



Summary and key events

The Watsons tells the story of 19-year-old Emma Watson, who has recently returned home to live with her ill clergyman father and her two sisters, after being cut off from her wealthy aunt. She is eager to marry a rich man quickly, in order to help her family avoid poverty and maintain the higher-status lifestyle she has grown used to. Emma's list of potential suitors grows when a new girl arrives in town, but in the end, will the play's writer intervene and help guide Emma towards the right husband, or will she be left to face life as a spinster?

Historical, social and cultural context

Theresa May was at the political helm of Conservative Britain in 2018 – the second female Prime Minister after Margaret Thatcher.

Although society's expectations of women have drastically changed since Austen first created these witty characters, Wade attempts to steer her own characters in a thought-provoking direction, encouraging the audience to question whether we are truly the captains of our own destinies.

Structure, language and themes

- **Act 1:** Austen's original introduction of *The Watsons*.
- **Act 1, Scene 1:** The characters rebel against Laura, the writer.
- **Act 1, Scene 2:** The writer allows the characters to pick up their own pen.
- **Themes:** Women in society / authorship / rebellion / authority.

Original performance conditions

Originally performed on a **thrust** stage at **Chichester Festival Theatre** in **2018** and directed by **Samuel West**, the play begins in the ornate naturalistic Austen-style manner. However, as the play progresses, the writer breaks the fourth wall and the performance style becomes more physical and absurd. **Ben Stones'** production design similarly begins in a minimalistic Austen-period setting but becomes more symbolic as walls break down and scenes flow from society ballroom to Watsons' parlour, from the street to poor Mr Watson's bedroom. **Waller-Bridge's** classical score is replaced with 'Uptown Funk', and **Johanna Town's** lighting design changes from naturalistic to twenty-first century disco.

Contemporary audience

Designing, performing and directing for a **contemporary audience** means thinking about how you would you design, direct and perform extracts of this adaptation of a nineteenth century novel for an audience today, rather than when it was first performed in 2018. Would you stay true to Laura Wade and Samuel West's original intentions, or take a more digital approach to reflect the increasingly technological world we live in?

Characters and performance / directing skills

Laura is the metafictional character in Laura Wade's play. **Emma Watson** is Austen's heroine and the youngest member of the Watson family. Her brother, **Robert**, is married to **Mary** (Mrs Robert), a snob. Her eldest sister, **Elizabeth**, cares for their sick father, while **Margaret**, the middle sister, is carefree and outgoing. Emma must marry into wealth and is introduced to many suitors upon her return to the family home, including the awkward **Lord Osborne**, the handsome rake **Tom Musgrave**, and the fair, pious **Mr Howard**.

We also meet Mr Howard's 10 year old nephew, **Charles**, as well as Lord Osborne's mother and sister, **Lady Osborne** and **Miss Osborne**, along with the **Nanny, Mr and Mrs Edwards** and the **Officers**.

The original director, Wade's partner Samuel West, staged the play on a thrust stage, placing the audience in close proximity to the non-naturalistic performance of these Austenesque characters. This setup allowed the actors to break the fourth wall when the writer character interrupted the action to complete the story through a twenty-first century lens.

Design skills

Set and props: Minimalistic, with some symbolism.
Costume, hair and make-up: Period: Nineteenth century. Laura: today; naturalistic.
Lighting: Naturalistic in Act 1 until Laura enters and the lighting become more symbolic.
Sound: Naturalistic. Clash of 19th century Austen and 21st century phones and music.