

**Synopsis of**  
***Jane Austen and the State of the Nation***  
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Jane Austen's England was plagued with widespread poverty, crop failures, bank failures, recessions, and an unprecedented national debt, due in part to the fact that the country was waging costly wars for much of Jane's life. From the political jousting between Mrs. Percival and Mr. Stanley in "Catherine and the Bower," written when she was a teenager, to *Sanditon*, Jane Austen's characters represent the varying views of what, if anything, should be done to help the poor. Jane had first-hand knowledge of support of the local poor house. Her father, as a clergyman, would have been responsible for overseeing the support of the local poor house. This support depended primarily on the generosity or lack of it by the local landowners.

Jane's leanings were Radical Tory. The view of the Radical Whigs was expressed very well by Mrs. Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* when she talks her husband out of providing any help to his stepmother and sisters. In *Sense and Sensibility*, enclosures are also addressed. John Dashwood wastes no time in enclosing Norland Commons. Enclosures were a crippling blow to the poorest people who supplemented their income by running sheep, having a milk cow, or gardening on common land. Enclosure had to be approved by Parliament, but the applications for enclosure were always granted. Between 1761 and 1801, enclosures deprived the working class of the use of 3,180,87 acres of land common land. When John Dashwood tells Elinor about his enclosure of Norland Commons, she says nothing. She knows there is nothing she can do.

The locations of these events were meaningful. Norland's location was in Sussex, where 1 in 4 people were classified as paupers. There was a complete lack of private charities in Sussex. The concept of helping others is so alien to John Dashwood that he cannot understand Colonel Brandon giving a living to Edward Ferrars. By contrast, the generous Sir John Middleton lived in Devon, where truly little of the land was enclosed, ensuring the ability of Devonshire's poor to supplement their daily diet.

Private charities were abundant in Devon. Edward Ferrars, while walking through Devon, observed no ruined, tattered cottages, showing that Sir John Middleton was everything a good squire should be. Willoughby's home, Somerset, was a difficult place to be poor. Wages were low and taxes half those in Devon. Young men like Willoughby were filling seats in Parliament voting against measures to raise their taxes.

The view expressed by the Whigs was that the poor were wasteful, immoral, and irresponsible, and therefore were undeserving of help. Their view was that any help given should be from private charity, but as in *Sense and Sensibility*, the promised help often did not arrive.

This is a small sampling of the issues Jane took on in her novels. Ponder this statement from the book: "To consider Jane Austen's novels as merely escapist love stories is to do the author a great disservice and to miss the political messages that would have been obvious to Austen's original readers."

We Janeites already know that Jane's novels were much more than escapist love stories!