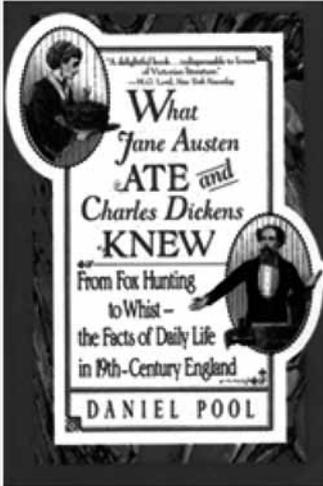


## What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew

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### ***What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – the Facts of Daily Life in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century England***

**Daniel Pool**

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The novel was the most significant literary genre during 19<sup>th</sup>-century England. English novels of this period document social history from the perspective of the novelists. These novels also present disparities among genders, classes, and environments; these function as a driving force behind their characters' formation. The aristocrats enjoying remarkable achievements in the fields of science and education and, their negligence and injustice towards the underprivileged were the major issues dealt in them. However, bizarre customs and regulations, set by the powerful upon the weak, often breed insurmountable questions in readers' minds. Therefore, in order to fully comprehend the setting and background of 19<sup>th</sup>-century English novels, Daniel Pool's *What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – the Facts of Daily Life in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century England* serves as an essential guide for readers who are familiar with these novels but unfamiliar with the etiquettes, customs, and aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> century English society, marred by class division. In addition to that, it provides insights to the everyday struggles of characters that populate this world and their triumph over the socio-economical discrepancies and divergence.

The book is divided into two parts: the first part is narrative and the second part consists of a glossary. The first part starts with a description of the social conditions exhibited in the novels, with a basic introduction to currency, calendar, and units of measurement since these

are the prime factors to judge the living standards of that time. Then, locations where facts and fiction overlap are introduced. Novelists Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy, and others wrote about countrysides but the city of London and the importance of the river Thames in its life were more successfully dealt with by Charles Dickens. Fancy areas in London were majestic; they represented a pleasure world of theaters, dances, card games like whist, and dinner parties. Remarkably, England had an extensive tax system which made it one of the most taxed countries in the world; by engaging in such luxury, the rich enjoyed the fruits of the poor's labor. There was tax on almost everything with the most obnoxious one being the window tax. "Even a hole cut in a wall for ventilation was counted as a window," the writer mentions (88). It resulted in dark houses for the poor who lived in slums, full of poverty and misery.

Nonetheless, among the upper classes, social hierarchy was prominent and people were known by their ranks. The dukes and the barons were the richest among general people. They possessed gigantic landed estates and their titles were bestowed by the monarch. Titles generally passed to the eldest sons, as a result of primogeniture and the rule of entailment. The knights, the gentry and the baronets, comprising the middle class, were next in line. This class was predominantly focused upon in the world of the novels. Traders were also middle-class people but trade lacked grandeur because sophistication and aristocracy never permit one to earn money by sweat and labor. "Hopeless display of inability" to do trivial everyday jobs was a sign of sophistication, the author remarks; as a result, there was a "growing reliance on servants" (47). The status of the servants came after the rank of the farmers, small traders, and sailors but before the working poor or laborers since they worked in affluent households. However, despite their long and difficult working hours, masters were cruel to servants. Servants slept away from the core household, in dark basements and were given only the minimum necessities to live on.

In a nutshell, it was a world of the strong manipulating the weak. Animals were also not free from upper class whims. Fox hunting was a favorite sport. In order to prove their masculinity, men hunted foxes with their hounds and brought their tails and fur as trophies. To be more specific, it was not just the upper class but the upper-class men or the patriarchs that ruled over nineteenth-century England. They regulated that young girls should be married by the age of thirty to avoid becoming wretched spinsters. They determined that women could not inherit property but the dowry she brought from her father became the property of her husband. Husbands could verbally abuse or physically torture their wives, and even confine her against her will as we see in *Jane Eyre*; Bertha Mason was held captive by her husband Rochester and was labeled insane. Moreover, courtship was a very serious matter for women; they were expected to have no sexual contact before marriage. Evangelicalism promoted sexual pleasure as distortion for them, though middle and upper-class men engaged in premarital sex with servants and prostitutes due to a lack of "nice girls" who did not engage in sex before marriage (181). Sometimes they kept governesses as their mistresses in secluded apartments around London. Being a governess was a suitable occupation for middle-class girls who needed to earn their own living but it was simultaneously a lonely and difficult task. Among the working

class, premarital sex was disapproved of but not prohibited; a considerable number of brides were pregnant on their wedding day. Eventually, marriages for all women often equated to constant pregnancies and early death during childbirth.

Comprehensively, the author describes 19<sup>th</sup>-century England as a “Grim World” with an argument that along with poor sanitation and a lack of medical service, women’s deaths at childbirth gave rise to many parentless protagonists in these novels. These orphans, lodged in the workhouse, like Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*, got very little food and a uniform, and had no personal belongings. They often served as sweepers brushing away the mud and dust from the street so that the genteel could cross them without getting their attire dirty. Children as young as four or five were sent crawling up the narrow chimneys of nice homes to clean out the soot. They were often tortured by the elders to complete the job.

Moreover, class distinction was so rife that even in educational institutions, the nobility wore distinctive clothes and sat at special tables. Scholarship students were commoners; they were publicly distinguished from their fellow students. Rich people introduced the workhouse and the debtor’s prison, where family members of the poor were separated and became lesser than human. Nonetheless, industry, patronage, and education brought a considerable amount of changes. Many children worked as apprentices to surgeons, teachers, and lawyers. As we can see in *Great Expectations*, Pip made his own fortune by his hard work and his benefactor’s kindness.

It must be remembered that every dimension of this century is not covered in the book as the focus is on only those issues that were dealt with in the fictions of the time; affairs that are not accurate. Pool has spent most of his adult life teaching and his research draws materials from various sources. This is why the book is written in the form of a commentary. Due to Pool’s background in law, legal terms are more effectively discussed but comparatively with lesser reference from the novels. Furthermore, repetition is a major setback of the book. A lot of the same details are repeated, for example, that both men and women wore gloves. This information appears in pages 79, 215, and 217, redundantly. The book also does not give an account of why the novel became the most popular genre of literature in the nineteenth century because none of the sections comments on people’s reading habits. The title suggests that book will talk about what the novelists did: “what Jane Austen ate and Charles Dickens knew,” but ultimately, the focus is mostly on their fictional characters’ activities.

In spite of these issues, the book is a joy to read for those who are curious about 19<sup>th</sup>-century English novels. Pool provides instances from the novels every time he introduces a new topic. Readers familiar with these texts will love the book because it aids in understanding the backdrop of the novels especially as the second part of the book contains a glossary, connotations of specific details explaining history and habits of the time in literature, and a bibliography that suggests further reading. These can be consulted while reading any 19<sup>th</sup>-century novel in order to understand archaic terms. Nevertheless, the first part of the book must be read after reading the novels in order to inter-relate the facts for thorough understanding.

*What Jane Austen Ate and Charles Dickens Knew: From Fox Hunting to Whist – the Facts of Daily Life in 19<sup>th</sup>-Century England* is a delightful book for readers who like to read 19<sup>th</sup>-century English novels and are eager to know about the facts of the daily affairs of the time. Though the book deals mostly with the conflicts of the era, the greatest lesson the book preaches is to fight the odds and emerge as strong. It was certainly a time of deprivation, injustice, and division but virile protagonists of the novels battled these difficulties with valor and courage. Pool's book elevates us by showing their efforts and intellect that transformed the English society over the ages.

