 1815–August 1816) was published posthumously, with *Northanger Abbey*, in December 1817.

The years after 1811 seem to have been the most rewarding of her life. She had the satisfaction of seeing her work in print and well reviewed and of knowing that the novels were widely read. They were so much enjoyed by the prince regent (later [George IV](#)) that he had a set in each of his residences, and *Emma*, at a discreet royal command, was “respectfully dedicated” to him. The reviewers praised the novels for their [morality](#) and entertainment, admired the character drawing, and welcomed the domestic realism as a refreshing change from the [romantic](#) melodrama then in vogue.

For the last 18 months of her life, Austen was busy writing. Early in 1816, at the onset of her fatal illness, she set down the burlesque *Plan of a Novel, According to Hints from Various Quarters* (first published in 1871). Until August 1816 she was occupied with *Persuasion*, and she looked again at the manuscript of “Susan” (*Northanger Abbey*).

In January 1817 she began *Sanditon*, a robust and self-mocking satire on health resorts and invalidism. This novel remained unfinished because of Austen's declining health. She supposed that she was suffering from bile, but the symptoms make possible a modern clinical assessment that she was suffering from Addison disease. Her condition fluctuated, but in April she made her will, and in May she was taken to Winchester to be under the care of an expert surgeon. She died on July 18, and six days later she was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

Her authorship was announced to the world at large by her brother Henry, who supervised the publication of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. There was no recognition at the time that regency England had lost its keenest observer and sharpest analyst; no understanding that a miniaturist (as she maintained that she was and as she was then seen), a "merely domestic" novelist, could be seriously concerned with the nature of society and the quality of its culture; no grasp of Jane Austen as a historian of the emergence of

regency society into the modern world. During her lifetime there had been a solitary response in any way adequate to the nature of her achievement: [Sir Walter Scott](#)'s review of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* for March 1816, where he hailed this "nameless author" as a masterful exponent of "the modern novel" in the new realist tradition. After her death, there was for long only one significant essay, the review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in the *Quarterly* for January 1821 by the theologian [Richard Whately](#). Together, Scott's and Whately's essays provided the foundation for serious [criticism](#) of Jane Austen: their insights were appropriated by critics throughout the 19th century.

Austen's novels: an overview

Jane Austen's three early novels form a distinct group in which a strong element of literary [satire](#) accompanies the comic depiction of character and society.



Sense and Sensibility Emma Thompson (left) and Kate Winslet in *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), directed by Ang Lee. Thompson not only costarred but also wrote the script,...([more](#))

[Sense and Sensibility](#) tells the story of the impoverished [Dashwood](#) sisters. Marianne is the heroine of “sensibility”—i.e., of openness and enthusiasm. She becomes infatuated with the attractive John Willoughby, who seems to be a [romantic](#) lover but is in reality an unscrupulous fortune hunter. He deserts her for an heiress, leaving her to learn a dose of “sense” in a wholly unromantic marriage with a staid and settled bachelor, [Colonel Brandon](#), who is

20 years her senior. By contrast, Marianne's older sister, Elinor, is the guiding light of "sense," or prudence and discretion, whose constancy toward her lover, Edward Ferrars, is rewarded by her marriage to him after some distressing vicissitudes.



Pride and Prejudice Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier in *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), directed by Robert Z. Leonard.

Pride and Prejudice describes the clash between Elizabeth Bennet, the daughter of a country gentleman, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a rich and aristocratic landowner. Although Austen shows them intrigued by each other, she reverses the convention of "first impressions": "pride" of rank and fortune and "prejudice" against the

inferiority of the [Bennet family](#) hold Darcy aloof, while Elizabeth is equally fired both by the “pride” of self-respect and by “prejudice” against Darcy’s snobbery. Ultimately, they come together in love and self-understanding. The intelligent and high-spirited Elizabeth was Jane Austen’s own favorite among all her heroines and is one of the most engaging in [English literature](#).

[Northanger Abbey](#) combines a satire on conventional novels of polite society with one on [Gothic tales of terror](#). [Catherine Morland](#), the unspoiled daughter of a country parson, is the innocent abroad who gains worldly wisdom, first in the fashionable society of [Bath](#) and then at Northanger Abbey itself, where she learns not to interpret the world through her reading of Gothic thrillers. Her mentor and guide is the self-assured and gently [ironic](#) Henry Tilney, her husband-to-be.

In the three novels of Jane Austen’s maturity, the literary satire, though still present, is more subdued and is subordinated to the comedy of character and society.

In its tone and discussion of religion and religious duty, [Mansfield Park](#) is the most serious of Austen’s novels. The heroine, [Fanny](#)

cared for by the [Bertram family](#) in their country house. Fanny emerges as a true heroine whose [moral](#) strength eventually wins her complete acceptance in the Bertram family and marriage to Edmund Bertram himself, after that family's disastrous involvement with the meretricious and loose-living Crawfords.



Emma Gwyneth Paltrow (left) and Toni Collette in *Emma* (1996), directed by Douglas McGrath.

Of all Austen's novels, [Emma](#) is the most consistently comic in tone. It centers on [Emma Woodhouse](#), a wealthy, pretty, self-satisfied young woman who indulges herself with meddlesome and unsuccessful attempts at matchmaking among her friends and neighbors. After a series of humiliating errors, a chastened Emma finds her destiny in marriage to the mature and protective [George Knightley](#), a neighboring squire who had been her mentor and friend.

Persuasion tells the story of a second chance, the reawakening of love between Anne Elliot and Captain Frederick Wentworth, whom seven years earlier she had been persuaded not to marry. Now Wentworth returns from the Napoleonic Wars with prize money and the social acceptability of naval rank. He is an eligible suitor acceptable to Anne's snobbish father and his circle, and Anne discovers the continuing strength of her love for him.

The enduring popularity of Austen's books can be seen in the numerous film and television adaptations of her work. These include [Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*](#) (1995), which stars [Emma Thompson](#) (who also wrote the [Academy Award](#)-winning screenplay) and [Kate Winslet](#). *Pride and Prejudice* was notably adapted into a [1940 movie](#) starring [Greer Garson](#) and [Laurence Olivier](#) and a 1995 TV miniseries with Jennifer Ehle and [Colin Firth](#). Other film adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice* include [Bride & Prejudice](#) (2004), directed by Gurinder Chadha and starring [Aishwarya Rai Bachchan](#); a 2005 film featuring [Keira Knightley](#) and [Matthew Macfadyen](#); and *Fire Island* (2022), starring Joel Kim Booster. *Mansfield Park* was covered in a 1983 miniseries, a 1999 film, and a 2007 TV movie. Treatments of *Emma* include a 1996 TV movie, a 1996 film starring [Gwyneth Paltrow](#), and a [2020 movie](#) starring [Anya Taylor-Joy](#). In addition, [Bridget Jones's Diary](#) (2001) was based on *Pride and Prejudice*, and [Clueless](#) (1995) was inspired by *Emma*.