

LADY SUSAN BY JANE AUSTEN



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Review

Inspired by *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, and written in a similar epistolary form, *Lady Susan* is one of Jane Austen's earliest finished works. In it, she reveals all the caustic wit and brilliant social satire of her later novellas.

About the Author

One of England's most beloved authors, Jane Austen wrote such classic novels as *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, and *Northanger Abbey*. Published anonymously during her life, Austen's work was renowned for its realism, humour, and commentary on English social rites and society at the time. Austen's writing was supported by her family, particularly by her brother, Henry, and sister, Cassandra, who is believed to have destroyed, at Austen's request, her personal correspondence after Austen's death in 1817. Austen's authorship was revealed by her nephew in *A Memoir of Jane Austen*, published in 1869, and the literary value of her work has since been recognized by scholars around the world.

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Lady Susan is a short epistolary novel by Jane Austen, possibly written in 1794 but not published until 1871. This epistolary novel, an early complete work that the author never submitted for publication, describes the schemes of the main character—the widowed Lady Susan—as she seeks a new husband for herself and one for her daughter. Although the theme, together with the focus on character study and moral issues, is close to Austen's published work (*Sense and Sensibility* was also originally written in the epistolary form), its outlook is very different, and the heroine has few parallels in 19th-century literature. Lady Susan is a selfish, unscrupulous and scheming woman, highly attractive to men, who tries to trap the best possible husband while maintaining a relationship with a married man.

- Sales Rank: #9842197 in Books
- Published on: 2015-07-19
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .21" w x 6.00" l, .30 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 90 pages

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Most helpful customer reviews

164 of 173 people found the following review helpful.

Minor treasures from the Jane Austen treasure chest

By JLind555

Jane Austen is known for six complete novels, each one a masterpiece. This Penguin Classics compilation features one novel unpublished in her lifetime and two unfinished fragments. This book is proof that even an incomplete Austen is better than no Austen at all.

"Lady Susan" is an epistolary novel whose eponymous anti-heroine, unlike the women featured in Austen's other works, is bad to the bone. When the book opens, Lady Susan, a stunningly beautiful widow in her

upper thirties, has just been sent packing from the home of a family she had spent some months with, having been discovered carrying on a flagrant affair with the husband of the family, right under his wife's nose. She takes refuge with her kind-hearted brother and his sensible wife, who sees through Lady Susan from the day she enters the house and can't wait to see her leave.

Also in the home are Lady Susan's teenage daughter, who has been expelled from boarding school after attempting to run away so that she won't be forced into marrying the rich, fatuous nobleman her mother has picked out for her; and the younger brother of Lady Susan's sister-in-law, who has heard intimations about Lady Susan's unsavory reputation; in retaliation for his initial disdain, Lady Susan sets out to captivate him and succeeds so well that she has him on the brink of proposing marriage to her, despite the fact that he is 12 years younger than she is, much to the alarm of his family. It looks as though he is about to fall into her clutches, when a chance meeting between him and the wife of Lady Susan's lover blows all Lady Susan's machinations, as well as her reputation, to smithereens.

Lady Susan, to save what is left of her honor, ends up marrying the rich, fatuous nobleman she intended for her daughter; Jane Austen slyly hints that Lady Susan and her married lover will continue their affair under the noses of both their spouses. The book's ending is in a narrative style that appears simply tacked on, as if Austen got tired of both the story and the epistolary style she wrote it in; but on the whole, it's an enjoyable read, interesting mostly because it is so different in style and content from the books we're familiar with.

"The Watsons" is a delight from beginning to middle; I can't say "end" because, unfortunately, Austen never finished it. It's very much in the style of her six major works. Emma Watson is the youngest child of a large family and has been raised by her rich aunt since early childhood; she is thrown back on her impoverished family when her aunt makes an ill-advised second marriage. She is thus reintroduced at the age of 19 to her terminally ill father, two brothers and three unmarried sisters. Emma is a refreshingly original heroine very much in the style of Elizabeth Bennet; she's bright, astute, spirited, perceptive, down to earth, and unimpressed with mere good looks and money. She has no problem rejecting the town casanova who thinks he's all that and a bag of chips; nor is she especially impressed by the young lord of the manor who is infatuated with her. A footnote to the story says that Jane Austen told her sister how the book was to end; we could have guessed it even without the footnote, but it's a great story and would surely have been included in her major works if only she had lived to complete it.

"Sanditon" is probably the best known of Austen's unpublished works; it's also a fragment of a novel, very different in content from her finished works. Austen excels in writing about manners and morals; "Sanditon" is more about social commentary, and somehow, it doesn't work as well. The characters in "Sanditon" are not as interesting or compelling as the people in her other works; they are not nearly as well drawn; they're more like sketches or caricatures than three-dimensional persons. It's difficult to tell how she would have ended the book, and there's not really enough interest in the plot to make us want to know. "Sanditon" is the weakest of the three stories in this volume, but "The Watsons" and "Lady Susan" more than make up for its defects. One can see in these two works the development of a great writer.

Judy Lind

94 of 97 people found the following review helpful.

Jane Austen's least known novel is one of her wittiest and most charming.

By Mary Whipple

Though *Lady Susan* is considered part of Jane Austen's "juvenilia," having been written ca. 1805, it was not published till well after Jane Austen's death and is still not counted among her "six novels." In fact, this seventh novel, though not as thoughtful or thought-provoking as the "famous six," is one of her wittiest and

most spirited. Written in epistolary style, it is the story of Lady Susan, a beautiful, recent widow with no conscience, a woman who is determined to do exactly what she wants to do, to charm and/or seduce any man who appeals to her, and to secure a proper marriage for her teenage daughter, whom she considers both unintelligent and lacking in charm.

Lady Susan, the character, has no redeeming qualities, other than her single-mindedness, and her problems, entirely self-imposed, show the extremes to which an unprincipled woman will go to ensure her own pleasure and ultimately a more secure, comfortable life. As Lady Susan manipulates men, women, and even her young nieces and nephews, her venality knows no bounds, and when she determines that her daughter Frederica WILL marry Sir James, a man who utterly repulses her, Lady Susan's love of power and her willingness to create whatever "truth" best suits her purpose become obvious.

Austen must have had fun writing this novel which "stars" a character who to appears to be her own opposite. While this novel is not a pure "farce," it is closer to that than anything else Austen ever wrote. Containing humor, the satiric depiction of an aristocratic woman of monstrous egotism, her romantic dalliances and comeuppances, and her ability to land on her feet, no matter what obstacles are thrown in her path, the novel is a light comedy in which the manners and morals of the period are shown in sharp relief-- Lady Susan vs. Catherine Vernon, her sensible sister-in-law; the free-wheeling Lady Susan and those who love the city vs. the moral grounding of those who live in the country; the sexual power of an unprincipled woman vs. the "proper ladies" who, along with their husbands, become her victims.

While this novel is not as "finished" as her more famous novels (the conclusion is weak), it shows Austen as a more playful novelist than in her other novels, an author who is obviously having fun introducing a wild card like Lady Susan into polite society to show how ill-equipped men are to deal with someone so clever. This surprising novel by Austen shows her as a careful observer of society but a polite critic of that society at the same time. Mary Whipple

59 of 62 people found the following review helpful.

Not your typical Austen

By Southern Housewife

This short story is certainly not your typical Austen depicting a heroine's romance and then a happy ending. This story is in the form of letters, which was handled well, but I think limits Austen's story telling ability. In Lady Susan the heroine is in fact a manipulative villain with no redeeming qualities and I found myself frustrated with the other characters reactions to her schemes. I also thought the letter format limited character development and had this been in the form of her more traditional novels it might have been a very interesting story with a meddling mother and her daughter becoming our heroine. Worth a read but if you're a fan of Austen's novels this is quite a change of pace.

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