

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

The Seventh of eight children, Jane Austen was born on the 16th of December, 1775, at Steventon, in the county of Hampshire. On the death of her father, she removed with her mother and sister Cassandra, for a short time, to the village of Chawton, New Hampshire. She never married; nevertheless, as she belonged to a large and lively family, her life was full of human interest and incident. Jane began writing at an early age, but many of the novels were not published until a long time after the first versions were composed, and it is uncertain how much revision went into the final form. One of her earliest efforts was Love and Friendship, which she wrote when she was about fifteen. Her major novels are Sense and Sensibility, published in the year 1811; Pride and Prejudice, 1813; Mansfield Park, 1814; Emma, 1816; Northanger Abbey, 1818; Persuasion, 1818.

Her novels revealed to the early nineteenth-century reading public that fiction could and should be taken seriously as a form of literature, and that criticism of the novel could be a serious intellectual activity.

Jane Austen died on Friday the 18th of July, 1817, and was buried in the cathedral church at Winchester.

Prior to 1870, Jane Austen was never thought of as a popular novelist nor did she win very wide attention from the Victorian critics and literary historians; but this is not to say that she went unvalued or unrecognized. From the very beginning, the contemporary reviewers had welcomed the novels as something new, something

better than the usual run of romantic fiction. During her lifetime, Jane Austen knew that her works were fashionable in some circles; they seemed to have been widely read among the upper-middle classes and even in the court of the Prince Regent. A few critics such as Scott and Whately saw her as a distinctively "modern" novelist, as the representative of a new school of writing; whereas Lewis and Macaulay hailed her works as classics of English literature, to be named in the same breath as those of Shakespeare. However, while her early critics recognized her skill in character portrayal and in creating realistic plots, none of them attempted to make a detailed study of the characteristic patterns of her syntax, neither did they record admiration of narrative technique. Instead, their criticism had a tendency to view and approach the six novels in general. They concentrated monotonously on her skill in conveying an illusion of life; "real" and "natural" were the most common epithets of praise bestowed upon her works.

From around 1870 onwards, interest in Jane Austen steadily increased; but it was not until the appearance of the book Jane Austen and Her Art by Mary Lascelles in 1939 that a serious study of her style and narrative techniques was initiated. Since then the trend has moved towards more detailed studies of the individual novels and of the major aspects of the novelist's technique. Though the twentieth-century critics have paid less attention to the realism of her plots, they spend more time in analyzing her technique as a novelist, her methods of shaping the structure of her works, of controlling the tone and

feeling, and of fashioning the diction and style.

Though it may appear to many critics that Jane Austen writes with great simplicity, her narrative is actually quite complex, for an unusual subtlety of thought and attitude is concealed by the simplicity of her presentation. When one talks about the simplicity of Jane Austen's work, he does not mean that it lacks art, but that the very considerable art she uses is unobtrusive. Indeed, she actually initiated a considerable number of narrative devices; events are told either by the impersonal narrator, or by one or more of her characters, or through the letters, or through direct and reported conversations. The nature and function of her language, down to the smallest detail, are intimately related to the form of each novel as an aesthetic whole; whereas her narrative tone varies according to the habitual expressions of the characters, their situations, and according to the episodes in which they are involved.

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