

## Jane Austen Book Club - Session One

Welcome members

Ask them to introduce themselves and

- give brief info about why they are interested in Austen and
  - what they hope to get out of our sessions
  - What do you imagine she was like as a person?
    - Some of you might only want either the books or films or both. You decide.
- Look at the draft plan for the sessions

What I intend to do

1. Refer to any info from members as needed.
  - Three levels of exploring Austen's appeal to us.
    - Historical Background of Regency Society
    - Her novels – how and why she explores the lives of her contemporaries
    - The films: How C20th film makers have interpreted her novels. Are these interpretations different from hers? Why? What does this say about us?
1. Background:
  1. I want to take a look at the society and social group Austen belonged to in Regency England and we can ask how Austen chooses to present them in her novels [and why]
    - i. Only about 10% of Britain's 13 million people belonged to various levels of the upper classes. A hierarchy existed even in this group.
      1. Traditional and exclusive barons, earls, dukes, lords. These were the titled families who mostly exclusively married within this even smaller group, but sometimes, if in financial trouble, looked for the daughters of extremely wealthy new comers who could provide massive dowries for their daughters to marry into the gentry.
      2. Traditional county gentry on middling rural estates with farms and tenants creating income for them. Sirs and Ladies also marrying within their class or some of them marrying up.
      3. BUT A new group emerging - the pseudo-gentry- or we might call them the nouveau-riche. Don't own land but sometimes buy properties or rent country estates for periods of time to enjoy country life and get the opportunity of mixing with the local traditional country gentry and even slipping their way into introductions with the small exclusive rich or titled families. Made money owning slave estates in Caribbean, in trade and other

opportunities that arose in the expanding economy of this period.

2. Read the description of them given by William Cobbett in his famous book *“Rural Rides through the Shires of England.”* P.14-15 David Thompsons *England in the C19th.*

#### WHAT IS CHANGING?

- i. Socially these three groups start to mix together in Assemblies and entertainments in towns like Bath, London etc. during “The Season”. Balls were common, Debutants were paraded before other families with the intention of finding a husband. Clubs were established with exclusive memberships. An elaborate ritual of home visits was established. You needed a letter of introduction and left your calling card at the home of a society dame who held soirees on various afternoons or evenings. Concerts and plays were another place to be seen and establish valuable contacts.
- ii. **It was amongst this group of nouveau riche that Austen and her family mixed. Most of the local families who lived within a few miles of the Steventon parsonage were in this group.**

#### 3. HAND OUT MAP

- i. Claire Tomalin [*Jane Austen: A Life*] researched these local families and most were newcomers . Some also suffered from a common problem of the nouveau-riche. Not all were able to stay rich, and many slid back into obscurity in small houses in far less attractive places than they had lived in with only one or two servants to attend them. Some even moved abroad to hotels or boarding houses in Brussels or France.

Give examples from Tomalin’s book , [Chapter 8, The Neighbours, pp 87f.]

1. Boltons of Hackwood Park, formerly Thomas Orde who married the illegitimate daughter of Lord Bolton and was given a title and inherited some of the Bolton estates.
2. Dorchesters of Kempshott Park .Lord Dorchester was formerly a soldier, Guy Carleton , an Irish soldier who moved up the social scale through personal efforts. He leased Kempshott Park for several years before moving to a lease in another county.
3. Portsmouths of Hurstbridge Park. Dark complex story of Lord Portsmouth, a violent half-wit manipulated by his brothers who married him to a much older wife so he could not produce an heir, so one of them could inherit if he died. His wife appeared to torture or mistreat him and

eventually he was rescued by the intervention of the Lord Chancellor.

It's interesting, in Austen's novels to identify which group her main characters belonged to. Like most others of her class Austen was unconcerned about the 90% in the lower orders AND WAS CRITICAL ONLY OF PEOPLES PERSONAL BEHAVIOURS not with the social issues of the other 90% of her society

- ii. The other 90% consisted of the small emerging middle class and the vast majority who belonged to the "lower orders" who were servants, factory workers in towns, rural agricultural workers, small tenant farmers, candlestick makers, slaughtermen, dressmakers, teachers, milliners etc. etc.

Our first video will look at the places that the Austen family lived in. You will see a progression of family economic situations that was common in her class. No social security system [the Poor Law was only for the most desperate and impoverished families]. In this period **The Family** was your social security. You had to keep in firm touch with all of them because you never knew when you may need to call on their financial and other help

Show video: *The Untold Story of Jane Austen: Behind Closed Doors*, narrated by Lucy Worsley, UTube. [50 minutes] A general introduction to Austen's life.

Also useful is *Death of Jane Austen*, narrated by Lucy Worsley, UTube. Discussion with Don Snow about Austen's later years at Chawton and London and a critique of her ideas. [25 mins] Probably group members will have to view this themselves if they are interested in their own time.

Discussion [if time permits] and finish.

Meg Dillon, convenor.

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