

The World that Jane Austen presents

Jane Austen wrote about the sector of society of which she had personal experience, that is the gentility. In roughly modern terms, this means the middle and upper classes. The majority of England's population at the time were struggling to house, feed and cloth themselves. We rarely witness this level of existence in the six novels although we occasionally encounter servants interacting with their employers (*Sense and Sensibility*) and families in economic hardship (The Prices in *Mansfield Park*).

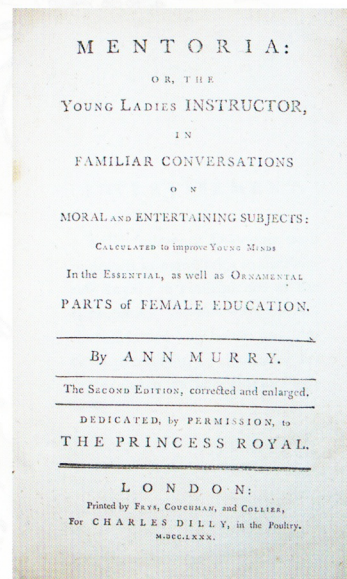
What was expected of young people in Jane Austen's day?

Gentlemen

The expectations of young gentlemen at the time were to take up their allotted place in society, according to their wealth and prospects. They were required to match or increase those prospects by marrying into a family of distinction. The marriage needed to produce legitimate male heirs since inherited assets generally passed down the generations through the male line. A career in the Services, the Law or the Church was acceptable but being in trade was not.

Ladies

Young ladies, however, were expected to retain an untarnished reputation at all costs. (Once a young lady was suitably married, it was essential that sons later born to her represented a pure blood line of inheritance in their lawful father's name.) Any scandal could ruin a girl's reputation and also that of her female relations.



How they passed their time

Men

Their pastimes were those of a nobleman: land-acquisition and enhancement, hunting, shooting, fishing, keeping horses and dogs for these pursuits, carriage-driving, belonging to exclusive clubs, dressing expensively, dancing, playing cards with noble friends, dining extravagantly, and being discreet (though not particularly moral) about sexual adventures.

Pastimes of some gentlemen in the novels:

- ***Pride and Prejudice***: Bingley and Darcy shoot. Fishing at Pemberley
- ***Sense and Sensibility***: Willoughby breeds horses and dogs
- ***Emma***: Frank Churchill loves music and dancing

Women

A young lady might play parlour games (including light gambling), dance elegantly, read, sew, draw, paint, write, sing, play music, go for walks or carriage-rides or shopping for fashionable items to wear, call on friends and acquaintances, but she was never to find herself indoors unsupervised in the company of an unrelated young gentleman.

Pastimes of some ladies in the novels:

- ***Emma***: Emma draws. She and Jane Fairfax play the piano
- ***Northanger Abbey***: Catherine Morland reads gothic novels
- ***Pride and Prejudice***: Elizabeth walks, Mary reads and plays the piano, Lydia plays cards.

