

CHAPTER III

JANE AUSTEN AND HER WORK

III.1. BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JANE AUSTEN.

Jane Austen was born on December, 16, 1775 in Steventon parsonage, Hampshire, a village in southern England. The youngest child of a country clergyman, she has six brothers, one of whom was adopted by a wealthy kinsman and succeeded in time to his family named Godmersham, in Kent. Two of the Austen's boys, Frank and Charles, rose to become Admirals in the Navy. Another, Henry, became a clergyman. Jane Austen's elder sister, Cassandra, remained (like Jane) unmarried and outlived her.

Although many events of importance occurred during her lifetime (including the American and French Revolution), The Reign of Terror in France during which the husband of one of her cousin was executed, the meteoric rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the naval battles of Lord Horatio Nelson), her novels do not draw their materials from any of these sources.

Although English literature itself was in these years undergoing a period of transition from the eighteenth century values and techniques of Pope and Dr. Johnson to new, 'romantic' ideas and methods popularised by Sir

Walter. Scott, William Wordsworth and Lord Byron, Jane Austen lived herself outside the English literary world and is not known to have met a fellow author.

Until she was twenty-five years old, she lived in her father's rectory. In 1800 the family moved to Bath and, on the death of Reverend George Austen in 1806, to Southampton. In 1809 Mrs. Austen and her two daughters settled at Chawton Cottage, a small house on Edward Knight's Hampshire property, and here Jane Austen lived until within a few weeks of her death in 1817. Here too all completed novels were put by her into their final form and prepared for publication.

With her brothers and their families, and with her sister, Cassandra, Jane Austen enjoyed a close, affectionate relationship and maintained an intimate correspondence. She distributed the greater part of her life between Hampshire and visit to Bath, Kent and London.

Her family was her first and most appreciative audience, and the reading public she envisaged for Sense And Sensibility was clearly very like her parents and her brothers and sisters in its tastes: cultured, lively, humorous, and scornful of false pomp and pretentiousness. She began to write as a young child, scribbling playlets and little satirical stories and sketches for the amusement of her family.

Except for a brief period during which Cassandra and Jane Austen were sent to a boarding school in Reading, their education was conducted at home under their father's supervision. He gave tuition to a few selected pupils every year, and encourage his own daughters to read widely.

Like most girls in their station in life, she and Cassandra learn French and Italian, and were taught to sing, play musical instruments, sew and embroider. She was very fond of dancing, enjoyed making and wearing pretty clothes in her youth, and domestic skills that make a little money go a long way.

Jane Austen's social circle was restricted to members of her own rank, the 'genteel' upper middle class. As a girl she attended balls and monthly assemblies, and was taken visiting, to tea-parties, card-parties, musical evenings, dinner-parties and theatricals. Her authorship kept, by her own wish, a family secret. Chawton's society was very limited, as her letters make clear, and Jane Austen was probably did not wish to be singled out and even, perhaps, avoided by her neighbours being dangerously 'satirical'.

Jane Austen characteristically drew the bulk of her material from experience, re-working incidents over and

over again, and inventing as little as she could. At the same time she carefully broke up and altered what came to her from real incidents and people, until the source was unrecognisable, or at any rate, impossible to establish beyond doubt. Therefore, although readers might believe they see in the unjustly differentiated fortunes of John Dashwood and his three sisters a reflection of the difference between the incomes of Edward Knight and his sisters Cassandra and Jane, anything approaching an identification of John and Fanny Dashwood with Mr and Mrs. Edward Knight would not be justifiable.

Characters such as John Dashwood and Mrs. Ferrars, Mr. Collins and Lady Catherine de Bourgh in Pride And Prejudice, or General Tilney in Northanger Abbey are the 'ogres' and 'monster' in Jane Austen's fiction: they represent qualities (notably greed and hypocrisy) that Jane Austen seems to have disliked and resented very much in their real life manifestations, for she sets them up in novel after novel to be suitably humbled or defeated by her wily and sensitive heroines. But they derive their distinctive qualities, comic as well as disagreeable, from many sources and not from a single identifiable only.

Her relationship with her sister, Cassandra is also very likely to have influenced her presentation of Elinor

and Marianne. The affectionate tranquility between them that ends the book provide Sense And Sensibility with one of its most empathic personal statements: that strong family affection and sympathy can help to minimise poverty and personal loss.

Her writing reflects contemporary ideas more than it does contemporary events. The absence of 'good' or 'common' sense provides the basis for many of her fictional portraits of insincere or pretentious people. 'Sense' and 'reason' extended their range as Jane Austen matured, to include moral virtue as well as social tact and active intelligence.

Jane Austen died , after a year of deteriorating health, in 1817 at the age of forty-one. She was buried in Winchester Cathedral.

III.2. SYNOPSIS OF SENSE AND SENSIBILITY.

The twice married Mr. Henry Dashwood dies , his estate at Norland in Sussex passing to his son from his first wife, Mr. John Dashwood. His his widow and her three daughters become tenants of Barton Cottage in Devonshire at the invitation of Sir John Middleton, a landowner and a distant relation of Mrs. Dashwood.

At Barton, Marianne meets. in romantic circum-

stances, and falls in love with, John Willoughby, an attractive youngman who satisfied the yearnings of her sentimental imagination by appearing to share enthusiastically her every thought, opinion and artistic taste. They openly display their affection for each other, but Elinor is troubled by the absence of any formal declaration on either side of an intention to marry.

When Willoughby is called suddenly away from Devonshire, and the lonely Marianne spends all her time thinking sadly of him (indeed, cultivating the melancholy feelings that are readily stimulated in the person of 'sensitivity'), her family assume that the pair are privately engaged to marry. This is however, not the case.

Elinor Dashwood has, meanwhile, herself become attached to Edward Ferrars, a brother of her sister-in-law Fanny Dashwood. She believes Edward loves her in return. But as she has very little money in her own right (her family's fortune now being legally in her brother, John's possession and he is unwilling to assist

Elinor is aware that an engagement exist between Edward and herself would be disapproved of by his mother who expects him to marry well. Since Edward and Elinor have not told one another of their mutual affection, no engagement (not even a secret one) exist between them;

and when Lucy Steele, a poor and pretty cousin of Lady Middleton, confides to Elinor that Edward Ferrars is already secretly engaged to marry her, Elinor decides to try and dismiss all thoughts of marrying Edward from her mind.

Volume II begins as the two sisters, reacting characteristically to their disappointments (Elinor behaving with such sensible fortitude that no one suspects her sorrow, Marianne yearning openly for Willoughby's company), go to London as the guest of Mrs. Jennings, Lady Middleton's mother.

Marianne meets Willoughby again, but only to find that he is about to marry another woman, an heiress. Elinor supports Marianne through the agony of this disappointment and, unhappy as she is herself, bears without defence or explanation her sister's bitter accusations of insensitivity and coldheartedness. However, when the secret of Lucy's engagement to Edward is accidentally disclosed by Lucy's sister, Anne to Mrs. John Dashwood and the enraged Mrs. Ferrars (and freely discussed by everyone else), Marianne recognises for the first time the full extent of both her sister's heroism and her own self-indulgence and selfishness. Both are unhappy at the close of volume II. But Elinor can draw some consolation

from the fact that her sense helped her to guard her own privacy and support Marianne through her troubles, while Marianne has little she can look back on without regret.

Elinor and Marianne leave London to stay with Mr and Mrs. Palmer (she is Mrs. Jennings' younger daughter) in Somersetshire. Careless and neglectful of her own health, Marianne contracts pneumonia and very nearly dies. Hearing that she is dying, Willoughby rides to Cleveland and interviews Elinor. He tells her of his unhappy marriage, and explains that his own extravagance and selfishness had led him so heavily into debt that he had believed the only course left to him was to give up his affection for Marianne and marry a wealthy woman. When Marianne recovers, the sisters return to Barton. Told Elinor of Willoughby's confession, Marianne shows that her experiences have taught her good sense; she ascribes her sorrows to their true cause: 'I have nothing to regret-nothing but my own folly.'

The unselfishness and strength of Elinor's character can be seen in the fact that, although she has given up all hope of marrying Edward Ferrars herself, she encourages Colonel Brandon (a friend, met originally at Barton, where he became a distant but very sincere admirer of Marianne) in his decision to present Edward with a living on his estate at Delaford.

This will, Elinor believes, enable Edward to follow his own inclination to take orders and marry Lucy, thus putting an end to his dependence on his mother. She now daily expects news of Edward's marriages to Lucy. It comes, reported by a servant, and Elinor resigns herself to what she has long regarded as inevitable: her own unhappiness and loneliness.

But correction is at hand. Edward himself comes to Barton, to tell the Dashwoods that Lucy has broken their engagement and married his younger brother Robert (who now owns the property Edward lost when their mother, enraged by the news of his engagement to Lucy, disinherited him). Edward explains the true nature of his earlier entanglement with Lucy, asks Elinor to marry him, and is accepted.

Their marriage is necessarily delayed, for marry on inadequate income would be an act of foolish 'sensibility' rather than of prudent 'sense'. But in time, Mrs. Ferrars is reconciled with Edward, and provides him with financial assistance.

Edward and Elinor moved to their new home at Delaford Parsonage on Colonel Brandon's estate, and after a lapse of time, Marianne recovers sufficiently from her disappointment over Willoughby to allow herself a second

attachment. She becomes the wife of Colonel Brandon, and the two sisters maintain the affection that has linked them in all the experiences described in the novel.

CHAPTER IV

SELF-CRITICISM OF ELINOR AND MARIANNE