

The Story of Jane Austen

I started reading the novels of Jane Austen when I was just a teen. Her stories were more than just love stories, contemporary sweet romances of their time. She understood the conventions of her time and the status of women. Jane Austen (16 December 1775 – 18 July 1817) was an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels, my favorite of which was *Pride and Prejudice*. Her works interpreted, critiqued and commented upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explored the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of favorable social standing and economic security. It also brought to light that standing of women in her society. Inheritance due to death of the male head of the household would never go to the wife nor the daughters in the household. The life of wife and daughters were often at the mercy of a male heir who could be a distant cousin not at all close to the family. If he chose, he could legally limit their income and run the household as his own.

Pride and Prejudice is a novel by Jane Austen, first published in 1813. The story charts the emotional development of the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, who learns the error of making hasty judgements and comes to appreciate the difference between the superficial and the essential. The essential story lies in the depiction of manners, education, and marriage and money in the British Regency. Mr. Bennet of the Longbourn estate has five daughters, but his property is entailed, meaning that none of the girls can inherit it. Since his wife had no fortune, it is imperative that one of the girls marries well in order to support the others on his death. However, Jane Austen's opening line 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' is a sentence that is quite telling. The novel revolves around the necessity of marrying for love, not simply for mercenary reasons despite the social pressures to make a good and wealthy match. friends.

Jane Austen never wed, but she knew how to play the marriage game

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By Miguel Ángel Jordán
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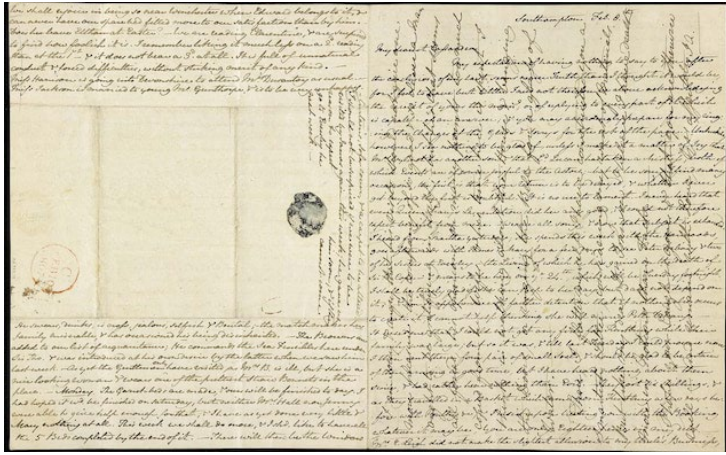
While the author stayed single, Austen used her keen powers of observation to fill her novels with juicy insights into how the gentry flirted, courted, and coupled in 19th-century England.

Jane Austen's beloved 1813 novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, depicts the troubles of a rural English family of the gentry class in the early 19th century. It opens with a famous line: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." The couples in the novel, embody Austen's attitudes toward courtship in the Regency period. Some are partnerships based on affection; others are more practical. She also shows what can happen to those who marry without careful consideration.

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"We have now another girl, a present plaything for her sister Cassy and a future companion. She is to be Jenny, and it seems to me as if she would be as like Henry, as Cassy is to Neddy." With these words, the Reverend George Austen announced the birth of his daughter Jane, the seventh of eight children (six boys, two girls) born to his wife, Cassandra Leigh. No one could have

suspected that this baby, born in 1775 in Steventon, a small town in England, would become one of the most famous novelists of all time. She died at just 41 and now rests in Winchester Cathedral.



Jane Austen's handwritten letter from 1807 is showcased in the J. Pierpont Morgan Library.
The J. Pierpont Morgan Library/Scala, Florence

Jane Austen's life was spent mainly in the domestic sphere, always living with immediate family, and never working outside the home. She lived in Steventon in Hampshire for 25 years (except for brief stints at girls' schools), in the resort town of Bath, the port and naval station of Southampton, and finally Chawton. She lived through the American War of Independence, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and much of George IV's regency. She never left southern England, died in Winchester, and never married, though she had more than one proposal.

But through her acute powers of observation, Austen depicted English society of the period in delicious and often ironic detail. She focused on the dramas in genteel drawing rooms of the upper classes and members of the gentry in her six major novels. All of them place female characters center stage. With wit and keen insight, Austen highlights the enormous obstacles they faced in trying to secure even minimal independence.



Nineteenth-century laptop

This portable desk was used by Austen when she was writing her novels. Her glasses and case rest on its surface.

British Library/Album

Life in Regency [England](#) did not encourage freedom of expression, and penalties for speaking against society's status quo were high. Women in particular lacked most legal protections, including owning property and making legal and financial decisions in their own names. In a uniquely insightful and subversive style, Austen's [novels](#) address these and many other social and political issues: primogeniture, entailment, and inheritance; royalty, wealth, poverty, and social class; adultery and illegitimacy; colonialism and slavery; and equal rights.

Jane and her sister, Cassandra, received a brief formal education at boarding schools. In Austen's time, the purpose of educating genteel young women was to raise their stock in the marriage market. A young woman was more likely to land a decent marriage proposal if she possessed accomplishments. Some young ladies were educated in girls' schools, others at home with a governess. But most would learn to play a musical instrument; to draw, embroider, and dance; and to speak a polite smattering of French, considered a sophisticated language. Superficial studies in geography and history might be useful, too, but only as a way of enlivening conversation.



Austen spent the last years of her life with her mother and sister in this house in Chawton, England.

In her novel *Emma*, published in 1815, a year and a half before her death, Austen describes Mrs. Goddard’s school as “a real, honest, old-fashioned boarding school, where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price, and where girls might be sent to be out of the way, and scramble themselves into a little education, without any danger of coming back prodigies.” At 17 or 18, or sometimes earlier, the daughters of upper-middle-class families were launched into society and the marriage market. For daughters of the aristocracy and some other privileged families, this included being presented to a member of the royal family at the Court of St. James’s in [London](#). For less well-connected young women, “coming out” would mean attending a private party or a local dance. Once “out,” a young woman would attend an array of social events: walks, balls, and tea parties, all with the ultimate goal of meeting an eligible gentleman willing to make a marriage proposal.

How to have a ball



A gown from the Duchess of Richmond's ball in 1815 is on display.

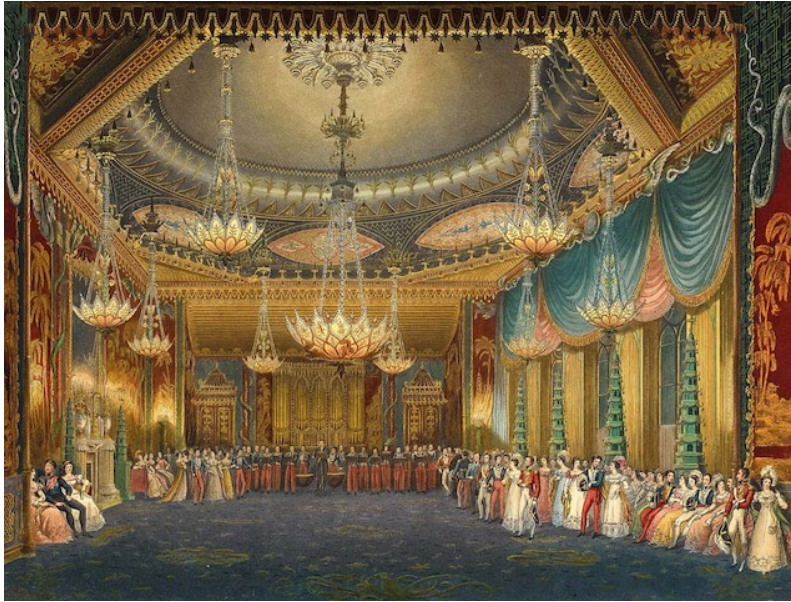
Fashion Museum Bath/Bridgeman/ACI

“To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love,” writes Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. In a society obsessed with reputation and social standing, young people had few opportunities to spend time together unchaperoned. Fancy-dress balls, with their ritualized intimacy between the sexes, were charged with possibility. A woman waited for a man to ask her to dance. If that didn’t happen, she faced the embarrassment of being a wallflower. The couples changed partners often, since sharing more than two dances with the same person was seen as inappropriate and might set tongues wagging. Many of the important plot turns in Austen’s novels center on interactions at balls.

Inheritance issues

Such a proposal could be a lifeline for some women and their families. The fate of many was marked from birth by an inexorable law of inheritance. When the male head of household died, almost all his possessions were typically passed to his eldest son, through entailment. If he had only daughters, legal conditions often came into play. A man’s assets would skip over the family’s women, inherited by the next male in the familial line, which could leave the deceased’s immediate family with no income. In *Pride and Prejudice* the Bennet family’s estate is subject to such an entailment. When Mr. Bennet dies, Longbourn would pass not to his wife or five daughters, but to Mr. Collins, a distant cousin.

Often, women’s only share of the family fortune was their marriage dowry. So for many women, marriage was the only way to achieve any material stability. Charlotte Lucas in *Pride and Prejudice* openly admits her plight in a difficult conversation with her friend Elizabeth Bennet when they discuss Mr. Collins’s proposal: “I ask only a comfortable home; and, considering Mr. Collins’s character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state.”



Invitation to the dance

A ball at the Royal Pavilion, Brighton, with ladies and gentlemen in their finest attire is shown in an 1827 color engraving by John Nash.

British Library/Bridgeman/ACI

Clinching the marriage deal among the gentry involved a transaction between the two families. The groom was expected to have the means to support his new wife, while the bride had to contribute the dowry put aside for her by her family.

Lack of funds rather than changes in affection ended many relationships. In Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)—the first of her novels published in her lifetime—Marianne Dashwood falls in love with a handsome gentleman, John Willoughby, and he with her. However, Marianne has only a modest dowry. Following the revelation of Willoughby's involvement in a scandal, he is disinherited by his wealthy aunt, and ruthlessly abandons Marianne to marry a wealthy heiress.

Wealthy relations



Edward Austen Knight makes the grand tour at Chawton House, Hampshire, in this painting. Bridgeman/ACI

One of Jane's older brothers, Edward Austen, climbed the social ladder unintentionally. When Edward was 12, Thomas Knight, wealthy landowner and member of Parliament, and his wife, Catherine, visited Stevenson during their honeymoon and called on their relatives, the Austens. The newlyweds asked them to let Edward accompany them on the rest of their journey. They were so impressed with the young man that four years later they asked to adopt him, since they had no children of their own. All agreed. But Edward never forgot his birth family. After George Austen's death, Edward cared for his mother and sisters, offering them a comfortable home at Chawton.

Proper professions

Securing a marriage proposal from the heir to a large estate would have been the dream of many young women in Austen's day. Such a match guaranteed economic and social position. Landing a member of the aristocracy, with a title, privileges, and possessions, was a bonus. *Pride and Prejudice's* Fitzwilliam Darcy is perhaps the best known of all the eligible gentlemen in Austen's novels. As the owner of an extensive Derbyshire family estate, his annual income is 10,000 pounds (equivalent to more than \$1 million today).

While being the firstborn son usually meant inheriting the family estate, younger brothers needed to find themselves a profession. Manual trades were unthinkable for the upper classes and the gentry. Trade, though potentially lucrative, was seen as vulgar. A man might well become rich through it, but he would never be considered an equal by the members of the nobility. The only respectable career options for those who wanted to maintain social standing were the clergy, the law, or the armed forces.



Chawton House

This Elizabethan mansion and adjoining grounds in Hampshire were owned by Edward Austen Knight, Jane's brother who was adopted in his youth by a wealthy relative.

Philip Enticknap/Alamy/ACI

Traditionally, few who went into the military made a fortune that could compare with that of upper-class firstborn sons. But during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) some did get rich, especially Navy officers who took a share in bounty looted from the French. In Austen's *Persuasion* her protagonist, Anne Elliot, accepts a marriage proposal from Frederick Wentworth, a low-ranking seaman. Anne's associates force her to break off the engagement. Eight years later, Wentworth returns from war as a captain with a large fortune and finally marries Anne.

Becoming a clergyman was another option for a second son. In Regency England Anglican clergy were held in high regard and moved freely between social classes. With the right connections, ideally a patron from the aristocracy's upper echelons, a clergyman could obtain a parish or chaplaincy along with a home and a secure, if modest, income.

A room of her own



A tiny table where Jane Austen covertly worked in her Alton home.

Christie's Images/Bridgeman/ACI

Austen's nephew and first biographer, James Edward Austen-Leigh, tells how his aunt wrote her novels in the living room, on a portable box that she placed on a small table. One story, perhaps apocryphal, is that Austen gave instructions for a creaky door in the house not to be oiled. The warning gave her time to hide her work in progress from approaching visitors and to pretend instead to be writing a letter. Austen wanted no one except those closest to her to know that she was writing novels. The four published during her lifetime indicated they were simply penned “By a Lady.” In a “biographical notice,” Austen’s brother Henry named her as their author when two additional novels of hers were published posthumously in 1817.

Yet some young women remained skeptical about ecclesiastical suitors. In Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (the third of Austen’s novels to be published in her lifetime, in 1814), Edmund Bertram, second son of a wealthy landowner, decides he will be ordained at 24 and run a parish on his father’s land. Edmund is in love with charismatic Mary Crawford, who is unimpressed: “So you are to be a clergyman, Mr. Bertram. This is rather a surprise to me,” she says. He replies, “Why should it surprise you? You must suppose me designed for some profession, and might perceive that I am neither a lawyer, nor a soldier, nor a sailor.” But Mary’s opinion is categorical: “Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing.”

Austen in Love

Given the transactional vision of marriage typical of the period, it is striking to some that in her novels and personal correspondence, Austen repeatedly defends marrying for love. “Oh, Lizzy! do anything rather than marry without affection,” Jane Bennet pleads with her sister Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*. In her own life, Austen espoused the same beliefs. She wrote to her niece Fanny: “Nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound without love— bound to one and preferring another; that is a punishment which you do not deserve.” In fact, several of Austen’s protagonists do reject marriage proposals from wealthy gentlemen even though they are being offered a life of luxury and comfort.



Accomplished young ladies

A group of upper-class girls receives a singing lesson. In the background, one girl paints while another embroiders in this 19th-century engraving.

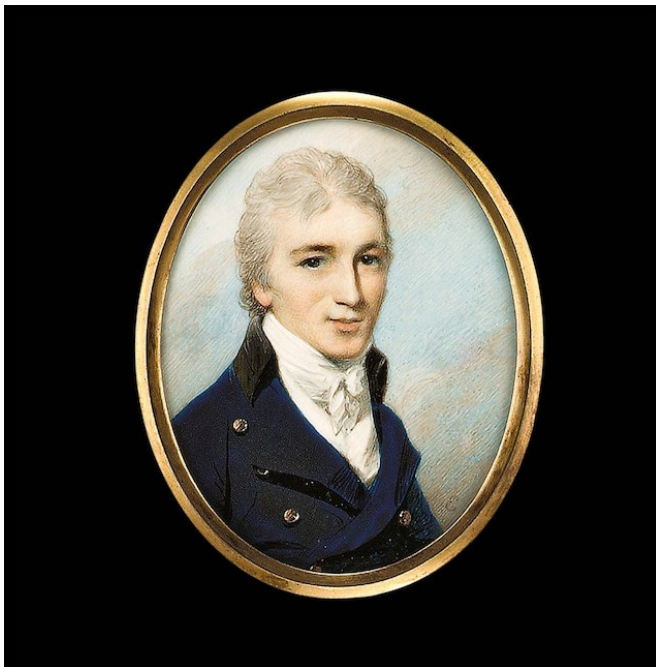
British Library/Bridgeman/ACI

Taking a look at Austen’s own life, it is tempting to see these instances as more than just romantic plot twists. She seems to have followed her own edict when she received a proposal of marriage from Harris Bigg-Wither, brother of a dear friend and heir to Manydown Manor. Although Austen initially accepted his proposal, she turned it down the next day. For an author often

mischaracterized as writing Regency romances, Austen always had a clear-eyed view of what marriage entailed and what she wanted.

Austen and her sister remained unwed, a situation that she herself recognized as unenviable. As she wrote with her usual irony and wit in a letter to her niece Fanny: “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor—which is one very strong argument in favor of Matrimony.” Professional opportunities for a single genteel woman were quite limited. Unless she had private means, through an inheritance or assistance from a family member, the most common field for such a woman to earn a living was either as a teacher in a girls’ school, or as a governess to gentry. This was Jane Fairfax’s situation in Austen’s *Emma*. A young woman of fine qualities but without money or connections, she is forced to accept a job as a governess, remain single, and move away from home.

Austen's affair



A portrait shows Thomas Lefroy, once rumored to be on the verge of being engaged to Jane Austen.

Derek Croucher/Alamy/ACI

Much ink has been spilled over Jane Austen's relationship with Thomas Lefroy, a young man she met in 1795 when he was visiting relatives living near the Austen family home in Steventon. Their idyll lasted just a few weeks; Lefroy returned to Ireland at the behest of his family, who seemed keen to nip any attachment to Austen right in the bud. Austen's account of their time together implies an attraction: In a letter to her sister and confidante, Cassandra, Austen wrote of her relationship with Lefroy: "You scold me so much in the nice long letter which I have this moment received from you, that I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together."

Emma also introduces the unfortunate Miss Bates, a mature single woman who cares for her elderly mother. They subsist on the meager interest from savings left by the late Mr. Bates. As a clergyman's daughter, Miss Bates belongs to the gentry, but with such little income, she depends on her neighbors to lead a decent life. Mr. Knightley, one of her main benefactors, describes Miss Bates's bleak situation in a pointed conversation with Emma: "She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more."

Transcending circumstance

Jane Austen was a woman and a writer at a time when both circumstances posed challenges. Along with her mother and sister Cassandra, she knew hardship and financial dependency after her father's death. They were forced to leave Steventon and were lacking a home of their own until brother Edward offered them Chawton Cottage.



Inspirational setting

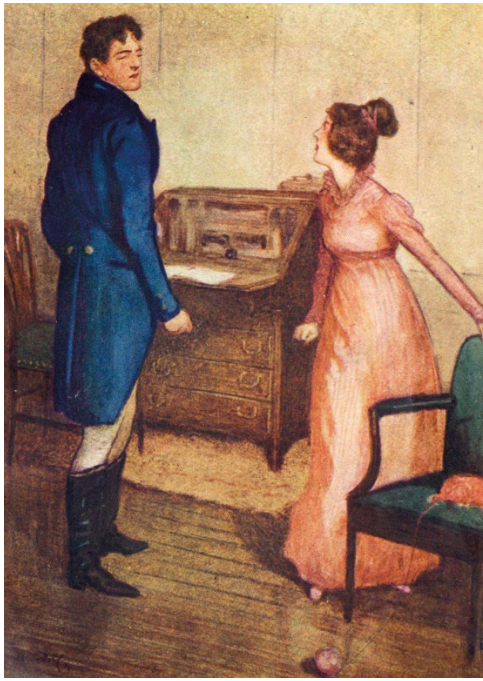
Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire was designed by 18th-century architect Robert Adam. It partly inspired Pemberley, the ancestral seat of Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*.

The National Trust Photo Library/Alamy/ACI

However, rather than railing overtly against the social order and values of her time, Austen used keen observation to point out their shortcomings. She turned her curious, searching gaze on the people and situations around her, leavening her criticisms and raising social concerns subtly, with warmth, insight, and above all humor. What interested her most were the individuals she shares with her readers, reflecting the range of personalities and attitudes found in her social circle. But her timeless observations of human character and the way of the world transcend any limitations of her place and time and have become classics.

Sir Walter Scott praised Austen's "exquisite touch, which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting, from the truth of the description and the sentiment." He went on to lament for all her readers: "What a pity such a gifted creature died so early."

"Pride and Prejudice": Dramatis Personae





British Library/Aurimages
