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Sep. 14 - Oct. 9, 2004 : Mainstage

"a truth universally acknowledged"

Jane Austen's life, when compared with those of other famous novelists, was relatively quiet. She lived simply, rarely traveled, never married. She preferred a life far from the tumult of the city and successfully banished fame from her door. She did nothing much, went nowhere special, knew no-one important. Yet her work is celebrated for its unsurpassed knowledge of human behavior—its motivations and its consequences, its common touches and its eccentricities. She wrote about a very small group of people in a very specific time and place,

The Story

Pride and Prejudice tells the story of the Bennet family, with five marriageable daughters, in the village of Longbourn, County Hertfordshire, England circa 1811. Mrs. Bennet is overjoyed when rich, handsome Mr. Bingley leases nearby Netherfield House, and positively beside herself when he seems to take a shine to eldest daughter Jane, "the pretty one." Mr. Bingley's friend, the even more wealthy and handsome Mr. Darcy, would make an excellent husband too, but Mrs. Bennet's second daughter, Elizabeth, is put off by Mr. Darcy's excessive pride, while he is prejudiced against her lack of pedigree. But first impressions are not always what they seem, and despite their mutual dislike, Darcy and Elizabeth find themselves mysteriously drawn to each other. *

Exploring Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice

devised by Alan Stanford
from a version by James Maxwell

yet the universality of her themes has made her one of the most beloved authors throughout the world.

The novel first developed in the early seventeenth century, with such works as Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) emerging from the tradition of the epic heroic romance. Among the earliest English novels are Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749). In these early years, the novel developed few formal rules. Literary purists considered history, poetry, and political writing to be "higher forms." The novel was "popular" and often "sensational," leading highbrows to look down their noses at books that earned acclaim.

For women, the novel was a double-edged sword. While it was easier for a woman to get her foot in the literary door with the unestablished novel, it was also necessary for her to be careful that her reputation not be smeared by its potential for scandal. Jane Austen was not the first woman novelist, but she was the first whose books remained popular long after her lifetime.

Although for nearly two centuries Jane Austen's books were much beloved by readers, they were largely ignored by the literary establishment. Some critics considered her settings provincial and her themes trivial. In the last twenty years or so, however, Jane Austen has finally been taken seriously as a subtle humorist and a keen observer of society and human relationships. *

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Look for characters and situations in the play that remind you of people and events in your family or circle of friends.

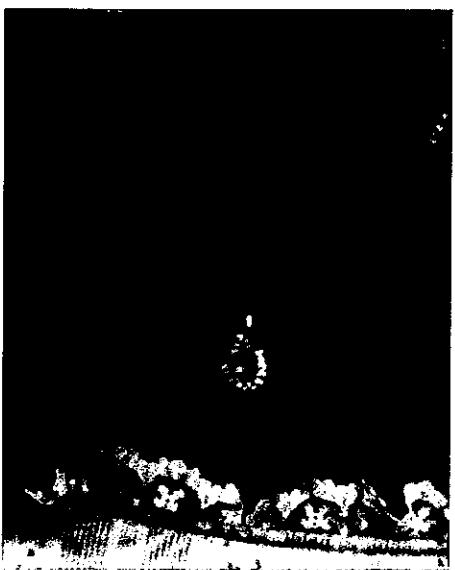
FOR DISCUSSION

- How do Darcy and Elizabeth change over the course of the play? What changes in attitude do their changes in behavior suggest?
- Why do you suppose Jane Austen's work has appealed so strongly to some readers but not others? Why have attitudes changed in recent years?

TO LEARN MORE

Check out these books:

- *The Friendly Jane Austen* by Natalie Tyler
- *The Jane Austen Book Club* by Karen Joy Fowler



Jane Austen was born December 16, 1775, in Steventon, County Hampshire, England. The daughter of a scholarly country clergyman and his accomplished wife, she had six brothers and one sister, Cassandra, three years older. Jane grew up in a small cottage where her father taught lessons to seminary students and her mother ran the family farm. The two sisters had three years of boarding school when Jane was ten; otherwise, they were educated at home. An avid reader, Jane began writing at age 13, stories and poems and even short books. One was entitled "The History of England from the reign of Henry the 4th to the death of Charles the 1st by a partial, prejudiced, & ignorant Historian." It begins thus:

HENRY the 4th ascended the throne of England much to his own satisfaction in the year 1399, after having prevailed on his cousin & predecessor Richard the 2d to resign it to him, & to retire for the rest of his Life to Pomfret Castle, where he happened to be murdered.

Eventually, the childhood works of Jane Austen were collected into three volumes entitled *Juvenilia*. Her first major novel, written at 20, was *Elinore and Marianne*. Two more followed over the next few years, *First Impressions* and *Susan*. Like her childhood works, these were written for the entertainment of family and friends. Jane often read her works to visitors without revealing the author, in order to get their honest opinion. Jane's father thought so highly of *First Impressions* that he offered it to a publisher who didn't bother to read it. Like all of Jane's mature novels, these first three books focus on small-town life and the rituals of romance and marriage.

Much of what we know about Jane comes from 100 letters to and from her older sister, Cassandra. Jane was a sociable girl who enjoyed parties, but for someone who wrote so much about love, romance seems to have been unimportant in her own life. In a letter to Cassandra dated January 9, 1799, Jane wrote about a ball:



Jane Austen.
Watercolor by her sister,
Cassandra.

Jane Austen a quiet life

There was one Gentleman, an officer of the Cheshire, a very good looking young Man, who I was told wanted very much to be introduced to me;—but as he did not want it quite enough to take much trouble in effecting it, We never could bring it about.... One of my gayest actions was sitting down two Dances in preference to having Lord Bolton's eldest son for my Partner, who danced too ill to be endured.

At one point Cassandra was engaged, but her fiancé died. Family legend suggests that Jane's one true love was a family friend who could not support her and left

to pursue other possibilities, but

there is no proof. There is also a suggestion of a brief summer romance, but like

Cassandra's fiancé, the young man died. One man did propose to Jane while she was visiting his family, and she accepted; but the next day she changed her mind and left town.

Cassandra seems to have burned all the letters from the time when these romances might have occurred, so to this day there is some mystery. In the end, neither sister ever married.

When Jane was 25 her father retired to Bath, a resort town that was a bit too active for Jane's taste, and her writing came near to a halt as a result. Four years later her father died. Jane, Cassandra, their mother, and a spinster in-law had about £210 yearly to live on—less than one quarter of what they had had previously. They moved around for four years, seeking affordable lodging. Then a brother who had been adopted by a wealthy family came into his inheritance, and he gave them a little house on one of his estates in Chawton near their childhood home. The return to a quiet, peace-

ful home and a measure of economic security allowed Jane to begin writing again.

Over the years Jane had revised *Elinore and Marianne*, and under the new title *Sense and Sensibility*—“by a Lady”—it was published at her own expense in 1811. Within two years she had earned £250 from the book. This success encouraged her to revise and publish *First Impressions*. As another book by that title had recently been published, she changed the name. *Pride and Prejudice*—“by the author of *Sense and Sensibility*”—was published in 1813 and became her most popular book during her lifetime. Despite her newfound success, Jane refused to compromise her privacy and never revealed herself as the author of her books except to her closest relatives. She wrote on small pages that looked like stationary, and whenever visitors called she hid her papers away. She preferred to live quietly and enjoy her family status as a much-beloved maiden aunt.

In the peaceful serenity of Chawton Jane wrote *Mansfield Park*, and it was published in 1814. *Emma* was published in 1815, and she wrote *Persuasion* in 1816. She was working on a seventh novel, *Sanditon*, when ill health forced her to cease. She died on July 18, 1817, age 41, probably of Addison's disease—adrenal insufficiency—or a lymphoma such as Hodgkin's disease.

Persuasion and *Northanger Abbey* (the revised *Susan*) were published shortly after her death. There was no name on the title pages, but a brief note at the back of the books revealed the author's name. She was buried in Winchester Cathedral, where her tombstone keeps her secret and makes no mention of her work as an author. ★

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Look for situations and people in Jane Austen's life which are reflected in the plot and characters of *Pride and Prejudice*.

FOR DISCUSSION

- How do the powerful forces of family and community affect the play's events?
- How does the character of Elizabeth represent the idea of change in society?
- What is irony? How does Austen use irony in her work? Think not only of dialogue and narrative but also structure.

TO LEARN MORE

Visit these websites:

- www.austen.com
- www.pemberley.com

Or check out these books:

- *Jane Austen: A Life* by Claire Tomalin
- *Jane Austen* by Carol Shields

Jane Austen's World

Class is one of the central themes of *Pride and Prejudice*. In Jane Austen's England, the top of the social ladder was the royal family, followed by the aristocracy: dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons, in descending order of rank. These are inherited titles, passed down from generation to generation along with the family estate. Lady Catherine de Bourgh in the play is the daughter of an earl, placing her among the top 125 members of England's social structure. Sir William Lucas is a knight, a title which is granted in honor of some achievement and which is not passed on to one's descendants. A gentleman is a man who owns property: land and/or investments that produce an income and thus save the gentleman from working for a living. Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley, and Mr. Bennet in the play are all gentlemen, but with vastly different fortunes. Some members of the gentry, such as Miss Bingley, look down upon those who must work for a living, even professionals such as attorneys. In this society, the most respectable professions are the military (Mr. Wickham and Colonel Fitzwilliam) and the clergy (Mr. Collins).

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- The five Bennet daughters, Miss Bingley, Charlotte, and Ann de Bourgh are all of marriageable age. Look for differences and/or similarities in their attitudes towards marriage, strategies to achieve their goals, and successes or failures.

FOR DISCUSSION

- In what ways is marriage different today than in 1811? How is it the same?
- In what ways are women's options today better than in 1811? In what ways are they more challenging?

TO LEARN MORE

- Look for ways that class affects relationships among the characters in the play. What happens when characters attempt to cross class lines or ignore class rules?

FOR DISCUSSION

- How does the idea of class affect American society today? What are the different effects of a class structure that is explicit, as in Jane Austen's England, and one which is hidden?

TO LEARN MORE

- Read this web article:
www.victorianweb.org/previctorian/austen/lynch/class.html

Or check out this book:

- *Class: A Guide through the American Status System* by Paul Fussell

The Military is a constant presence in the play. At this time, Britain was involved in the Napoleonic Wars with France. A regiment of the militia, which is akin to our National Guard, is stationed for the winter in Meryton. In 1811, however, a small village in rural Britain was quite isolated from battles fought across the channel in France. War news lacked the immediacy it has today.

Marriage is an important subject in *Pride and Prejudice*. In Jane Austen's time, a woman's social status was dependent upon her father or her husband. A “respectable” woman could not work for a living; therefore, if her father could not support her for life, she had no choice but to marry a man who could. Her eligibility for marriage was directly tied to the size of her dowry, the personal fortune that she brought with her as a bride. Mr. Bennet's estate is rather small (see “Entailment” below) and when split among his wife and five daughters, it will not be enough to support them. Therefore, it is vital that the girls find husbands.

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Look for ways that money, as opposed to class or family, unites or divides characters in the play.

TO LEARN MORE

Check out this book:

- *Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels*
by Deirdre Le Faye

Etiquette is extremely important to the characters in the play. In Jane Austen's world, there were rules of etiquette about who could be introduced to whom, who could speak first in a conversation, who offered his or her hand first for a handshake. Only family members called each other by first name only, a lady never went anywhere alone, and a gentleman never sat while a lady stood. Such rules may seem ridiculously excessive in our increasingly mannerless world, but for the people of Jane Austen's era, etiquette was the oil that kept their society, with its complex class structure, running smoothly and pleasantly.

WHILE WATCHING THE PLAY

- Watch the way characters behave and try to determine what rules of etiquette are being followed—or broken.

FOR DISCUSSION

- What rules of etiquette do we follow today? How has etiquette changed in your lifetime?

TO LEARN MORE

Check out this book:

- *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: the Facts of Daily Life in 19th-Century England* by Daniel Pool



Steventon, Jane Austen's childhood home.

