

## An Introduction to Jane Austen

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a reader of Jane Austen's novels will either love the author passionately or despise her with equal force. How did six little novels written by a middle-class woman in early nineteenth-century England come to have such worldwide popularity, their author becoming the subject of cult-like devotion among her fans and shuddering dislike among her detractors? Why is Jane Austen such a big deal? And why are all of her characters so obsessed with marriage?

Let's start with that last one first. Jane Austen's characters are obsessed with marriage because everybody in Regency England was obsessed with marriage. For virtually all of English history, marriage had been an economic transaction, one arranged for the financial benefit for the families involved without much regard to the couple's feelings (or lack thereof) for one another. Suddenly, during the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century period in which Austen lived, people began wondering if it might be okay to factor love into the equation as well, making matters all the more complicated.

Jane Austen knew all too well how marriage defined a woman's life. She never married, and as a result was dependent most of her life on the charity of her brothers. She fit her writing into the otherwise dull daily routine of chores, visits, and "respectable activities" expected of a middle-class lady. She didn't even get to put her own name on her books—the four novels she published during her lifetime were described only as being written "By a Lady." Still, from this perch of relative obscurity she managed to make some of her era's sharpest (and funniest) observations on human behavior, most of which still apply today.

One thing is certain: Jane Austen fans love their Jane. Film and television adaptations of her books proliferate like rabbits, and self-professed Janeites (the official term for diehard fans) are scattered across the world. Why the adoration for this author whose entire body of work can fit neatly in a backpack? It might be because her characters are so charming. It might be because she's so funny. And it might be because the books really are just that good.

Austen's novels were the first literary works to acknowledge this complex dance of gender and social convention, in a way that was funny, perceptive, and realistic. With her elegantly crafted plots and characters, Jane Austen pretty much single-handedly rescued the novel from the trash heap of the literary world. Before Austen, all novels were regarded with the same kind of respect we now give to cheap supermarket romance novels; thanks to Austen, it is now possible to gain a "serious" literary reputation on the backs of novels alone.