

## Reader's Guide to *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

\* Brought to you by Penguin Putnam Inc

### INTRODUCTION

*Pride and Prejudice* has always been, since its publication in 1813, Austen's most popular novel. The story of a sparkling, irrepressible heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, the behavior of whose family leaves much to be desired, and Mr. Darcy, a very rich and seemingly rude young man who initially finds Elizabeth "tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me," is, in the words of the Penguin Classics Edition editor Tony Tanner, a novel about how a man changes his manners and a woman changes her mind. Through the ages, its chief delights for readers have been its flawed but charming heroine ("I [Elizabeth] as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print," Austen herself wrote to her sister, Cassandra); its humorous treatment of a serious subject; brilliant and witty dialogue laced with irony; a cast of humorous minor characters; and Austen's nearly magical development of a complex but believable love relationship between two complex people.

Critics have pointed to many ways in which *Pride and Prejudice* represents Austen's development and greater mastery of technique and artistry over *Sense and Sensibility*; perhaps the chief being that the conflict of the story is of the central characters' own making; and that a lively narrator more often appears to present material and to offer comment.

### ABOUT JANE AUSTEN

Jane Austen, seventh of the eight children of Reverend George and Cassandra Leigh Austen, was born on December 16, 1775, in the small village of Steventon in Hampshire, England. Her childhood was happy: her home was full of books and many friends and her parents encouraged both their children's intellectual interests and their passion for producing and performing in amateur theatricals. Austen's closest relationship, one that would endure throughout her life, was with her beloved only sister, Cassandra.

From about the time she was twelve years old, Austen began writing spirited parodies of the popular Gothic and sentimental fiction of the day for the amusement of her family. Chock-full of stock characters, vapid and virtuous heroines, and improbable coincidences, these early works reveal in nascent form many of her literary gifts: particularly her ironic sensibility, wit, and gift for comedy. Attempts at more sustained, serious works began around 1794 with a novel in letters – a popular form at the time – called *Lady Susan*, and in the years immediately following with two more epistolary novels – one called *Elinor and Marianne*, the other *First Impressions* – that would evolve into *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. *Lady Susan*, later revised and entitled *Northanger Abbey*, also was begun in that period.

From 1799 to 1809, little is known of Austen's life or literary endeavors, other than that upon her father's retirement she moved unhappily from her beloved home in Steventon to Bath; that he died a few years thereafter and she moved to Southampton; and that she began, but did not

complete, a novel called *The Watsons*. A move back to the country in 1808 – to a cottage on one of her brother's properties in Chawton – seems to have revived her interest in writing.

Her revised version of *Elinor and Marianne* – *Sense and Sensibility* – was published, like all the work that appeared in print in her lifetime, anonymously, in 1811; and between the time *Pride and Prejudice* was accepted for publication and the time it actually appeared, she wrote *Mansfield Park*. *Emma* appeared in 1816 and was reviewed favorably by the most popular novelist of the day, Sir Walter Scott, who said:

The author's knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant, and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.

Scott also insightfully pointed out *Emma*'s significance in representing the emergence of a new kind of novel, one concerned with the texture of ordinary life.

Though all her novels were concerned with courtship, love, and marriage, Austen never married. There is some evidence that she had several flirtations with eligible men in her early twenties, and speculation that in 1802 she agreed to marry the heir of a Hampshire family but then changed her mind. Austen rigorously guarded her privacy, and after her death, her family censored and destroyed many of her letters. Little is known of her personal experience or her favorite subjects. However, Austen's reputation as a "dowdy bluestocking," as literary critic Ronald Blythe points out, is far from accurate: "she loved balls, cards, wine, music, country walks, conversation, children, and bad as well as excellent novels."

In 1816, as she worked to complete her novel *Persuasion*, Austen's health began to fail. She continued to work, preparing *Northanger Abbey* for publication, and began a lighthearted, satirical work called "*Sanditon*," which she never finished. She died at the age of forty-two on July 18, 1817, in the arms of her beloved sister, Cassandra, of what historians now believe to have been Addison's disease.

The identity of "A Lady" who wrote the popular novels was known in her lifetime only to her family and a few elite readers, among them the Prince Regent, who invited Austen to visit his library and "permitted" her to dedicate *Emma* to him (unaware, no doubt, that she loathed him). But Austen deliberately avoided literary circles; in Ronald Blythe's words, "literature, not the literary life, was always her intention." It was not until the December following her death, when *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* were published, that "a biographical notice of the author" by Austen's brother Henry appeared in the books, revealing to the reading public for the first time the name of Jane Austen.

### Three or Four Families in a Country Village: An Appreciation of Jane Austen

It is now almost exactly two centuries since the first two of Jane Austen's six completed novels – *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* – were published, and for much of that time

writers and critics have passionately disagreed about the true caliber of her work. Austen's books received a few respectful reviews and lively attention from the reading public during her lifetime, but it wasn't until nearly thirty years after her death that some critics began to recognize her enduring artistic accomplishment – and others to debate it.

In 1843, the historian Thomas Macaulay called Austen the writer to "have approached nearest to the manner of the great master" Shakespeare; Charlotte Brontë felt, on the contrary, that "the Passions are perfectly unknown to her. ...Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete, and rather insensible (not senseless) woman." Anthony Trollope made up his mind as a young man that "Pride and Prejudice was the best novel in the language," while Mark Twain claimed to feel an "animal repugnance" for Austen's writing.

Austen herself would probably not have disagreed with many of her detractors' objections. She acknowledged that her themes and concerns were limited; she described them as "human nature in the midland counties." "Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on," she wrote in a letter to her niece; and in another, now famous letter to her brother Edward, she described her art as "the little bit (two inches wide) of ivory on which I work with so fine a brush, as to produce little effect, after much labour."

It is true that great historical events and political concerns appear only obliquely, if at all, in the background of Austen's stories; that she deals with the spiritual condition of the human soul only insofar as it manifests itself in her characters' manners and taste in spouses; that the intellectual issues of her day appear in her novels primarily as a vehicle for revealing character and spoofing fashion. Even Austen's great early champion, the critic G. H. Lewes, had to admit the truth of Charlotte Brontë's objection that Austen's style lacked poetry, and that her "exquisite" work would appeal only to readers who didn't require "strong lights and shadows." But in spite of these limitations, the particular genius and lasting appeal of Austen's writing has only become clearer and more certain as the decades pass and literary fashions come and go.

What is Austen's particular genius? And what might account for the renaissance of popular interest in her work today – one reflected in the recently acclaimed television and feature film productions of *Sense and Sensibility* (with an Oscar-winning screenplay by Emma Thompson), *Pride and Prejudice* (an A&E miniseries), the art house hit *Persuasion*, and Miramax's release of *Emma*, starring Gwyneth Paltrow, as well as the *Emma*-inspired *Clueless*.

"Of all great writers," Virginia Woolf said, "she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness." But perhaps Austen herself gave us a clue to the standards for greatness she set herself, and a way to judge her achievement, when in *Northanger Abbey* she has a character say: "'Oh! it is only a novel!' or, in short, only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusion of wit and humour are to be conveyed to the world in the best chosen language."

Austen's delightful wit is certainly one of the great pleasures of her work. As to "the best chosen language," while her writing conveys none of the lyricism of the Romantics (like Brontë) who would succeed her, it is full of intelligence and precisely crafted to convey its often subtle meaning. But Austen's strongest suit is her thorough knowledge and happy delineation of human

nature. We can still, despite the vast differences between her society and our own, recognize ourselves in the ways her characters think and behave. We all know people as cleverly manipulative and outwardly affectionate as Lucy Steele or Miss Bingley; as self-involved as Fanny Dashwood or Lady Catherine de Bourgh; and as charming but as lacking in scruples as John Willoughby or Colonel Wickham. We are in turns impulsive and hyper-responsible like Marianne and Elinor Dashwood; conceal ourselves with arrogance like Mr. Darcy; assume we understand more than we do like Elizabeth Bennet; and revel in gossip, like Mrs. Jennings. And while the great events and philosophical movements of history play themselves out around us, it is our own nature and actions, and the nature and actions of the people around us, that most influence our lives.

In her own day, Austen's work signified a break with the Gothic and sentimental novels that had long been fashionable, in which heroines were always virtuous, romance was always sentimentalized, and unlikely but convenient coincidences and acts of God always occurred to bring about the dramatic climax. Instead Austen represented the ordinary world of men and women as it – sometimes mundanely – was, a place where love and romance were constrained by economics and human imperfection; where women had distinct and often sparkling personalities; where characters were never simply good or evil but more complicated amalgams, reflecting both their own moral nature and the virtues and failings of the families and society that shaped them.

In these ways, Austen seems very much in tune with today's sensibilities. We love her strong, unpretentious heroines ("Pictures of perfection as you know make me sick & wicked," Austen said of them), who think for themselves and say what they mean when appropriate and don't take themselves too seriously. They are not, in today's parlance, victims. We are as interested as ever in Austen's favorite subjects of love and marriage, while also identifying with her steadfast refusal to romanticize romance; with her acknowledgment that money, class, and what other people think matter in the real world; that marriage does not result in a happy ending for everyone; and that it is dangerous to let passion blind us to reality. Living amidst the cultural fallout from the self-absorbed, sensibility-prone 1960s, we appreciate Austen's emphasis on reason, moderation, fidelity, and consideration for others.

Austen wrote her books at the dawn of the nineteenth century, when vast social changes were already encroaching on the way of life she so loved and rendered with such exquisite artistry. We read her books today on the cusp of a new century, with an unfathomable world creeping up on us, too – one globally interconnected, technologically complex, economically uncertain. Perhaps we find on Austen's rural estates and in her charming, insular society the same peace and pleasure she found there; and an analogue for the simpler, more circumscribed world of our own childhoods, itself passing quickly away into history.

So Quickly Was That Way of Life to Vanish:  
The World of Jane Austen

by Tony Tanner

Adapted from his Introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *Mansfield Park*

The time in which Jane Austen wrote her novels was a period of great stability just about to give way to a time of unimagined changes. At that time most of England's population (some thirteen million) were involved in rural and agricultural work: yet within another twenty years, the majority of Englishmen became urban dwellers involved with industry, and the great railway age had begun. Throughout the early years of the century the cities were growing at a great rate; the network of canals was completed, the main roads were being remade. Regency London, in particular, boomed and became, among other things, a great center of fashion. On the other hand, England in the first decade of the nineteenth century was still predominantly a land of country towns and villages, a land of rural routines which were scarcely touched by the seven campaigns of the Peninsular War against Napoleon.

But if Austen's age was still predominantly one of rural quiet, it was also the age of the French Revolution, the War of American Independence, the start of the Industrial Revolution, and the first generation of the Romantic poets; and Jane Austen was certainly not unaware of what was going on in the world around her. She had two brothers in the Royal Navy and a cousin whose husband was guillotined in the Terror. And although her favorite prose writer was Dr. Samuel Johnson, she clearly knew the works of writers like Goethe, Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Southey, Godwin, and other, very definitely nineteenth-century, authors.

If Jane Austen seems to have lived a life of placid rural seclusion in north Hampshire, she was at the same time very aware of a whole range of new energies and impulses, new ideas and powers, which were changing or about to change England – and indeed the whole western world – with a violence, a suddenness, and a heedlessness, which would soon make Jane Austen's world seem as remote as the Elizabethan Age. It is well to remember that in the early years of the century, when Thomas Arnold saw his first train tearing through the Rugby countryside, he said: "Feudality is gone forever." So close was it possible then to feel to the immemorial, static feudal way of life; so quickly was that way of life to vanish as the modern world labored to be born.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Charlotte Brontë did not appreciate *Pride and Prejudice*. She felt that Jane Austen didn't write about her characters' hearts. Do you think Brontë's criticism is accurate? Is Austen's treatment of her characters' feelings superficial? Do they feel and/or express deep emotion?
- 2) An earlier version of *Pride and Prejudice* was entitled "First Impressions." What role do first impressions play in the story? In which cases do first impressions turn out to be inaccurate, in which cases correct?
- 3) After Jane becomes engaged to Bingley, she says she wishes Elizabeth could be as happy as she is. Elizabeth replies, "If you were to give me forty such men, I never could be so happy as you. Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I never can have your happiness." Do you think Elizabeth's statement is true? Is it better to be good, to think the best of people, and be happy? Or is it better to see the world accurately, and feel less happiness?
- 4) Mr. Bennet's honesty and wry humor make him one of the most appealing characters in the book. Yet, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that he has failed as a father. In what ways does

Mr. Bennet let his children down? How does his action, or inaction, affect the behavior of his daughters? His wife? The course of the story?

5) Charlotte doesn't marry Mr. Collins for love. Why does she marry him? Are her reasons valid? Are they fair to Mr. Collins? Do you think marrying for similar reasons is appropriate today?

6) Both Elizabeth and Darcy undergo transformations over the course of the book. How does each change and how is the transformation brought about? Could Elizabeth's transformation have happened without Darcy's? Or vice versa?

7) Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh are famously comic characters. What makes them so funny? How does Elizabeth's perception of them affect your trust in Elizabeth's views of other people in the book, particularly of Wickham and Darcy?

8) For most of the book, pride prevents Darcy from having what he most desires. Why is he so proud? How is his pride displayed? Is Elizabeth proud? Which characters are not proud? Are they better off?

9) Editor Tony Tanner points out in the Notes to the Penguin Classics Edition that Austen did not mention topical events nor use precise descriptions of actual places in *Pride and Prejudice*, so that the larger historical events of the time did not detract attention from the private drama of her characters. "This perhaps contributes to the element of timelessness in the novel," he concludes, "even though it unmistakably reflects a certain kind of society at a certain historical moment." In what ways are the themes and concerns of *Pride and Prejudice* timeless? In what ways are they particular to the times in which Austen wrote the book?

## MORE PENGUIN CLASSICS

### *Sense and Sensibility*

Edited with an Introduction by Ros Ballaster

0-14-043425-9

In this, the first of her major novels, Austen depicts with subtle precision two strikingly different sisters and their search for husband, power, and social position.

Available on audiocassette from Penguin Audiobooks: 0-14-086245-5.

### *Northanger Abbey*

Edited with an Introduction by Marilyn Butler

0-14-043413-5

This lighthearted romance, generally agreed to be Austen's earliest major novel, though it was not published until after her death, is also a high-spirited burlesque of the sentimental and Gothic novels of her day. When the charmingly imperfect heroine, Catherine Morland, visits Northanger Abbey, she meets all the trappings of Gothic horror, and imagines the worst. Fortunately, she has at hand her own fundamental good sense and irresistible but unsentimental hero, Henry Tilney.

Real disaster does eventually strike, but doesn't spoil for too long the happy atmosphere of this delightful novel.

#### Mansfield Park

Edited with an Introduction by Tony Tanner

0-14-043016-4

More varied in scene and conceived on a bigger scale than Austen's earlier books, *Mansfield Park* (1814) can be seen as an image of quiet resistance at the start of what was to be the most convulsive century of change in English history. In telling the story of Fanny Price, the quiet and sensitive daughter of a lower-middle-class Portsmouth family who is brought up in – and after much suffering eventually becomes mistress of – elegant *Mansfield Park*, Austen draws on her usual cool irony and psychological insight while also portraying a less immediately winning heroine in a more complex light.

#### Emma

Edited with an Introduction by Ronald Blythe

0-14-043010-5

Many writers and critics consider *Emma* (1816), the last of Austen's novels published in her lifetime, the climax of her genius. Dominating the novel is the character of Emma Woodhouse – vital, interesting, complex, and predisposed to playing power games with other people's emotions. Austen called her a heroine "no one but myself would like," but she endures as one of Austen's immortal creations. Charting how Emma's disastrous foray as a matchmaker precipitates a crisis in the small provincial world of Highbury, and in her own heart, this novel of self-deceit and self-discovery sparkles with intelligence, wit, and irony.

Available on audiocassette from Penguin Audiobooks: 0-14-086106-8

#### Persuasion

Edited with an Introduction by D. W. Harding

0-14-043005-9

Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth had met and separated years before. Their reunion forces a recognition of the false values that drove them apart. The characters who embody those values are the subjects of some of the most withering satire that Austen ever wrote. Like its predecessors, *Persuasion* (published after her death in 1818) is a tale of love and marriage, told with Austen's distinctive irony and insight. But the heroine – like the author – is more mature; the tone of the writing more somber.

Also included in this edition is the pioneering biography of Austen written fifty years after her death by her nephew, J. E. Austen-Leigh, which outlines the essential facts of Austen's life while also reflecting the Victorian era's limited comprehension of her achievements.

Available on audiocassette from Penguin Audiobooks: 0-14-086058-4

Lady Susan/The Watsons/Sanditon  
Edited with an Introduction by Margaret Drabble  
0-14-043102-0

These three works – one novel unpublished in her lifetime and two unfinished fragments – reveal Austen's development as a great artist. Lady Susan is a sparkling melodrama, written in epistolary form, featuring a beautiful, intelligent, and wicked heroine. The Watsons, probably written when Austen resided unhappily in Bath and abandoned after her father's death, is a tantalizing fragment centering on the marital prospects of the Watson sisters in a small provincial town. Sanditon, Austen's last fiction, reflects her growing concern with the new speculative consumer society and foreshadows the great social upheavals of the Industrial Revolution.

The Juvenilia of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë  
Edited by Frances Beer  
0-14-043267-1

This collection provides the opportunity to discover the first examples of Austen's neoclassical elegance and Brontë's mastery of the romantic spirit.

Also available on audiocassette from Penguin Audiobooks:  
Boxed Set: Sense and Sensibility, Persuasion, and Pride and Prejudice 0-14-771107-X

Penguin Classics wishes to thank and credit the following writers and books for information used in creating this Penguin Classics Guide:

Joseph Duffy, "Criticism 1814-70"; Brian Southam, "Criticism 1870-1940" and "Janeites and Anti-Janeites"; A. Walton Litz, "Criticism 1939-83"; J. David Grey, "Life of Jane Austen"; all in The Jane Austen Companion, J. David Grey, Managing Editor, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986.

Lloyd W. Brown, "The Business of Marrying and Mothering"; and Norman Page, "The Great Tradition Revisited"; in Jane Austen's Achievement, edited by Juliet McMaster, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., Barnes & Noble Import Division, 1976.

W. A. Craik, Jane Austen: The Six Novels, New York, Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1965.

#### WEB LINKS

Pride and Prejudice illustrations – <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppbrokil.html#thumbn>  
Thumbnail versions of the C. E. Brock illustrations for Pride and Prejudice.

A Pride and Prejudice chronology – <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppchron.html>  
Chronology of events according to MacKinnon and Chapman.

Characters in Pride and Prejudice – <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppdrmtis.html>

The Jane Austen collection of the Julia Rogers Library –  
<http://www.goucher.edu/library/jausten/jane.htm> A good resource for information on translation, early editions, other writings.

Film and TV adaptations – <http://www.geocities.com/Hollywood/Set/2484/>

An Austen biography – <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janelife.html>

Hampshire County Online – <http://www.hants.gov.uk/austen/>  
A website for Hampshire County, where Jane Austen spent most of her life.

An Austen biography – <http://worldroots.com/brigitte/austen.htm>

Jane Austen's letters – <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/brablets.html>