

JANE AUSTEN

LIFE (1775 - 1817)

Jane Austen was born in December 1775 in the small Hampshire village of Steventon, the of eight children. Austen led an uneventful life. When her father retired in 1801, the family moved to Bath. After his death in 1805 Jane moved back to Chawton in Hampshire. Apart from occasional visits to Bath, London and Lyme, she remained there until 1817. A few weeks before her death she moved to Winchester, where she died of adrenal insufficiency.

ACHIEVEMENT

Jane Austen was not an innovator, but she refined the novel. Her **novels** are centred on the lives of the genteel middle class, a world of parsons, soldiers and navy man, landed gentry and petty aristocrats.

The result is a penetrating study of the manners, morals, ambitions and weakness of an entire class. Austen's ideal marriage is a union of both hearts and mind; she distrusted the search for emotional intensity so typical of Romantic writers. She regarded extreme emotions and extreme subjectivity with suspicion. She attacked characters who have one ruling passion like money, social rank, personal elegance or infatuation. She often suggested that such characters are essentially egotistical. She believed in a balanced society where individual needs are tempered by a sense of social responsibility and respect for others.

Jane Austen completed six major novels:

- ***Sense and Sensibility*** portrays the contrast between two sisters: one, Elinor, endowed with "common sense", and the other, Marianne, with excessive romantic "sensitivity";
- ***Pride and Prejudice***, a description of life and manners of the upper middle-class in the English countryside;
- ***Mansfield Park***, the heroine is a Fanny Price, adopted, when a child by Sir Thomas Bertran. We see her grow from a shy child to a mature woman.
- ***Emma*** tells the story of a young woman, representative of the rich rural gentry;
- ***Northanger Abbey***, written to parody tales of romance and terror;
- ***Persuasion*** is Austen's last novel. The heroine is a young woman, Anne Elliot, who loves a naval officer but is persuaded to break off her engagement on the basis of economic difficulties.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Pride and Prejudice is regarded as Jane Austen's most brilliant social comedy. The story revolves around the question of marriage, and in particular the difficulties of finding a suitable husband for a young woman from a respectable family of modest means.

The love between William Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet is a far cry from the stereotype of Romantic love as a union of souls and hearts. Darcy and Elizabeth are also attracted by each other's intelligence. Theirs is a union of rational minds, and Austen implies that intelligence and wit can be as much a source of attraction as beauty, or sensibility.

PLOT. The novel deals with the lives of the Bennet family, living at Logbourne, a small village in Southern England. Mr and Mrs Bennet have five daughters; their great problem is that they have no dowry and it will be difficult for them to make good marriages. The novel opens with the news

of the arrival at Longbourne of a wealthy landowner, Mr **Bingley**, accompanied by his friend, Mr **Darcy**, the nephew of a rich noblewoman. Mr Bingley falls in love with Jane, the eldest Bennet daughter, but Mr Darcy persuades his friend that a marriage based on unequal positions would not be advisable. So Mr Bingley leaves Longbourne. **Elizabeth**, the second of the five sisters, charming, intelligent and witty, received a proposal of marriage from Mr **Collins**, her pompous and shallow cousin, whom she refuses. Also Mr Darcy admires Elizabeth's intelligence and beauty and is attracted by her, though he considers the Bennet family inferior in rank and education. But Elizabeth, on her side, is prejudiced against him and her negative feelings are confirmed by an account of Darcy's character she receives from a young officer, **George Wickham**. Mr Darcy makes a proposal of marriage to Elizabeth, but she rejects him and tells him what she has learned about him from Wickham. **Darcy** withdraws, but writes a letter denouncing Wickham as an impostor. This is proved true when Wickham elopes with Lydia, Elizabeth's younger sister, causing a scandal in the village. Mr Darcy however overcoming his grudge against Wickham and moved only by his persisting love for Elizabeth, gives him a large sum of money to convince him to marry Lydia. In the meantime Mr **Bingley** returns and meets **Jane** again, after which they get married. Elizabeth gradually changes her judgment and feelings. She had an encounter with Mr Darcy, who has now overcome his **pride** as she has overcome her **prejudice**; he renews his proposal of marriage, which now she is happy to accept.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

The novel portrays the contrast between two sisters, one, **Elinor**, endowed with "common sense", and the other, **Marianne**, with excessive romantic "sensitivity". Elinor falls in love with **Edward** but he is secretly engaged to a woman by a bond that he has contracted in his youth. Elinor knows this bond and she can only suffer. Instead Marianne falls in love with a dissolute young man, **Willoughby**, who doesn't hesitate to make everyone believe that there's an engagement, but then he leaves Marianne to marry a rich woman. When Marianne learns that Willoughby has deluded herself, she became seriously ill. The disease makes her realize how silly she was. Meanwhile Edward's engagement ends, so Elinor could marry him. Marianne gets married with Colonel Brandon, who has always loved her despite he wasn't paid at the beginning.