

# MASTERPIECE

## Jane Austen: Biography

While the literary art of Jane Austen is remarkable, the facts of her biography, at first glance, are not. The contrast has long intrigued Austen readers and scholars, and interest in her life is today almost as keen as interest in her works. Sources of information about her life dating back to her own time, when Austen's first four novels were published anonymously, still exist, including some of her letters (those her sister, Cassandra, did not destroy after Jane's death) and *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, written by her nephew J. E. Austen-Leigh in 1869. These sources reveal that Austen did lead the quiet life of an unmarried clergyman's daughter. She found early encouragement for her art within her family circle, and a starting point for her novels in her personal and family history.



*Engraving of Jane Austen, 1870, based on a sketch by Cassandra Austen.*

Born in 1775 to George and Cassandra Austen in the English village of Steventon, Jane Austen grew up in a highly literate family. Austen's father was an Oxford-educated clergyman, and her mother was a humorous, aristocratic woman. Of Jane's six brothers, two were also educated at Oxford and two became admirals in the Royal Navy. (Her older sister, Cassandra, never married.) Educated only briefly outside of her home, Austen read freely in her father's library of 500 books, which left her better educated than most young girls of the time. While her family never anticipated that she would be a published writer (not considered an appropriate profession for a young lady of her background), within the walls of their household she was encouraged to write. In this lively, intellectual atmosphere the 15-year-old Austen began writing her own novels, and by age 23 she had completed the original versions of *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*.


In 1801, the family moved to Bath when George Austen retired. When Jane received a proposal in 1802 from the wealthy brother of a close friend, for whom she felt no affection, she initially accepted him, only to turn him down the next day. This was a painful decision for her, as she understood deeply that marriage was the sole option women had for social mobility. She further understood the vulnerability of single women without family estates, who depended on wealthy relatives for a home. This subject is at the heart of *Sense and Sensibility*.

After Austen's father died in 1805, Jane, her mother, and Cassandra lived in a small house, provided by her brother Edward, in the village of Chawton. Encouraged by the success of *Sense and Sensibility* (published anonymously in 1811), Austen went on to publish three more novels: *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), and *Emma* (1815). Two additional novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, were published posthumously in December 1817. Her health began to fail in 1816 and on July 18, 1817, Jane Austen died at the age of 41, possibly from Addison's disease.

Austen never wrote a memoir, sat for an interview, or recorded whether she had herself felt the joys and disappointments of love. The biographical facts may never adequately explain the quick wit, sharp insight, and deep emotional intelligence she brought to her novels. Her works continue to transcend mere facts and to appeal to our hearts and minds.

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