

1. The World that Jane Austen presents

Jane Austen wrote about the sector of society of which she had personal experience; that is the gentility - in rough modern terms, the middle and upper classes. The majority of England's population at the time were struggling to house, feed and cloth themselves. We rarely witness this level of existence in the six novels although we occasionally encounter servants interacting with their employers (*Sense and Sensibility*) and families in economic hardship (The Prices in *Mansfield Park*).

2. General Expectations on Young People –their activities and pastimes

The expectations of young gentlemen at the time were to take up their allotted place in society, according to their wealth and prospects. They were required to match or increase those prospects by marrying into a family of distinction. The marriage was required to produce legitimate male heirs since inherited assets generally passed down the generations through the male line. A career in the Services, the Law or the Church was acceptable but being in trade was not. Their pastimes were those of a nobleman: land-acquisition and enhancement, hunting, shooting, fishing, keeping horses and dogs for these pursuits, carriage-driving, belonging to exclusive clubs, dressing expensively, dancing, playing cards with noble friends, dining extravagantly, and being discreet (though not particularly moral) about sexual adventures.

We see examples of these pastimes in *Pride and Prejudice* when Mr Bingley and Darcy go shooting, and also when Darcy offers Elizabeth's uncle the joys of fishing. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby delights in the pastimes of breeding horses and dogs and sporting of every kind, while Frank Churchill in *Emma* loves music and dancing and living dangerously as far as discreet liaisons in love are concerned.

Young ladies , however, were expected to retain an untarnished reputation at all costs. (Once a young lady was suitably married, it was essential that sons later born to her represented a pure blood line of inheritance in their lawful father's name.) Any scandal could ruin a girl's reputation and also that of her female relations. A young lady might play parlour games (including light gambling), dance elegantly, read, sew, draw, paint, write, sing, play music, go for walks or carriage-rides or shopping for fashionable items to wear, call on friends and acquaintances, but she was **never** to find herself indoors unsupervised in the informal company of an unrelated young gentleman.

We witness young ladies pursuing these pastimes throughout the novels. The eponymous heroine attempts portrait painting in *Emma*, while Elizabeth is doubtful about her piano-performance in *Pride and Prejudice*. Catherine Morland relishes the reading of Gothic romances in *Northanger Abbey*. Group-walking and calling on friends or relations is frequently undertaken in *Persuasion*, and the delights of dancing are experienced to varying degrees within the other five novels.

3. Expectations on women in Jane Austen's own family life

on Cassandra and on Jane herself

Cassandra Elizabeth (1773-1845) was Jane Austen's only sister, and her trusted soul mate. Cassandra's fiancé, Thomas Fowle, a childhood sweetheart from her days at her father's family prep school, died in 1797. The twenty four year old Cassandra, broken-hearted, chose to consider herself a widow. She was a talented amateur artist and an expressive writer of letters to her sister when separated from her. Cassandra, like Jane, frequently visited her brothers' families, as well as other relatives and friends. She was often supporting a household on the arrival of a new baby, and both sisters lovingly played this expected "devoted aunt" role. Cassandra appears to have lived up to the expectations of an older sister and a dutiful daughter, as well as of a respectable spinster. She nursed both her mother and Jane tenderly during their times of illness, and outlived them both.

Jane (1775-1817) was the seventh child out of eight, and the second of two daughters born to the Rev. George Austen, 1731-1805 (the local Church of England clergyman), and his wife Cassandra. He had a fairly respectable income of about £600 a year. He supplemented this by tutoring prep school boys who came to board with the family, and by managing the farming of church land surrounding his rectory. Despite all his hard work, George Austen had money worries, and could not plan to give his daughters a generous dowry in the future.

In those days, a girl hoping to find a well-born young man as a husband was expected to have such a dowry to offer, bringing money and or land into her family-by-marriage. Young ladies had virtually no opportunities to develop their own successful careers as an alternative source of income. If they did not marry, they would remain dependent on their relations or have a grim life of servitude or even poor-house residence in front of them.

In 1783, little Jane and her older sister Cassandra went briefly to be taught by a relation, Mrs. Cawley, who lived first in Oxford and then moved to Southampton. After health problems, the girls were transferred to the Abbey boarding school in Reading between 1785 and 1787. This rather sparse education was all that was expected of a young lady at that time, provided she had proper manners and some feminine skills to demonstrate such as dancing, needlework and musical or artistic talent. Between them, the two Austen sisters were high achievers in these required skills, but they had other talents which exceeded expectations.

By the age of eight, Jane Austen was an avid reader of both the serious and the popular literature of the day. Her father had a library of at least 300 books and allowed his children to read whatever they wished. Young Jane was very familiar with eighteenth century novels, such as those of Fielding and Richardson, which were full of rowdy adventures. Jane enjoyed writing little stories containing drunken quarrels and violence which must have much amused her brothers and the boarding pupils in her home. However well she attuned her reading and writing to boys, it might well have shocked adults!

The two sisters were unusually lucky to receive an extended home education alongside their brothers and the lively boarders who were sons of noble families. The girls were able to study under their dear father's scholarly yet child-centred guidance, alongside privileged friends. The Austen's restricted income did not exclude them from making warm contacts among local upper-class families, since a clergyman like George had considerable status as a scholar parish priest, beloved by his congregation.

Jane started writing full length drafts of fiction in her later teenage years. She did this in private, but perhaps she was encouraged by the public example of other young women writers of her day. She praised three popular books in her famous 'Defence of the Novel' written within an early work of her own. (The work was revised and published many years later as *Northanger Abbey*.) The books she singled out for admiration were Frances Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla*, and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda*. This sort of reading was regarded by many as too frivolous for a high-minded young lady, but it was clear that Jane was not conforming to that sort of expectation! Her letters at this time chat wittily about dances and parties she attended in Hampshire, and also of visits to London, Bath and Southampton where she attended plays and other social events. She certainly does not sound like a high-minded, demure young lady in these letters; the tone of her writing can be exuberant, cutting or ironic.

Jane did not conduct her love-life according to the expectations placed upon genteel young ladies of her time. During 1795-6, in her twentieth year of age, Jane had an unsanctioned mutual flirtation with young Tom Lefroy (an

Irish relative of Jane Austen's close older friend, Anne Lefroy). Mrs. Lefroy, aware that Jane seemed saddened when Tom was suddenly whisked away from Hampshire for London, tried unsuccessfully to match Jane up with an intellectual clergyman the following year. Jane was not at all interested in this suitable young man! Five years later, she went on to refuse a very tempting offer of marriage from the heir of a fine house at Manydown, Hampshire, the younger brother of dear friends, on the grounds that she could not love him. To many people back then, this would be a most unexpected decision, given the pressure on young ladies to make a good match. Jane's refusal meant that when her father, who was nearly 70, abruptly decided to retire with his wife and unmarried daughters to Bath in 1800, the sisters had no choice but to continue living with their parents in a city where they found it hard to settle, and where Jane wrote very little for almost ten years.

In January 1805, Jane's much loved father died. His immediate family was now largely dependent on support from the Austen brothers and a small amount of money left to Cassandra, amounting to about £450 yearly. Later in 1805, a family friend, Martha Lloyd, came to live with Mrs. Austen, Cassandra, and Jane. The four women eventually took up residence in a rent-free cottage on the Chawton estate of Jane's brother Edward. As the adopted heir of rich landowners, Edward could provide them with this secure base for the rest of their lives. Jane was to spend quietly fulfilling years (1809-1817) revising her existing drafts of novels and producing new ones, and becoming, by her late thirties, a successful and respected writer who earned about £100 a year.

These later years of Jane's at last allowed her to move far beyond the restrictive expectations of a middle-aged spinster of limited means. Sadly, she had little time to enjoy her success, as she fell ill and died at the early age of 41. She coped with her last illness without complaint. Cassandra nursed her tenderly and, along with her family and wider networks, deeply mourned the loss of "such a sister, such a friend as can never have been surpassed."

Loving sisters are portrayed in two of Jane Austen's novels. Elinor and Marianne achieve a close relationship during the course of *Sense and Sensibility*, while Elizabeth and Jane Bennet are always close to one another in *Pride and Prejudice*.

4. Expectations on the men in Jane Austen's own family life

on Jane Austen's brothers (except for Jane's 2nd oldest brother, **George**, whose health prevented him from taking up any expected role in society, but who was well cared for)

Jane's eldest brother **James** (1765-1819) was a clever and serious-minded boy. He was enrolled at Oxford university at the age of 14, gained a degree at 18, and was ordained a clergyman 10 years later, eventually taking on the Steventon parish after his father's retirement. This was the sort of role often required of the eldest son of a clergyman and scholar. In addition, he considered himself the writer of the family. He had an outdoor passion as well; he loved hunting and enjoyed the expensive leisure pursuits so popular among the nobility, which his brother Edward provided for him. His daughter Anna (born 1793) was Jane Austen's beloved first niece and it appears that James provided a sense of stability for this two year old after his first wife's death. Anna eventually married Ben Lefroy, cousin to the Tom who had been considered far above Aunt Jane's marriage expectations 15 years earlier.

Jane Austen portrays a variety of clergymen among her novels. There is, for example, the odious social climber, Mr Collins, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the contemptible Mr Elton in *Emma* and the good-hearted Henry in *Northanger Abbey*.

Edward (1767-1852) was practical and business-like, and was approached for adoption at about the age of 12 by rich childless couple distantly related to the Austens, Thomas and Catherine Knight. Between 1784 and 1788, Edward was sent by them on the obligatory Grand Tour of continental Europe. He eventually inherited his adoptive parents' estates in Hampshire and Kent, managed them with conscientious efficiency, and, as expected, took the last name of "Knight". Edward's wife (a baronet's daughter) died at 35, after the birth of her eleventh child, at a time when her oldest child, Fanny, was fifteen. The devastated yet steadfast Edward appears to have restored the stability of his eldest daughter and of all his family. Fanny, a twin cousin to Anna, and also much beloved by her Aunt Jane, went on to make a socially-approved marriage to Sir Edward Knatchbull, twelve years later. Her eldest son, Edward's grandson, later became Lord Brabourne. So descendants of the Austen family, beyond most expectations, gained the status of nobility.

Landowners of various sorts are presented in all of the novels. Some examples are the stern Sir Thomas Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, the arrogant Sir Walter Eliot of Kellynch Hall in *Persuasion* and the generous Sir John Middleton of Barton Park in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Henry (1771-1850) was thought by some to be Jane Austen's favourite brother. He was passionately involved in whatever he did, but not always steady or wise. He entered Oxford University in 1788, then joined the army for seven years as a popular young officer, broke an engagement, subsequently married his widowed cousin, Eliza Cassandra de Feuillide, and

eventually ended up as a church minister, after a business bankruptcy which cost his brother Edward, and other investing relatives, a great deal of money. Despite his winning charm and his fervent support for the publication of his sister's writing, he could not really be said to fulfill the expectations of a gentleman at that time!

Men of the Armed Forces appear in Jane Austen's writing at various points. There is the exploitative Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, the dissolute Marine officer Price (Fanny's father) in *Mansfield Park* and the literary Captain Benwick in *Persuasion*.

Francis (1774-1865) and **Charles** (1779-1852) both entered Portsmouth's Royal Naval Academy at the age of 12, one of the expected career paths for a younger son of a socially-ambitious family. The training for each boy was harsh but neither cracked under the pressure. They fought in the British navy during the Napoleonic wars, and both exceeded the expectations on them by eventually rising to become admirals. Alongside their career successes, both brothers remained loyal husbands and fathers, and also contributed support and financial assistance whenever their widowed mother and unmarried sisters, based in Bath, were in need of them. Edward was in a much stronger position to do the same and eventually, in 1809, the three women took up his offer of permanent residence at Chawton, ten miles away from Steventon. The five brothers remained in touch with one another despite the variations in their income and success. Between them, the Austen boys reciprocated their mother's and their two sisters' deep devotion to them.

Career orientated men of the Navy appear in Jane Austen's works. There seem to be echoes of Francis and Charles within these portrayals. There is, for example, the very promising William Price in *Mansfield Park*, the initially underestimated Captain Wentworth and the weather-beaten Admiral Croft, both in *Persuasion*.