

# JANE AUSTEN (1775-1817)

 VISUAL LESSON  
 JANE AUSTEN
 


## LISTENING

**1**  **106** Complete Jane Austen's biography with the following words. Then listen and check.

Bath | brother | December | education | room | family | parody | period

### Who was Jane Austen?

Jane Austen was born on 16 **1** ..... 1775, in Steventon, Hampshire, England. She was the seventh child and second daughter of an Anglican parish rector who encouraged her to learn and to read. For a brief **2** ..... Jane and her sister Cassandra attended boarding schools but financial problems in the family interrupted their formal **3** ..... and they returned to live with their family. When she was 14 years old, Jane wrote *Love and Friendship*, a parody of romantic fiction written as a series of love letters. At the age of 15 she wrote *A History of England*, a short **4** ..... of historical writing with illustrations drawn by her sister, Cassandra.

Jane's life was uneventful. She did not marry but lived in an intellectually lively, affectionate **5** ..... , spending much of her time reading, writing, helping to run the family home, attending church services and socialising with local families. She travelled occasionally but not widely, visiting London and **6** ..... and her brothers' houses. In 1801 the family moved to Bath. In 1806, one year after her father died and left the family in financial difficulties, they moved to Southampton and in 1809 to her **7** ..... Edward's house in Chawton, a small village two kilometres from her birthplace where she wrote most of her works. It is in the sitting **8** ..... of the family home in Chawton that Jane wrote most of her greatest novels, including *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), which she had started to compose in the 1790s, *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), followed by *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey*, a parody of Gothic novels, which were published posthumously in 1818. She spent the last few weeks of her life in Winchester, where she died in 1817 at the age of 41.

### Austen and the tradition of the novel of manners

Austen's novels are considered among the best examples of the 'novel of manners'. This popular genre flourished in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and analysed the social conventions shared by the members of the **rising middle class** and of **the country gentry**. Set in the countryside, Austen's novels often depict the **interactions** among a selected number of wealthy characters who meet in situations like balls, dinners and tea parties.

These social events are only apparently frivolous: Austen treats social interactions as opportunities to put her characters under a magnifying lens through which she can observe their peculiarities, evolving personalities, qualities and faults. Austen's novels do not make explicit reference to political or historical events: the historical macrocosm never intrudes into Austen's ideal microcosm, preserving it as a magic stage where characters explore universal themes such as self-realisation, growth, prejudice, social conventions and class prejudices.



↑ Portrait of Jane Austen. 19<sup>th</sup>-century coloured engraving likely derived from a portrait by her sister Cassandra.



### BEYOND THE BOOKSHELF

Jane Austen's influence on pop culture is immense and multi-faceted, creating a phenomenon which is often known as the 'Jane Austen Industry', which includes cultural productions of all sorts, including dress-up festivals, Bollywood film adaptations, Hollywood snaps such as *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001), grotesque zombie-rewritings such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), and all sorts of merchandising and memorabilia including unmissable 'I ♥ Mr Darcy' mugs or bags.

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 JANE AUSTEN'S  
 HEROINES

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## The main themes

- **Love:** in Austen's novels, the representation of authentic and genuine love plays a crucial part. In a world often dominated by economic interests and parental and societal pressures, the love between Austen's couples is a bond that requires a journey of self-discovery and mutual respect.
- **Marriage:** almost all of Austen's novels explore the theme of marriage, both in its romantic aspects and narrowest financial and economic dimensions: marriage is often depicted as a means to promote social mobility and guarantee financial security. This is particularly evident in the case of women, for whom marrying a wealthy man is often the only way to obtain economic independence and a decent life. By focusing on the 'economic' side of marriage, Austen criticises the social conventions of her times, in which marriage was not a free choice among lovers but mainly a 'mercenary' activity dominated by material needs, greed, and personal interest.
- **Happy ending as a moral reward:** Austen's novels normally finish with a happy ending, which usually corresponds to the marriage between the two protagonists of the story. The happy ending comes as a moral reward after the series of obstacles (prejudices, social conventions and misunderstandings) that Austen's characters have to face. In this sense marriage comes both as a personal decision and as the culmination of the character's personal growth and maturity.
- **The role of women:** Austen's novels are often centred on the representation of strong, independent, and intelligent women who question the status quo with the help of their cognitive abilities and strive to build their own social and economic independence. By doing so, Austen criticises the limitations imposed upon women by a rigidly traditional and patriarchal society.
- **Money and property:** in a world dominated by economic interests, it is unsurprising that money – and especially the lack of it – plays a fundamental role in Austen's novels, where questions of inheritance and family pressures often limit free will. By promoting the importance of relationships based on 'authentic love', Austen criticises the excessive importance money had in people's lives during her time.
- **Individuals vs society:** Austen's characters are often tormented by the tension between their need to fulfil societal expectations, and individual pulsions and desires, which they should follow to be true to themselves. Austen suggests that the tension between personal desires and societal expectations can be solved not by neglecting our impulses but by regulating them with the help of our rational ability.
- **The search for independence and self-fulfilment:** Austen's characters often have to undergo a process of change and growth, which makes them aware of their prejudices, misconceptions, and flaws. Obtaining self-awareness is the essential step for Austen's characters to reach independence and self-fulfilment.

→ A scene from the film *Emma* directed by Autumn de Wilde (2020), starring Anya Taylor-Joy as Emma.

VIDEO  
JANE AUSTEN



VIDEO

PROSE



↑ Illustration by Henry Matthew Brock (1898) from *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen. 'Miss Price is all alone!'





## Narrative structure, language and style

- **Narrative technique:** in her novels Austen uses the technique of ‘free indirect speech’, which combines the reliability of the third-person omniscient narrator with the psychological insight of a first-person narrative. This narrative technique allows Austen to give readers direct access to the thoughts and words of her characters without quoting them directly or commenting obtrusively on them.
- **Dialogues and psychological analysis:** Austen often depicts her characters in the act of interacting dialogically with each other. The extremely vivid dialogues of Austen’s novels are an excellent tool she uses to analyse the psychology and the inner motivations of her characters and an instrument to make them look more realistic and credible. Austen’s attention to the psychological traits of her characters is not only one of the elements of modernity of her style, but also one of the features that make her a Romantic writer.
- **Irony:** one of the most remarkable traits of Austen’s novels is irony, which she uses to highlight social hypocrisy, to critique how women were conventionally represented in 18<sup>th</sup>-century sentimental and gothic novels and to unveil the contradictions of the world she chose to portray. Austen deploys a very subtle form of irony, which is not based on explicit comments, but is characterised by ironic twists in the plot or sparkling verbal exchanges.
- **Language:** Austen’s ability to use language is quite unique in the panorama of English literature. Her narratives are always measured, and the language she uses avoids all forms of embellishment or unnecessary decorations in favour of a clear, succinct, perfectly controlled expression.

### VOCABULARY Lab

**2** Make reference to the previous texts. Then match the adjectives (1-8) with the nouns (a-h). Write a letter in the boxes.

- |                |                          |              |
|----------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| 1. authentic   | <input type="checkbox"/> | a. women     |
| 2. economic    | <input type="checkbox"/> | b. society   |
| 3. parental    | <input type="checkbox"/> | c. security  |
| 4. financial   | <input type="checkbox"/> | d. pressures |
| 5. material    | <input type="checkbox"/> | e. needs     |
| 6. free        | <input type="checkbox"/> | f. love      |
| 7. independent | <input type="checkbox"/> | g. interests |
| 8. patriarchal | <input type="checkbox"/> | h. choice    |

### COMPREHENSION

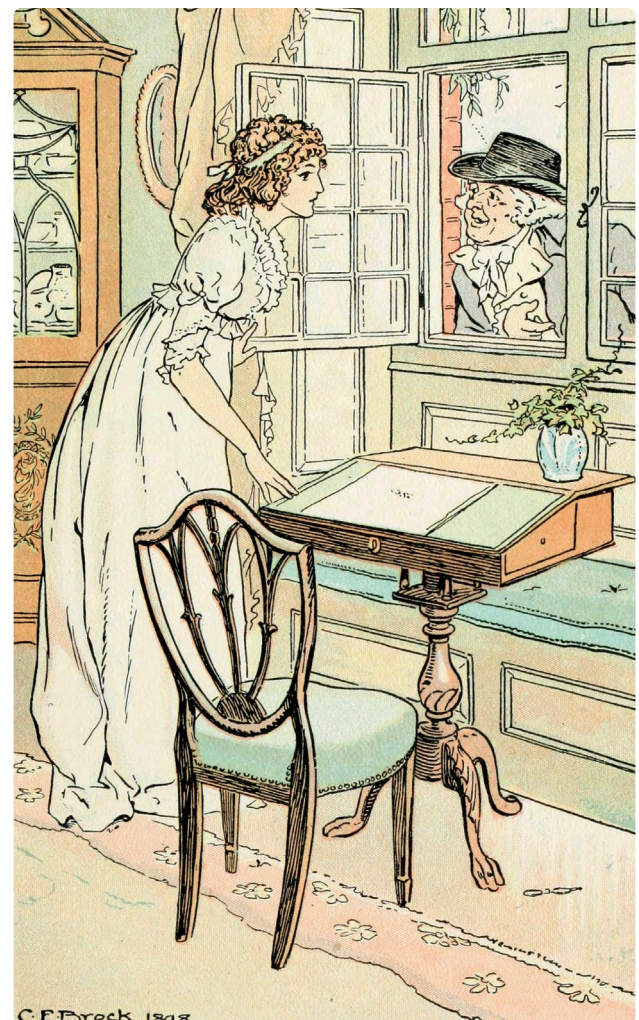
**3** Answer the following questions.

1. How did Jane Austen’s family background and early education influence her development as a writer?
2. What is the function of irony in Jane Austen’s novels?
3. How does Austen portray the economic and social dimensions of marriage? What social criticism does she express?
4. What is the role of ‘free indirect speech’ in Austen’s novels?
5. What kind of female characters does Austen portray in her novels?

### ORACY Lab PRESENTATION

**4** Use the following key concepts to prepare for an oral presentation on Jane Austen and her works.

- irony
- marriage
- social critique
- narrative technique
- independence



↑ Illustration for *Sense and Sensibility* by Charles Edmund Brock (1906). Published in *The novels and Letters of Jane Austen* volume I - Chapter 19.