



The Watsons and Emma Watson: Jane Austen's Unfinished Novel Completed by Joan Aiken

By Jane Austen, Joan Aiken

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Jane Austen wrote the untitled fragment that was later called *The Watsons* in 1803-5, and it was published posthumously in 1871. Joan Aiken, well known for her Jane Austen sequels and children's books, finishes the fragment, introducing a new hero and seamlessly continuing where Jane Austen left off to a satisfying ending for all Austen fans.

Emma Watson returns home after 14 years spent with a beloved aunt, whose re-marriage has caused a significant change in Emma's circumstances. Used to a life of ease, warmth and intelligence, Emma is thrust back into a home where, with one exception, her sisters are petty and jealous, if not vulgar, her father is ill and weak, and her brothers are not men of fine minds. This is a poignant exploration of a young lady's endurance in the face of reduced circumstances, and in true Jane Austen fashion, there is an admirable hero to make all right in the end.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

The late Joan Aiken was a prolific author of children's books and Jane Austen sequels and continuations. She is the author of *Lady Catherine's Necklace*, which follows Anne de Bourgh from *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Jane Fairfax*, a sequel to *Emma*.

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Excerpt from Chapter 1 of *Emma Watson*, Jane Austen's Unfinished Novel Completed by Joan Aiken

WHAT A VERY FORTUNATE CIRCUMSTANCE IT WAS THAT ROBERT and Jane chose this day to visit their friends at Alford,' said Emma Watson, walking into the wash-house with a large bundle of table-linen in her arms.

'Indeed yes!' agreed her sister Elizabeth, briskly giving a stir to various tubs of laundry soaking in solutions of household soda and unslaked lime. 'Those cloths you have there, Emma, can go straight into the copper, unless any of them is badly stained.'

'Only this handkerchief of my father's, which has ink on it.'

'Spread it out in a pan of oxalic acid. Or spirits of sorrel. You will find the bottles next door, on the shelf.'

The wash-house at Stanton Parsonage was a large, draughty room with a York stone floor, a copper, and a range of wooden tubs. The bleaching-room, next to it, was used for ironing, mangling, and drying. These two rooms were, of course, on the ground floor, with doors and windows giving on to the stable-yard; all the windows were wide open at the moment to let out the steam.

Both sisters wore pattens, and had tied voluminous linen aprons over their cambric gowns.

'I do think that Margaret, at least, might have stayed behind and helped us, since she knew poor old Nanny was laid up with her bad foot,' observed Emma dispassionately, spreading out the stained kerchief in a pan of bleaching solution.

'Hah! Margaret would be of no more use than a child of three. Less! She would grumble and stand about and argue and complain that the soda spoilt her white hands. No; we go on very well as we are, Emma! I am infinitely obliged to you for your good nature in sharing the work with me, and only thankful that it is such a capital drying-day; if we can get the bed-linen out into the orchard by nine o'clock, everything may well be put away before our guests return for dinner. For once it is an advantage that they like to keep late, fashionable hours.'

'I am only sorry that you could not go with them, Elizabeth; you never seem to get a day's holiday.'

'Oh, it pleases me much better to get this great wash done,' said Elizabeth simply. 'Besides I would not, no, I would not at all have wished to go along with Robert and Jane today – not for the universe, indeed! The visit would only arouse the most painful recollections; in fact-' Her voice was choked, she stood silently over the boiling copper, biting her lips in an effort to control a rising sob, as she stirred the white and steamy brew

with a wooden batten.

Emma threw a quick, unhappy glance at her elder sister.

Elizabeth Watson was now twenty-nine, long past all hope of matrimonial prospects. The sisters had been parted for fourteen years, and Emma's last recollections of Elizabeth were from when the latter was fifteen, a tall, lively, handsome girl, with a fresh complexion and a wonderful head of thick, pale-gold hair, like that of a Nordic princess; now her face was thin, careworn, and at the moment flushed and greasy with steam; the hair, lank and flat, long since concealed under an old-maid's cap.

It is so unfair, thought Emma helplessly; Eliza was far prettier than either Margaret or Penelope; why should she have been obliged to waste her youth and good looks in this kind of task while they may go away visiting and enjoying themselves?

In a wish to distract her sister's sad thoughts, she asked a question:

'Who is this friend of our brother's that they are to visit at Alford?'

The question was not a lucky one. Elizabeth's mouth quivered again, but she regained hold of herself and replied:

'His name is Purvis – I think you have heard me speak of Purvis?'

'Yes, now I remember, you mentioned him the other evening when you were driving me to the Assembly in Dorking.'

But, recalling the context, Emma's heart sank, for she could see this was the very last topic to allay her sister's sad recollections. But the latter went on, as if talking eased her:

'Purvis was my first, my only love. At the time, he was a curate, over in Abinger. He used to come and relieve my father sometimes on Sundays. And he – I – we liked each other very well. Everybody thought it would have been a match between us. But I am sorry to say that our sister Penelope set him against me. She told him untrue tales about me, that I had a flirtatious disposition and had formerly been plighted to Jeffrey Fortescue – which was wholly untrue – and so – and so – that was the ruin of my happiness.'

'But why, why, should Penelope play you such a terrible trick?'

'Because, my dear, she wanted him for herself. She thinks any trick fair for a husband – I only wish she may gain one for herself!'

'She failed, then, in her plan to ensnare Purvis?'

'Yes, she failed; he did not like her ways. The end of it was, he discontinued his visits here. And, very shortly afterwards, he removed to a greater distance and married a young lady of some fortune who lived in Leith Hill. And,' said Elizabeth sighing, 'I hope he has been happy. But I have never, never since seen another man whom I could love as I loved Purvis. Indeed, I have not seen many at all.'

'How could one sister so betray another?' demanded Emma hotly, wringing out a couple of napkins with great force and flinging them into the rinse water. 'It is the most shocking story I ever heard! I do not like the

sound of Penelope. I shall be afraid of her. I hope she does not return home for a long time.'

'Well, my dear, I daresay she will continue to stay with the Shaws in Chichester as long as she is able to stretch out the visit. She has an eye on a gentleman there, you see, a rich Dr Harding, the uncle of her friend Miss Shaw. He is a great deal older; but she is twenty-five now, so she has not much time left to be looking about her. We cannot afford to pick and choose, you know, there is no provision for us. We must all marry if we can. Still, Penelope cannot prolong her stay for ever, so, sooner or later, you will be obliged to meet her again. Do not trust her, though! Penelope has no scruples, none, if she sees a chance to promote her own advantage. But still, I think she will have a considerable respect for you, although you are the youngest.'

'For me? I see no reason for that, since I have been returned home like a parcel of unwanted goods,' said Emma drily.

'But, Emma, you have such an air of refinement and fashion! That is bound to impress Penelope very much. Those fourteen years you spent with Aunt Turner have turned you into a person of quality, my dear!'

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