



The
Jane Austen
Pocket Bible

—
EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW
ABOUT JANE AND HER NOVELS
—

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🌿 FINDING CONTEXTUAL HISTORY 🌿 IN JANE'S WRITING

Jane Austen makes barely any mention of contemporary political events in her work. Although her novels are based in the society of her age, she only ever alludes to the issues of the day. While some have criticized her for this, others think that her writing offered a breath of fresh air from the overly political and moralized writing of the time, much the same as the fantasy, romance, Gothic and adventure novels which were hugely popular at the time. While Jane focuses on morals and behaviors, she focuses on those relevant at any time, and chooses to base her moral examinations in the home, a setting which was relevant to everyone. She differs from other writers of her day who suffered from the 'French disease' of preaching moral issues: instead she presents characters whose behavior and fates helps us decide for ourselves the best ways to act.

Pocket Fact 🌿

Jane's niece Caroline recalled the lack of political commentary in her aunt's work when she said, 'Anyone might naturally desire to know what part such a mind as her's had taken in the great strifes of war and policy which so disquieted Europe for more than 20 years . . . in vain do I try to recall any word or expression of Aunt Jane's that had reference to public events'.

There are some slight allusions to her contextual history in Jane's work though. See if you can spot:

- The slave trade in *Mansfield Park*
- The 1780 Gordon Riots in London in *Northanger Abbey*
- The militia presence in *Pride and Prejudice*
- The naval presence in *Persuasion*

🌿 SOCIETY AS JANE KNEW IT 🌿

English society during Jane's time (dubbed Regency society after the rule of the Prince Regent) was based firmly on a class hierarchy, meaning that people were treated and recognized in direct accordance with their wealth and social status. Social classes descended in prestige from the Royal family to the nobility, the gentry, the clergy and finally to the working class. Jane's family was part of the gentry, meaning her father was considered a gentleman. It is this class which populates Jane's novels although we are sometimes introduced to characters from other classes, such as the nobility (Lady Catherine or the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple) or the clergy (Mr Collins and Mr Elton).

Most people knew their place in society and reverence or condescension to higher and lower classes was observed on a daily basis. For example, people from a lower class would never address a member of a higher class by his or her first name. Jane always praises those members of the gentry who behave well to those considered lower than them, and mocks those who behave badly. Compare the presentation and fates of Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice* and Mr Knightley in *Emma* with regards to their treatment of the lower classes, for example.

Pocket Fact 🌿

In Emma, Harriet Smith is Emma Woodhouse's best friend. But throughout the entire novel she never uses her name Emma, she always refers to her as Miss Woodhouse. This may seem odd but it is merely because Harriet is observing that Emma is her social superior.

THE GENTRY

To be considered a part of the landed gentry, a family had to own at least 300 acres of property. A male member of this class was known as a 'gentleman' (although, confusingly, not everyone called a gentleman was part of the gentry). Jane's father was part of the gentry, but he was from the lower end of the class while

Jane's mother had been part of a much wealthier gentry family. All of Jane's heroines are members of the gentry and range from the lower end of the class (like Catherine Morland) to the higher end (like Emma Woodhouse).

Essential traits of the gentry included:

- Owning at least 300 acres of land
- A sizeable income from this land or from a career
- A good family name
- Correct behavior

It is important to remember when reading Jane's novels, that although some men are called 'gentlemen', such as Mr Bennet, they would not necessarily have the land and wealth which were essential to be a part of the gentry. The strict social nuances of gentry society can be the most difficult part of Austen's novels for modern readers to grasp. The trick is to remember that people would be expected to remember their social level, and would be expected to act according to this level. It is also worth bearing in mind though that it was during Austen's time that a change in social values was occurring which would change these attitudes forever.

TIMES OF CHANGE

Jane's lifetime spanned both the American and French revolutions. While there was no violent revolution in England, there was a noticeable shift in social classes, as those with newfound wealth began to surpass the traditional land-owning classes in power and influence. The landed gentry looked on nervously as those with new money made from business, or naval officers with large fortunes made from prize money, began to be recognized and treated as gentlemen, even though they didn't perhaps meet the traditional criteria.

Persuasion is a perfect example of Jane's portrayal of these class shifts. Jane puts the rising family, Captain Wentworth and the Crofts, in direct opposition to the fading gentry family, the Elliots. Not only are the Elliots forced to give up their inherited property

due to their debts, but the family who take the property from them have none of the qualities that Sir Walter considers essential parts of a gentleman.

Jane makes reference to this shifting class dynamic in most of her novels, presenting these 'new money' characters in both positive and negative ways. For example, she is happy to be positive about hard working families such as the Coles in *Emma* who have made their fortune and have risen through the social ranks without forgetting their roots, but characters like Mrs Elton, who Jane makes fun of for her newly acquired airs and graces from her sister's fortunate marriage, are shown only in a negative light.

In Her Own Words 🕒

The Musgrove family in Persuasion can be taken as an example of this shift in class consciousness as the family is described in a way that highlights Jane's acknowledgement of the shift, but in a manner that also shows she has not decided if these changes are for the better: 'The Musgroves, like their houses, were in a state of alteration, perhaps of improvement. Their father and mother were in the old English style and the young people in the new. Mr and Mrs Musgrove were a very good sort of people; friendly and hospitable, not much educated, and not at all elegant. Their children had more modern minds and manners.'

🌿 HOW TO BEHAVE IN REGENCY SOCIETY 🌿

Manners were of the utmost importance in Regency society; they were one of the most important displays of a person's class and wealth. Regency manners were loosely based on ideas from Renaissance Italy and on ideas and fashions from 17th century France, although the conduct guides of the time updated these ideas and made them more period specific.

One of the most important modes of behavior in Regency society was knowing your place. It was of the utmost importance that a person acted according to his or her station in life. A person's rank in society dictated the order in which they should enter a room, whom they could or could not speak to, and with whom it was appropriate to be on friendly terms with.

A person's rank was shown in a number of ways:

- **How they entered a room.** The aristocracy always entered first, followed by the landed gentry and their families. Families entered according to their age and marital status. Married women took precedence over single women, meaning that a younger sister could enter a room before her older sister once she was married (as Lydia is keen to do, entering before Jane in *Pride and Prejudice*).
- **How they were addressed.** People rarely used first names to address an acquaintance: only close friends and family did this. It was permissible for people of a higher rank to use the first name of a lower class friend (as shown with Emma and Harriet above), but not the other way around. The eldest daughter in a family was referred to as Miss (last name), while her sisters were called by their first names, so we meet Miss Elliot and Miss Anne. The same principle applied to sons, although most were referred to by their full name, so we are presented with Mr Ferrars (Edward) and Mr Robert Ferrars.
- **In meeting new people.** It was unacceptable just to walk up to someone and introduce yourself, unless you were from a higher rank. People of a lower or equal rank had to wait to be introduced by a friend or the master of ceremonies, or they were forced to remain silent, as Catherine and Mrs Allen are forced to do when they first arrive in Bath. After an introduction a person was always acknowledged as an acquaintance. If a person shunned an acquaintance it was called 'cutting' and was considered very rude.

Pocket Fact

After an introduction people would always acknowledge their acquaintance with another person, but only with a wave. Although nowadays people use a handshake to greet a new acquaintance, in the Regency period a handshake was only used among firm friends – hence Harriet's sense of honor when Emma shakes hands with her.

MANNERS FOR MEN

Young boys were taught to be 'gentlemen' from a very young age, both at home and at school. There were also guides available, called courtesy books, to teach young men how to behave. One popular guide was *Il Cortegiano*, an Italian courtesy guide for courtiers published in 1528, and translated into Latin and English by Sir Thomas Holby in 1561.

So exactly what manners and traits did a man have to possess to be considered a well-mannered gentleman? The essential parts of a gentleman's behavior dictated that he should:

- Speak and act confidently
- Use proper language and not make rude or vulgar remarks
- Be well-educated and able to give his opinion on all subjects
- Be well-turned out in his appearance
- Have a graceful walk and posture
- Be able to dance at balls
- Be polite and amiable with those of a lower class as well as those of his own class

So which of Austen's heroes fit this bill?

The perfect example of a gentleman in Austen's novels is Mr Knightley in Emma. Mr Knightley always acts correctly, as we see when he behaves with condescension towards the poor

Mrs and Miss Bates, when he walks and dances so well at the Crown Inn ball and because he also acts as a standard of moral good for Emma. Conversely Mr Darcy doesn't behave like a gentleman at all in Pride and Prejudice. He is rude to those whom he believes to be beneath him, and Elizabeth even chastises him for his complete lack of gentlemanly behavior. Unfortunately for poor Mr Knightley though, Mr Darcy was still the person a poll of almost 2,000 women voted as their ideal date.

MANNERS FOR WOMEN

Women were expected to be meek, obedient, docile and soft. They were expected to take care with their appearance, and to obey the will of their fathers and then their husbands. Most gentry families would own copies of conduct manuals, such as Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* and Gregory's *A Father's Legacy to His Daughter*. These books advised young women to behave meekly and obediently, to value beauty over education and to hide any learning that they did have.

Austen mocks the accepted model of female behavior by having her heroines break with convention – and it would seem that they all manage to find the man of their dreams by behaving in a manner which departs from the norm:

- **Elizabeth Bennet: too forthright.** By speaking her mind and not living up to the simpering female model he is used to, Darcy finds Elizabeth captivating for her differences.
- **Catherine Morland: too open.** Catherine never conceals her regard for Henry and it is her blatant preference for him that makes Henry notice her in the first place.
- **Emma Woodhouse: in charge of her life and household.** Emma's independent wealth means she doesn't need a husband and never seeks one until she realizes she is in love with Mr Knightley.
- **Anne Elliot: being constant to her first love.** Although Anne is forced to break off her engagement with Captain

Wentworth she declines an offer from Charles Musgrove, a wealthy man who would help Anne fulfill her duty of marrying well, because her feelings remain true to Captain Wentworth.

- **Marianne Dashwood: too emotional and free-spirited.** Although Marianne's lack of secrecy about her feelings proves to be disastrous in her relationship with Willoughby, her openness and free-spirited behavior remind Colonel Brandon of his first love and endears Marianne to him from the start.
- **Fanny Price: doesn't hunt for a husband.** Fanny secretly pines for Edmund throughout the entirety of *Mansfield Park*, and even when she is sure he is going to marry Mary Crawford, she won't accept Henry Crawford's offer of marriage even though it would give her security for life.

FEATURES OF REGENCY SOCIETY

WEALTH, LAND AND INHERITANCE

Traditionally, gentlemen made their career and their fortune from their estate. Estates were inherited and provided a family's wealth and social status. The eldest son of a gentry family would normally make his career the management of the estate, overseeing the tenants and the farming. Many eldest sons had to wait a long time to take on this role though, leaving them free to lead a lazy existence, sure of their future inheritance. Take Tom Bertram in *Mansfield Park* and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* for example. However, some young men found this lifestyle curtailed by the need to pander to the relative who controlled their inheritance, as we see with Frank Churchill and his demanding aunt in *Emma*.

In Her Own Words 🕒

Jane was critical of the laziness arising from this line of 'career', as can be seen in Elinor's reflection on Willoughby's behavior in Sense and Sensibility: 'Her thoughts were silently fixed on the

irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest and a feeling, affectionate temper. The world had made him extravagant and vain — extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish.'

The size of the estate had a lot to do with the wealth of the family. Mr Darcy's estate Pemberley is worth £10,000 a year (about \$512,000 now), whereas Mr Bennet's estate of Longbourn is worth only £2,000 (about \$102,000 now). A father would have to support his family using this income, as well as provide a dowry for his daughter. This is why the daughters of large estates were targeted by ambitious young men, as the control of their wealth and any property they would inherit would pass to them after their marriage. (See p. 44 for the wealthiest estates in Jane's novels.)

CAREERS

If the eldest sons in gentry families inherited the family estate and made their career managing these estates, what did younger sons do? There were several respectable careers a younger son could pursue and still retain the respectable appearance of a gentleman. The main choices for a younger son were either to become a lawyer, enter the church or join the army. Of course some elder sons also chose to pursue careers in these professions, while they waited to inherit their property.

'A person who can write a long letter with ease, cannot write ill': *Communicating by letter*

During Jane's lifetime the only mode of communication available was the letter. This meant that the only news people had of their loved ones came infrequently and due to the unreliability of the mail could often be out of date by the time it arrived.

When writing a letter people would use a quill pen and the writing paper would be folded, leaving one blank page for the address. People would try to fit as much writing as possible on a page, to save on both the cost of paper and the price of postage (although at that time the recipient of the letter would pay the postage). People often employed a method called 'cross writing' to save space; once a page was filled people would turn the page on its side at a right angle and write between the lines of text already written. When the letter was finished it would be sealed with a wax seal.

Letters play an important part in Jane's novels, often revealing key information or acting as the vehicle for an expression of love. See if you can spot the important role letters play in Austen's novels.

THE DAY IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG LADY

Young ladies were expected to be 'accomplished'. While Jane makes fun of this concept in *Pride and Prejudice* it was a fact of life that young ladies, to be good marriage material, had to possess certain skills. Most young ladies in Jane's time would fill their day with the following activities: writing letters, learning French, drawing, sewing, reading novels or conduct guides, planning meals (if their mothers weren't alive), making tea for visitors or paying morning visits to friends, and practising a musical instrument: usually the harp or the pianoforte. Austen herself was a talented pianist who practised every day before she began her writing.

It was these types of accomplishments that most young ladies would learn to do, in place of a formal education. Young women would receive some education from a governess or at a boarding school but most of their education focused on running a household.

Regency Fashion

We've all seen the bonnets worn in the films, and heard Caroline Bingley's shock at the state of Elizabeth's petticoat,

but do you know exactly what was considered fashionable for a Regency lady? Here's a list of everything you would need to be considered well dressed:

- **Dress.** A lady's dress would be straight with short sleeves, a high waistline and a low neckline. Dresses often had a train but this fashion was beginning to die out during Austen's time. Dresses were made from a fine cotton material called muslin and were usually white or a light pastel color with a floral design. Having a white dress was a sign of status and wealth.
- **Undergarments.** A lady would need at least one petticoat with a pair of long drawers and a chemise (like a slip).
- **Hairstyle.** A lady's hair was worn up with short curls at the front.
- **Evening dress.** For the evening ladies would wear a similar style dress, more often with a train and more ornate decoration. They would wear simple jewelry, carry a fan and wear gloves. They might also decorate their hair with feathers or ribbons.
- **Outerwear.** Ladies would often wear a shawl around their shoulders, and would wear a bonnet when venturing outside. In colder weather they could wear a spencer (a tight fitting waist-length jacket, like a man's coat but without tails) or a pelisse (a long dress-like coat often lined with fur). They would wear gloves and might also carry a muff.

Pocket Fact

From all accounts it seems that Jane didn't really care about her dress or her appearance. She once wrote to Cassandra saying, 'My hair was at least tidy which was all my ambition' and in *Northanger Abbey* the narrator points out that, 'It would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire . . . woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone.'

A woman needed to have enough of a dowry to be considered a good match. If a woman from a lower gentry family couldn't find a man willing to accept her lack of fortune and marry her she was left with the prospect of becoming a spinster. Jane and her sister Cassandra both chose this path, meaning they had to live on their brothers' generosity rather than being provided for by a husband. If a woman didn't have a kind brother or family member to support her most often she would have been forced into a career as a governess.

Governesses were pitiful figures, as they were above the other servants in the house but couldn't mix socially with the family and their guests. Women were aware that being a governess was a lonely life, and Jane Fairfax, who is facing the prospect of becoming a governess, compares it to a state of slavery, saying 'There are places in town, offices . . . offices for the sale, not quite of human flesh, but of human intellect' (see p. 79 for more on this).

SOCIAL EVENTS

Dances

Dances were a major part of Regency society. Dances and balls were held both at public assembly rooms, and at private residences. It was also not uncommon at family parties for the young people to roll back the carpet and dance to whatever instrument they had in the home.

Pocket Fact

Henry Austen recalled that 'Jane was fond of dancing and excelled in it'.

Dances were the best, and very nearly the only, way for young people to meet and get to know each other. In essence a dance was the best place to find a spouse. Dancing together was the only acceptable way for young people to have a private conversation. It was normal for dancing lessons to be a part of a genteel boy or girl's education and being able to dance was considered a necessary social skill.

In Her Own Words 📖

Jane clearly acknowledged the importance of dancing in finding a partner, as seen by Henry Tilney's analogy in Northanger Abbey: 'I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both.'

So what exactly happened at a dance?

- A gentleman would ask a lady to dance (but only if he had been properly introduced by a mutual acquaintance or the master of ceremonies).
- The most important lady in the room (the one of the highest social rank) would open the first set.
- The dance would most likely be a country dance, such as a minuet, a quadrille, a cotillion, or a Scottish reel (see the glossary for more on these dances).
- The dance would consist of sets of five to eight couples.
- The couples would stand opposite each other in two lines.
- Each dance would last about half an hour.
- A couple couldn't dance together more than twice, or it was thought that there was a decided engagement between them.
- The ball itself would last from 8 pm until 3 or 4 am!

Pocket Fact 📖

Although dances and balls feature prominently in all of Jane's novels she never specifically names the dances her couples are performing.

Evenings

If they weren't at a dance a Regency family would spend their evening in one of the following ways:

- Playing cards
- Reading aloud to one another
- Listening to one of the daughters play an instrument
- Putting on a play
- Making conversation on the issues of the day

Dinners

A Regency dinner party would have begun between 5 and 6 pm (although the acceptable time for dinner would differ between the country and London), starting with soup, followed by a main course of meat, surrounded by jellies, quinces, vegetables, and a number of other dishes. After the main course, salad and cheese would be served. There would then be a second main course with several different types of dishes. After this the tablecloth was removed (hence Austen's use of the phrase 'the cloth was removed') and dessert was served.

After the meal the ladies would go to the drawing room to sew and chat, while the gentlemen stayed in the dining room to drink port, and possibly smoke cigars. The gentlemen would then join the ladies for cards and tea.

People would always dress formally for dinner, even if they had been dressed nicely all day. This meant that ladies wore more elaborate dresses and men would wear white shirts and waistcoats and change their riding boots and jacket for formal ones.

Planning your own Regency dinner party

Food

To start serve soup, such as a white soup made from veal or chicken stock, egg yolks, ground almonds and cream, or even a mock turtle soup.

For a main course offer something like roast chicken with egg sauce, or mutton. For dessert try baked apples, rum cake or rice pudding.

Entertainment

Card games were a popular pastime after dinner. Here are a few you can try:

- **Cassino** (fishing card game for two partnerships of two, three or four players)
- **Loo** (a gambling game for five or more players)
- **Piquet** (a card dealing game for only two players)
- **Quadrille** (a trick taking card game, developed from Whist, for four players)
- **Speculation** (a gambling game which involves a whole deck of cards for any number of players)

You can also try playing the pianoforte, or having an impromptu dance. Charades were also a popular game, using written rhymes which gave clues to the answer as we see Emma and Harriet compiling in *Emma*.

Some Austen stereotypes to invite

To have a true Austen style dinner party there are a few stereotypical characters you'll need to invite:

- **A spinster (like Miss Bates)**
Pro: She will keep the conversation going.
Con: You might be left with an odd number.
- **An elderly relative (like Mr Woodhouse)**
Pro: He or she will praise your planning and musical performance after the meal.
Con: He or she will want the party to finish early.
- **An annoying neighbor and his wife (like Mr and Mrs Elton)**
Pro: You will fulfill your obligation to invite them and seem a gracious host.
Con: You will have to put up with their boastful conversation.
- **The local clergyman (like Mr Collins)**
Pro: He could be a potential catch for your friend.
Con: He may be boring or have designs on you which you will have to politely decline.

- **Your best friend (like Charlotte Lucas)**
Pro: You will have someone there to talk about your guests with.
Con: She may distract the eligible bachelor.
- **The local militia (like Wickham)**
Pro: Attractive young men who will join in the dancing and flirt with your female guests.
Con: They may be scoundrels in disguise.
- **The eligible bachelor (like Charles Bingley)**
Pro: This is the man you have your eye on so it's a chance to get to know him better.
Con: You will have to make sure you are sitting near him and be charming all night long.
- **Your family and near neighbors (like the Bennets and the Lucases)**
Pro: They make up numbers.
Con: You might be embarrassed by them.

Pocket Fact

During World War One British soldiers suffering from shell shock were advised to read Austen's novels. The hope was that the comforting images of idyllic English society would help speed up their recovery.

JANE AUSTEN TODAY

Nowadays Jane Austen is hugely popular with both casual readers and academics, and her work and life inspires societies and clubs for people from all walks of life. Jane Austen features on English literature courses all over the world and her novels have never been out of print since they were first published nearly 200 years ago.

Here are just a few examples of Jane's enduring popularity:

- In 2002 Jane was voted number 70 in the BBC's top 100 Britons.