



## Dressing sense in the perception of Jane Austen

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### Abstract

Things appear very attractive whenever there is a discussion of dress and fashion, especially among the younger generation. Not only the young but also people of all ages are attracted towards it. It has been observed that most people spend considerable time enhancing their appearance, as they often feel conscious of how others perceive them. Such ideas capture our imagination and transport us into a world of dreams and aspirations. When discussing dressing sense, one era that immediately comes to mind is the Regency Era. Undoubtedly, the Regency period is known as an age of fashion, elegance, and style. A great deal of knowledge about clothing, appearance, and social identity can be gained from this era. Many poets and writers have portrayed the period in their works, but Jane Austen, one of the most distinguished novelists of her time, beautifully depicted the styles and dressing practices of her heroines and heroes, making them memorable and admired by generations of readers. This paper is an attempt to highlight Jane Austen's perception of dress and fashion, exploring how clothing reflects social class, character, and cultural values. Austen continues to be remembered today for her elegance, literary brilliance, and keen understanding of dress culture.

**Keywords:** Dress & fashion, Regency Era, dressing sense social identity & social class

### Introduction

Clothing and style hold an important place in the works of Jane Austen. Clothing serves as a significant marker of social standing, individual identity, ethical nature, and cultural beliefs, going beyond just decorative purposes. According to Daniel Roche, clothing is much more than something people wear. It reflects how a society sees itself, what it values, and what people consider normal or real in their daily lives. Fashion is also a place where new ideas and social changes constantly interact with older customs and traditions. In this way, clothing becomes a visible arena where change and tradition meet, compete, and influence each other. Austen employs clothing not only to illustrate the stylish realm of Regency England but also to explore human conduct, societal biases, and the connection between outward appearance and truth. By her nuanced portrayal of attire and looks, she uncovers the intricacies of class, gender, ethics, and social aspiration. Her view of fashion goes beyond just looks and serves as a way to comprehend character and society.

Austen's literary concern with clothing can be understood in relation to the Regency period's socio-historical background. During this time, clothing served as a major indicator of social standing and cultural sophistication. Empire-line shapes, high waistlines, and light materials like silk and muslin that were frequently adorned with ribbon, lace, and embroidery were the hallmarks of women's fashion. Bonnets, gloves, shawls, parasols, and reticules were examples of accessories that helped create a socially acceptable image. Even though it was more controlled, men's fashion also conveyed social meaning through hats, waistcoats, cravats, breeches or pants, and structured tailoring, all of which denoted respectability and status. Her novels offer insightful information about Regency fashion

culture. Typically, women wore silk, cotton, or muslin Empire-line gowns with a high waist. Fashionable ensembles were complemented with accessories including bonnets, ribbons, shawls, and gloves. Men wore waistcoats, breeches or pants, fitted coats, and well-fitting cravats. Respectability and social standing were indicated by good grooming and appropriate attire. Austen seamlessly incorporated fashion into daily life, in contrast to many Victorian novels who described costumes in great detail. Because they capture the genuine social significance of dress in her day, her references appear authentic.

Jane Austen often reveals her characters' personalities through their thoughts regarding clothing. Instead than depicting ornate attire, she illustrates how characters discuss and think about clothing. Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* is very focused on appearances, fashion, and shopping. She frequently talks about the newest styles, accessories, and muslin dresses. Her self-interest and shallow personality are reflected in her infatuation with stylish appearance. As the novel goes on, readers see that Isabella is a deceitful and untrustworthy character because her preoccupation for appearances extends beyond clothes to her relationships. Catherine Morland, on the other hand, is more focused on moral behavior and true friendship than fashion. Austen uses this contrast to imply that while moderation demonstrates sincerity and common sense, excessive devotion to fashion may indicate superficial values. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the Dashwood sisters represent differing perspectives on looks and style. Marianne Dashwood cherishes beauty, grace, and emotional display; whereas Elinor Dashwood prioritizes balance, self-control, and rational judgment. Their varied styles of dress represent the larger conflict between emotion and reason. Austen indicates that true refinement comes not from trendy

looks but from self-discipline, intellect, and ethical integrity. Austen is able to show inner attributes through external appearances by using dress as a tool for character development.

In Austen's novels, fashion is a part of courtship culture. Marriage is a major issue, and the social exchanges that precede courtship are significantly influenced by fashion. Young men and women had the chance to meet possible spouses at balls, assemblies, banquets, and social gatherings. Since appearance affected first impressions, appropriate attire was crucial at these gatherings. The Meryton and Netherfield balls in *Pride and Prejudice* are significant social gatherings where relationships are impacted by attire, manners, and looks. A person's social appeal could be increased by attractive clothing, but Austen consistently shows that brains and character are ultimately more significant than outward looks. In a similar vein, social events in *Emma* stress the significance of adequately presenting oneself. Clothes are a component of a broader system of respectability and social graces.

Through these sequences, Austen challenges society's propensity to make snap judgments about people based just on their appearance while simultaneously highlighting fashion as an important aspect of courtship culture.

Ideas about clothing and morality were widely circulated through literature and conduct books, and they strongly influenced women's private lives. These texts did not simply describe social behaviour but helped shape it, especially through repeated instructions about proper female conduct. Austen consistently explores the connection between fashion and social class differentiation. In *Pride and Prejudice*, attire acts as a way to differentiate authentic value from social pretentiousness. A particularly unforgettable instance takes place when Elizabeth Bennet traverses muddy fields to see her sick sister Jane at Netherfield. When she arrives, Caroline Bingley ridicules Elizabeth's look, especially her "petticoat, six inches deep in mud."

This critique exposes Caroline's shallowness and bias towards social class. Elizabeth's messy look stems from her dedication and worry for her sister, whereas Caroline's fixation on grace showcases vanity and social aspiration. Austen juxtaposes Elizabeth's practicality, honesty, and autonomy against the superficiality of high society. Mr. Darcy, notably, appreciates Elizabeth's wit and vivacity instead of concentrating only on her looks. In this episode, Austen highlights that genuine character should be appreciated more than superficial beauty. Another significant instance relates to Elizabeth's meeting with Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Mr. Collins recommends Elizabeth: "Lady Catherine prefers to maintain the distinction of status." His remarks highlight current issues regarding social hierarchy and how clothing helps sustain differences between the aristocracy and the middle classes. Attire transforms into a representation of wider social conflicts stemming from evolving class systems and growing social fluidity. The view of social status and advancement is also reflected in *Mansfield Park*, where Mrs. Norris, Fanny Price's aunt, commends a housekeeper for firing two servants dressed in white gowns. Many middle-class women owned white muslin dresses, which were very popular at the time. But considering their inferior social standing, Mrs. Norris views the maids' desire to dress stylishly as improper and ostentatious. Additionally, she suggests that white

clothing is inappropriate for manual laborers like housemaids since it is associated with cleanliness and respectability. However, this response is presented critically in the book. Mrs. Norris's severe criticism of anything as trivial as attire exposes her own moral failings. Jane Austen uses this example to show how clothes may be used as a social policing tool, where fashion serves as a symbol of perceived moral value as well as class.

In *Persuasion*, concerns regarding attire are closely connected to notions of class hierarchy and servant behavior. Mrs. Musgrove criticizes a nursery maid, calling her too stylish and "fine-dressing," and asserts that such a servant could have a detrimental impact on other members of the home. This illustrates a wider concern that stylish clothing may erode social boundaries. Servants are perceived as upsetting established distinctions of rank and propriety when they adopt styles associated with their employers or the upper classes. Here, fashion is linked to wealth and consumption, but it also carries the risk of social copying, when those of lower rank seem to copy the looks of their superiors. But this viewpoint is conveyed with sarcasm, just like in other Jane Austen writings. Readers are urged by the story not to take such assessments at face value. Rather, it quietly criticizes the people who voice these fears, showing how dress-related worries frequently reflect insecurity and societal prejudice rather than actual moral peril.

In *Emma*, Austen examines the connections between looks, social ascent, and awareness of class. Emma Woodhouse emphasizes the significance of etiquette, sophistication, and social appearance. Her efforts to elevate Harriet Smith's social standing include a focus on looks as well as education and conduct. Apparel serves as a means by which social ambitions are conveyed and mediated.

Through these issues, Austen explores the strict social hierarchy of Regency England and the impact of looks on social connections. This viewpoint is especially noticeable in *Northanger Abbey*, where Austen examines the connection between style, consumerism, and self-identity. By engaging in shopping trips, talking about fabrics and dresses, and detailing appearances, she shows how fashion can serve as a means for self-definition and social expression.

Mrs. Allen is largely focused on clothing and looks. Her talks seldom extend beyond topics of dresses, materials, and adornments, exposing her superficial grasp of existence. In a similar manner, Isabella Thorpe employs stylish attire and playful antics as tools for social elevation. Her fixation on looks demonstrates her aim to draw affluent partners and enhance her social status. Austen reveals the risks of an obsession with fashion through these characters and underscores the ethical void that frequently accompanies vanity.

In comparison, Catherine Morland embodies honesty, naivety, and temperance. Despite her innate passion for fashion, she does not permit apparel to shape her sense of self. Her straightforwardness and sincerity set her apart from Isabella's faux sophistication and affectation. Similarly, Eleanor and Henry Tilney value fashion without allowing themselves to be controlled by it. Their discerning sense of style showcases intellect, sophistication, and wise decision-making. A notable instance of the link between attire and ethics is evident in Catherine's carriage excursion with John Thorpe. Mrs. Allen cautions: "Open carriages are unpleasant

things." "A clean gown doesn't last five minutes on them." Mrs. Allen's attention is solely on the risk to Catherine's gown, while Austen discreetly alludes to the modern connections between white muslin and women's virtue. White muslin, valued for its fineness and susceptibility to staining, represented sexual innocence and suitability for marriage. Catherine's white dress serves as a symbol of her purity and ethical strength. Austen uses dress symbolically to highlight cultural beliefs that connect appearance with virtue. Bath, the central location of the novel, further emphasizes these themes. Bath serves as a hub for fashion, shopping, and social exhibition, transforming into a symbolic locale where identity, consumerism, and social performance converge.

Austen perceives dress as a moral and ethical language that helps to judge one's character. In this reference Daniel Roche states that clothing was viewed as an extension of the body throughout the eighteenth century. According to this perspective, a person's inner nature was expressed by their attire. This indicates that a person's morality, integrity, and character were perceived to be reflected in their attire. In this reference Jennie Batchelor also states that this idea highlighted the importance of clothing as a representation of morals, suggesting that inappropriate clothing or poor taste could be interpreted as signs of moral decay or corruption. Because of this, eighteenth-century literature often portrayed a character's deteriorating physical appearance or poor clothing as a metaphor for their moral decline and immoral behavior. The words "the virtues of the mind as well as those of the body" seen in *The Mirror of the Graces* point out that a respectable woman's inner virtues should be visible through her outward appearance. Female virtue was therefore expected to be "legible" or readable through both the body and clothing. Dress was not simply decorative; details such as fabric, colour, and style carried moral significance and were believed to reflect a woman's character. This belief reinforced the close connection between appearance and morality in the period of Jane Austen.

Austen illustrates this relationship in *Northanger Abbey* through Catherine Morland's white muslin dress. When Catherine rides in an open carriage with the morally questionable John Thorpe, her chaperone, Mrs. Allen, worries only that the journey may stain Catherine's gown. However, the concern carries a deeper symbolic meaning. As scholar Kate Miskin argues, white muslin was a delicate fabric that stained easily and was commonly associated with female purity, innocence, and suitability for marriage. Consequently, the possible staining of Catherine's dress symbolically suggests a threat to her reputation and virtue. In her another novel *Mansfield Park*, apparel serves as an emblem of ethical character. At social events and theatrical shows, attire serves as a significant indicator of status and self-representation.

Fanny Price's simple and unpretentious look symbolizes her humility, honesty, and ethical character. In contrast to the Bertram family members, who frequently prioritize appearance and social status, Fanny stays uninfluenced by ambition and vanity. Her simplicity manifests a tangible reflection of her inner goodness and strength of character. Here it appears clothing operated as a moral language in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries along with Austen's time. Woman's dress was often interpreted as a reflection of her inner character, meaning that outward

appearance and moral worth were closely linked in both social attitudes and literary representations.

In conclusion, Jane Austen employs clothes as a major literary device to examine character, morality, social standing, gender expectations, and class inequalities in Regency England, rather than just as a decorative element. Dress serves as a visual language in all of her works, reflecting cultural views, social aspirations, and personal ideals while also highlighting the conflicts between appearance and reality. Austen illustrates via characters like Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price, and Isabella Thorpe that while social judgments may be influenced by outward appearance, true worth is judged by moral character, intelligence, and integrity rather than fashionable show. Her portrayal of clothing also highlights how fashion shapes courtship, identity, and social interaction while upholding societal structures. Austen offers an accurate depiction of Regency society while quietly criticizing the biases and presumptions associated with beauty by including clothing into daily life. In the end, her portrayal of clothing emphasizes the notion that, despite the social and symbolic significance of fashion, true virtue and personal worth cannot be determined just by clothing.

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