A

Jane Austen

BIOGRAPHY

Jane Austen was born on December 16, 1775, in the tiny village of Steventon, where her father, the Reverend George Austen, served as the town rector. Her mother, Cassandra Leigh Austen, was herself the daughter of a rector, and Jane was the seventh of the couple's eight children. An older brother, George, suffered from epilepsy and did not live with the family, and the couple's third son, Edward, was adopted by wealthy, childless relatives who took a strong interest in the boy throughout his childhood. The remaining six children, however, lived with their parents in the plain, comfortable village rectory.

George Austen was a scholarly man, and the household included a large library, from which Jane read extensively throughout her life. Much of the children's education took place under their father's tutelage, with two of Jane's brothers, James and Henry, both of whom attended the University of Oxford, assisting their father with the younger children's periods of schooling at home. Jane and her sister Cassandra received several years of formal education, first at private schools in Oxford and Southampton and later at the Abbey School in Reading.

The Austens were a lively, close-knit family. Literature was a shared family interest, and evenings in the rectory were often spent discussing works by the leading novelists of the day. Among Jane's favorite authors were Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and Fanny Burney, and references to their work appear in both her letters and her own novels. Amateur theatricals were also a much-loved family pastime, and friends and neighbors were frequently recruited to participate in plays staged in the rectory barn. This interest, too, later found its way into Austen's work, most notably in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Indeed, family life itself is a frequent theme in Austen's work, and her heroines' relationships with parents and siblings are as fully developed as the romantic alliances on which their stories turn.

Jane's closest ties within her family were to her adored older sister, Cassandra. Three years apart in age and the only girls among the eight children, the two were close companions from childhood onward. Although Cassandra was engaged once, to a young man who died of yellow fever, and Jane entered into several brief romantic attachments, neither sister married, and the two lived together with their mother until Jane's death in 1817. Many of Austen's wittiest, most informal—and therefore most revealing—letters were written to Cassandra during their occasional separations, and it was Cassandra who most often had early glimpses of Jane's novels in progress. A less fortuitous result of the sisters' close bond, however, was Cassandra's decision following Jane's death to edit or destroy any of her sister's letters and papers that she feared might cast Jane in an unfavorable light. For Austen scholars, Cassandra's loyalty has been a source of much speculation and regret.

In 1801, George Austen retired as rector of Steventon and moved with his wife and two daughters to Bath, where he died in 1805. The family's

years in this city were difficult ones; in addition to Mr. Austen's death, Mrs. Austen suffered a serious illness, and Jane herself is thought to have begun a romance with a man who died soon afterward. Following her husband's death, Mrs. Austen moved with her daughters to Southampton. In 1809, Jane's brother Edward, who had inherited the estates of the wealthy relatives who had adopted him years before, offered his mother and sisters a permanent residence at one of his properties, a house in the village of Chawton. It was there that Jane Austen would live until her death, from what is believed to have been Addison's disease, at the age of forty-one.

Austen's writing life is less easily chronicled. Inspired by her own love of reading, Austen began writing at the age of twelve. Now termed "the Juvenilia" by Austen scholars, three volumes of her early writings, dated between 1787 and 1793, remain in existence. Her first mature work, an epistolary novella titled *Lady Susan*, was written in 1794 or 1795 and published in 1871. Around that same time, she also began work on a second novel of letters, "Elinor and Marianne" (completed between 1795 and 1797), which she would rewrite two years later as *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). Between the two versions, Austen wrote a third epistolary novel, "First Impressions," which would later become *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). In 1798 or 1799, following the initial rewriting of "Elinor and Marianne," Austen began work on "Susan," which would later be retitled and published as *Northanger Abbey* (1818), her satire on gothic novels. Because of the frequent lapses in time between each novel's earliest drafts, completion, and eventual publication, the publication dates of Austen's work are no indication of when the books were actually written.

In 1803, two years after the move to Bath, "Susan" was sold to the publishers Crosby and Company for ten pounds. The book was never published, however, and Austen bought it back for the same amount six years later. Austen also began *The Watsons* (1871, fragment) in 1803, a novel she put aside and did not resume after her father's death two years later. In the difficult years following her father's death, Austen appears to have abandoned her writing entirely, resuming it only after 1809, when the family was at last settled at Chawton, where she embarked on a period of tremendous productivity.

Portrait of Jane Austen (1870), from the memoir by J. E. Austen-Leigh (1798-1874), via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]

Austen devoted the years between 1809 and 1811 to *Sense and Sensibility*, and in 1811 the book became her first published work. That same year, she began work on *Mansfield Park*, which continued throughout the next two years. The following year, 1812, Austen began extensive revisions on "First Impressions," abandoning its epistolary form for that of a traditional novel. The book was published in 1813 as *Pride and Prejudice*. *Mansfield Park* appeared the following year, shortly after Austen began work on *Emma*, which was published in 1815. Over the next two years, Austen wrote *Persuasion* (1818) and began work on

Sanditon (1925, fragment), which remained unfinished at the time of her death on July 18, 1817, in Winchester, England. Both *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously in 1818.

ANALYSIS

In a letter written to her nephew several months before her death, Austen referred to her writing as "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush," a description of her work that conveys its essence with remarkable precision. Austen is not a writer whose books are characterized by sweeping dramatic action unfolding against a vivid historical backdrop; nor are her novels treatises on social ills or controversial contemporary issues. Austen wrote instead about the world she knew—a world of country villages, of polite middle-class society, of family life, of love and courtship—and her books offer a portrait of life as it was lived by a small segment of English society at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries.

Yet so great is her talent and her insight into the complexities of human nature that the seeming simplicity of her books belies the universality of their perceptions. In turning her writer's gaze on the world around her, Austen reveals deeper truths that apply to the world at large. Her portraits of social interaction, while specific to a particular and very carefully delineated place and time, are nevertheless the result of timeless human characteristics. If one looks beneath the details of social manners and mores that abound in Austen's novels, what emerges is their author's clear-eyed grasp of the intricacies of human behavior.

What is also readily apparent is that human behavior was a source of great amusement to Austen. Her novels are gentle satires, written with delicate irony and incisive wit. The famous opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice* capture her style at its best: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife." Courtship and marriage are the subject of all six of Austen's completed novels, and she treats the topic with a skillful balance of humor and seriousness. The elaborate social ritual of courtship and the amount of time and energy expended on it by the parties involved provide Austen with an ideal target for her satirical portraits. Dances, carriage rides, and country walks are the settings for the romances that unfold in her books, and the individual's infinite capacity for misconceptions and self-delusions provide the books' dramatic structure. Her heroes and heroines misjudge each other, misunderstand each other, and mistake charm for substance and reserve for lack of feeling with a determination that seems likely to undermine their chances for happiness—until at last they find their way through the emotional mazes they have built for themselves and emerge with the proper mate.

Yet while Austen is happy to amuse her readers with her characters' foibles and missteps, she brings an underlying empathy to her creations as well. Her heroines are never figures of fun—that role is left to the stories' supporting characters—but are instead intelligent, sensitive, amiable young women who are eminently likable despite the flaws they may exhibit. It is human nature in all its complexity that fascinates Austen, and she is capable of providing her novels with interesting, well-developed central characters who are believable precisely because they are flawed. Her amusement is not scorn but rather a tolerant awareness of the qualities, both good and bad, that constitute the human character. It is this awareness that lends Austen's work its relevance and contributes to her stature in the hierarchy of English literature.

Also central to the high critical regard in which she is held is Austen's extraordinarily eloquent and graceful literary style. Austen's use of language is as sure and as precise as her character development; indeed, the two are inseparable. Whether she is depicting the selfish, greedy Mrs. John Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, who says of a proposed yearly allowance for her widowed mother-in-law, "people always live forever when there is any annuity to be paid them," or characterizing Edmund Bertram's pursuit of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* with the observation, "She was of course only too good for him; but as nobody minds having what is too good for them, he was very steadily earnest in the pursuit of the blessing," Austen sketches her characters and relates their stories with the elegance and wit that are the unmistakable hallmarks of her style.

Austen's work offers ample proof that, in the hands of a gifted writer, stories of ordinary lives

filled with everyday events can transcend their outward simplicity and capture the intricacies of human nature. Austen's ironic portraits of the world she knew are both a revealing look at her own time and a perceptive examination of the workings of the human heart and mind.

NORTHANGER ABBEY

The plot and characterization used in *Northanger Abbey* obviously draw on many conventions of the gothic literature. Although a plain girl, Catherine Morland believes she is destined to become a heroine like those in her favorite gothic novels. She might, however, have spent her entire life in Fullerton, the small village in which she was born, had not Mrs. Allen, the wife of a wealthy neighbor, invited her to go to Bath. There a whole new world was opened to Catherine, who was delighted with the social life of the city. At Bath, she meets Isabella Thorpe, who is more worldly than Catherine and takes it upon herself to instruct Catherine in the ways of society. Isabella also introduces Catherine to her brother, John Thorpe. He and Catherine's brother, James Morland, are friends, and the four young people spend many enjoyable hours together.

Catherine meets Henry Tilney, a young clergyman, and his sister Eleanor, with whom she is anxious to become better acquainted. John thwarts her in this desire, and Isabella and James aide him in deceptions aimed at keeping her away from Henry and Eleanor. After Isabella and James are engaged, Isabella doubles her efforts to interest Catherine in her beloved brother. Although Catherine loves her friend dearly, she cannot extend this love to John, whom she knows in her heart to be an indolent, undesirable young man.

While James is at home arranging for an allowance so that he and Isabella can be married, Henry Tilney's brother, Captain Tilney, appears on the scene. He is as worldly as Isabella and, even more important to her, extremely wealthy. Catherine is a little disturbed by the manner in which Isabella conducts herself with Captain Tilney, but she is too loyal to her friend to suspect her of being unfaithful to James.

Shortly after Captain Tilney arrives in Bath, Catherine is invited by Eleanor Tilney and her father, General Tilney, to visit them at Northanger Abbey, their old country home. Catherine is delighted; she always wanted to visit a real abbey. She quickly writes for and receives a letter of permission from her parents. Henry arouses her imagination with stories of dark passageways and mysterious chests and closets.

When the party arrives at Northanger Abbey, Catherine is surprised and a little frightened to find that the Tilneys' descriptions had been so exact. When she hears that Mrs. Tilney died suddenly several years previously, Catherine begins to suspect that the general murdered her. At the first opportunity, she attempts to enter the dead woman's chambers. Henry finds her there and assures her that his mother died a natural death. Catherine is almost disappointed, for this news destroys many of her romantic imaginings about Northanger Abbey.

For more than a week after this event, Catherine worries because she receives no letter from Isabella. When a letter arrives from her brother, James, she learns the reason for Isabella's silence. James writes that Isabella is engaged to Captain Tilney. Catherine almost becomes ill when she reads the news, and Henry and Eleanor Tilney are also disturbed. They know that only greed and ambition drew Isabella from James to their wealthier brother, and they fear for his happiness. They believe, however, that the captain is more experienced with such women and will fare better than had James.

Shortly afterward, Catherine receives a letter from Isabella telling the story in an entirely different light. She pretends that she and James had just had a misunderstanding and begs Catherine to write to James in her behalf. Catherine is not taken in. She wastes no time in sympathy for her onetime friend and believes her brother fortunate to be rid of such a schemer.

A short time later, the general goes to London on business, and Eleanor and Catherine are alone at the abbey. Henry's clerical duties compel him to spend some time in his nearby parish. One night, soon after the general's departure, Eleanor goes to Catherine's room. In a state of great embarrassment and agitation, she tells Catherine that the general returned suddenly from London and ordered Catherine to leave the abbey early the next morning. Because she loves Catherine and does not want to hurt her, Eleanor gives no reason for the order. In great distress, Catherine departs and returns to

her home for the first time in many weeks. She and her family try to forget the insult to her, but they cannot help thinking of it constantly. Most of Catherine's thoughts are of Henry, whom she fears she might never see again.

Soon after her return home, Henry calls on her and explains why his father turned against Catherine. When the Tilney family first meet Catherine, John Thorpe tells the general that she is the daughter of a wealthy family and that the Allen money will also be settled on her. He brags because at the time he himself hopes to marry Catherine; when Catherine rebuffs him, and after his sister Isabella is unable to win James again, John spitefully tells the general that Catherine had deceived him. Although she never implied that she is wealthy, the general gives her no chance to defend herself.

After Henry tells his story, he asks Catherine to marry him. Her parents give their consent with the understanding that the young couple must first win over the general. Henry returns home to wait. Eleanor's marriage to a wealthy peer proves an unexpected aid to the lovers. The general is so pleased at having his daughter become a viscountess that he is persuaded to forgive Catherine. When he also learns that the Morland family, though not wealthy, could give Catherine three thousand pounds, he gladly gives his consent to the marriage. In less than a year after they meet and despite many hardships and trials, Catherine Morland marries Henry Tilney with every prospect of happiness and comfort for the rest of her life.

ANALYSIS OF NORTHANGER ABBEY

In all the history of the novel, perhaps no genre can claim more popularity than the gothic novel of the late eighteenth century. The gothic fad, however, was all but over when *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen's parody of the gothic novel, was published in 1818, a year after her death. Her delightful mockery had actually been written when such works were at their height of popularity, about 1797–1798. The novel had been sold to a publisher in 1803 but was published posthumously.

In her early twenties at the time of the composition, the young author lived in the quiet rectory where she was born in the Hampshire village of Steventon; her circumstances resembled those of the young heroine of her novel—even to including such amusements as poring over gothic novels. Persons who have not read Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which occupies so much of Catherine Morland's time and thoughts, will find other reasons to enjoy *Northanger Abbey*, but a knowledge of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or any other gothic novel will bring special rewards.

At one level, *Northanger Abbey* is an amusing parody of gothic novels, with their mysterious castles and abbeys, gloomy villains, incredibly accomplished heroines, sublime landscapes, and supernatural claptrap. Austen's satire is not, however, pointed only at such novels; the romantic sensibility of the gothic enthusiast is also a target. *Northanger Abbey* is a comic study of the ironic discrepancies between the prosaic world in which Catherine lives and the fantastic shapes that her imagination, fed by gothic novels, gives to that world. The author holds up the contrast between the heroine's real situation and the gothic world she fantasizes.

The prevailing irony begins with the first sentence: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy would have supposed her born to be a heroine." As she grows up, she develops neither the prodigious artistic and intellectual accomplishments nor the requisite beauty necessary for the role. She herself is merely pretty, but once her adventures get underway, she begins to assign stereotyped gothic roles to her new acquaintances. Detecting villainy in General Tilney's haughty demeanor merely because in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the evil Montoni is haughty, she overlooks the general's real defects of snobbery and materialism, traits that eventually prove far more threatening to her than his hauteur.

Since the central feature of the gothic novel is the sinister, dilapidated castle or abbey, Catherine's most cherished daydreams center on Northanger Abbey and its long, damp passages. In reality, nothing is damp except an ordinary drizzling rain, nor is anything narrow or ruined, the abbey having been thoroughly renovated for modern living. Try as she will, she cannot manufacture genuine gothic horrors. Instead of dark revelations of murder and madness in the Tilney family, she faces self-revelation, her recognition that she has