

bio. CLASSROOM

BIO: Jane Austen Classroom Guide



Jane Austen, a quiet country girl born in 1775 in Hampshire, England, saw only modest fame and little fortune as a female author during her short lifetime. Her six novels, though well received, were penned under a pseudonym and were far from widely read. Over two centuries later, however, Austen has become a cultural phenomenon. From blockbuster films to Jane Austen fan clubs, this British author has touched countless readers across the globe with her witty, insightful social commentary and her uncanny grasp of universal themes of love. Austen's most well-known novels include *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Pride and Prejudice*. These works are taught in schools worldwide and have been dramatized in dozens of popular films and television programs. This 1-hour biography takes a close look at the life of this literary giant, and examines the influences and experiences that shaped the content of her timeless, classic novels. This documentary would be a great companion to course units and lectures on Austen's work, bringing a visual element and background context to readings of her novels.

Objectives and Curriculum Links:

Jane Austen would be useful for literature, language arts, social studies and history classes for high school students.

Vocabulary:

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

- Pertinent
- Melancholy
- Elusive
- Outspoken
- Euphoric
- Decorum

- Satirical
- Prolific
- Disparage
- Moralistic
- Solitary
- Transcendent

Discussion Questions:

1. Some commentators and critics have described Jane Austen's work as "timeless". Do you agree with this description?
2. What is unique about Austen's heroines? Do you think there are similarities that many of them share?
3. Which notable character created by Austen do you think most closely resembles Jane Austen and in what ways?
4. What personal lesson in love greatly influenced Jane Austen? How do you think this misfortune shaped the content of her novels?
5. How are Austen's novels a commentary on societal problems of the gentry class? What do you think they reveal about this class of society in England at that time?
6. What do you think is the most central conflict in Jane Austen's novels? Why?
7. What characteristics mark Austen's leading men? Use an example from one of her novels to support your answer to this question.
8. How does Austen's "pleasure in observation" contribute to her unique narrative voice? What do you think this term means?
9. What role do "second chances" play in the plots of Jane Austen's novels?
10. Who was Jane's closest confidante? What did Austen's letters to her reveal?
11. Since Austen's death, in what ways has she become a literary phenomenon?

Extended Activities:

1. **An Observation.** Jane Austen was a master at close observation of everyday life. Choose an ordinary interaction, whether it be a family dinner, supermarket exchange, or sporting event and carefully watch what is going on around you. In a brief vignette of 3-4 pages, try to capture and recreate the nuances of the people and places you are watching in your own unique narrative voice.
2. **A Book's Cover.** One of the ways readers learn about the content of a novel before they read it is by examining the book jacket. Choose one of Austen's novels, and develop a design for the book. This design can include the front cover image, font styles, and a short description for the back cover which encapsulates the essence of the book. These projects can be in PowerPoint format, on construction paper or poster-board, or described in essay form.
3. **Austen's Era.** One of Jane Austen's key contributions to the literary world was her ability to capture the British upper-class during the early 19th century. For this assignment, break up into small groups and research some aspect of British society during Austen's era. These might include fashion, politics, arts and culture, or any other topic of your choice relevant to Austen's themes. Design a visual presentation on your topic to share with your larger class or group.
4. **From Austen's Pen.** Jane Austen's letters were lost forever when her sister Cassandra burned them before her death. Knowing how closely her life reflected some of the central themes of her novels, write a 1-2 page letter from Jane to Cassandra detailing one of her personal experiences with love. Imagine what she might have said to her closest confidante about Tom Lefroy's painful rejection, her shocking refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither's marriage proposal, or another influential experience you may choose to write about.

5. **Comparing/Contrasting.** Jane Austen's books touch on universal themes of love and society that appeal to readers all across the globe. Choose a 21st century author who has a similarly widespread audience. In 2-3 pages discuss what you believe makes this writer so attractive to modern readers. What universal themes do they touch on? Are these themes comparable or different to those Austen writes about?

Match-The-Novel Activity:

Each of the quotes below is taken from one of Jane Austen's novels. Match the quote to the appropriate novel below. An answer key is provided in the "References" section at the end of this guide.

- A. "A lively, imaginative girl with a weakness for the gothic novel visits Bath and nearly loses her love because of deceit and misunderstanding – and more significantly, her seeming lack of fortune.
- B. "From ill-timed match-making to rejected proposals, this spirited, confident protagonist only falls for the neighborly gentleman when jealousy strikes."
- C. "Raised in the shadow of her four spoiled cousins, only Edmund shows this young lady any true kindness; Not until after she refuses the proposal of the dashing and dishonest Henry, does she end up with the one man she has always admired."
- D. "An almost-spinster gets a second chance at love years after nearly losing her Captain Wentworth because he lacked family and fortune."
- E. "From one sister's brash, impetuous temperament to the other's reserve and responsibility, two young sisters take very different paths to find love."
- F. "The two eldest of the five Bennett daughters experience betrayal and heartbreak by the handsome, proud and wealthy men who will ultimately bring them great happiness."

- (1) **Sense and Sensibility** (1811)
- (2) **Pride and Prejudice** (1813)
- (3) **Mansfield Park** (1814)
- (4) **Emma** (1815)
- (5) **Persuasion** (1817)
- (6) **Northanger Abbey** (1817)

Websites:

More about Jane Austen from Bio.com:

<http://www.biography.com/articles/Jane-Austen-9192819>

Full online text of each of Jane Austen's six novels.

<http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janewrit.html>

Books:

Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen's Letters* (Pavilion Press, 2003)

Copeland, Edward and Juliet McMaster. *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)

Tomalin, Claire. *Jane Austen: A Life* (Vintage, 1999)

Match the Novel Activity Answer Key:

(1) E (2) F (3) C (4) B (5) D (6) A