

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

by Jane Austen



THE AUTHOR

Jane Austen (1775-1817) was the seventh child and second daughter of an Anglican rector in a country parish in Hampshire, England. She had a happy childhood. She read widely, though she had little formal schooling, and she and her siblings delighted in writing and performing plays at home. At the age of twelve, she began to write parodies of popular literary works, and set her hand to her first serious writing project when she was nineteen. That project was an epistolary novel called *Lady Susan* which, while not a work of genius, was good enough to encourage her to keep writing.

Austen's novels evolved through years of writing and rewriting. In 1795, she began a novel called *Elinor and Marianne* that was finally published in 1810 as *Sense and Sensibility*. She started writing *First Impressions* in 1796; it was initially rejected for publication, but later saw print in 1812 as *Pride and Prejudice*. She began work in 1799 on a novel called *Susan* (not to be confused with her initial effort), which was published posthumously in 1818 as *Northanger Abbey*. She wrote three other novels as well - *Mansfield Park* (1813), *Emma* (1815), and *Persuasion* (published posthumously in 1818).

Her personal life was a happy but quiet one, consisting largely of her writing, along with the kind of country amusements - balls, parties, and teas - described in her novels. The family struggled financially between the death of her father in 1805 and the publication of her first novel in 1810. She never married, though in her late twenties she received a proposal from a local aristocrat named Harris Bigg-Wither. She accepted, but changed her mind the next morning. She always maintained a close relationship with her older sister Cassandra, though we know little of her private life, because not only did she guard her privacy very closely, but her family either censored or destroyed almost all of her correspondence after her death.

Jane Austen died in 1817 of what is now believed to have been Addison's disease. She knew she was dying, and raced against time and declining strength to finish *Persuasion*, the novel containing the character considered to be most like Jane herself - the plain but witty Anne Elliot. Her brother Henry arranged for the publication of her last two novels after her death. Only then did people become aware of the author of these popular works of literature - all the novels published during her lifetime had been published anonymously.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* is the story of the Bennet family, and Mrs. Bennet's frantic attempts to marry her five daughters to eligible young men, the wealthier the better. The narrative focuses on three budding romances - between Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy, and Lydia and Wickham.

As the story begins, the Bennet have received the news that a wealthy young man, Charles Bingley, has moved into the neighborhood. Mrs. Bennet is sure that he will marry one of her girls, and begins scheming for him to meet them. They have their chance at a ball he organizes at his home, Netherfield. At the ball, Bingley takes an evident interest in Jane, the oldest daughter, but all are offended by Bingley's friend Darcy, who is too proud to mix with country folk beneath his station. In the weeks that follow, Darcy begins to be attracted to Elizabeth, but she is still repelled by him. This makes Miss Bingley jealous, since she has her cap set for Darcy as well.

Shortly thereafter, Collins, the heir to the Bennet property, visits Longbourn and announces his intention of marrying one of the Bennet girls. He first ogles Jane, but Mrs. Bennet tells him "Jane is soon to be engaged" - assuming that Mr. Bingley will eventually propose to her. He then turns his attentions to Elizabeth, but she makes no secret of her disgust with him, and rejects his proposal in no uncertain terms, horrifying her mother in the process. At about the same time, the girls meet Wickham, an officer in the local militia; Lydia's obsession with handsome soldiers foreshadows the trouble to come. Elizabeth is also attracted to Wickham, which sets her up to believe his lies about Darcy, who he claims arbitrarily deprived him of a deserved preferment.

Collins then proposes to Charlotte, who accepts him. The Bingleys and Darcy then return to town, where Miss Bingley sends poisonous correspondence to Jane, suggesting that Bingley is soon to marry Darcy's sister. Jane is invited to come to London by her aunt and uncle, and hopes to have the opportunity to see Bingley while she is there. Meanwhile, Wickham turns his attentions to a wealthy young woman named Miss King. While in London, Jane and Elizabeth visit Darcy's aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, a wealthy woman who thinks it is her birthright to order everyone else around. Elizabeth, unlike everyone else Lady Catherine has ever met, stands up to her bullying. While they are in London, Darcy proposes to Elizabeth against his better judgment, and she haughtily rejects him, citing his supposed injustice to Wickham and his role in keeping Bingley and Jane apart. From this point on, these two begin to develop love for one another.

His pride stricken, Darcy writes a letter to Elizabeth to justify his behavior in the matter of Wickham, explaining that the young man had tried to seduce his young sister in order to obtain her fortune. When this is confirmed by Darcy's cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, Elizabeth is mortified. Lydia, meanwhile, is invited to spend the summer in Brighton with the wife of the regimental commander; she has already been flirting with Wickham (Miss King is now out of the picture), but her father, Elizabeth, and Darcy all fail to stop the disaster that is about to occur. Elizabeth is then invited to vacation in the north with her aunt and uncle. While there, they visit Darcy's estate at Pemberley, believing him to be away. The visit shows a side of Darcy that Elizabeth had never imagined - not only does the house reflect the man, but the servants speak in glowing terms of the kindness and generosity of their master. When Darcy himself appears, he acts

like a perfect gentleman, and Elizabeth's opinion of him is clearly changing. This alteration is confirmed by her meeting with Darcy's sister Georgiana.

Word then arrives that Lydia has eloped with Wickham without benefit of clergy. Elizabeth turns to Darcy for help, while Mr. Bennet stands by helplessly and Mrs. Bennet goes into hysterics. Mr. Gardiner, the uncle, agrees to look for the "couple" in London. It is Darcy, however, who finds them and pays Wickham to marry Lydia, although at this point everyone still thinks Gardiner has accomplished this miracle. When Elizabeth discovers what Darcy has done, her love for him grows even more, but she is convinced that he cannot care for her because of the disgrace into which her family has been brought.

Bingley and Darcy return to the countryside, and Bingley soon proposes to Jane (at this point the reader does not know that Darcy has worked to remove the barriers that he had erected between them). Lady Catherine unexpectedly appears at Longbourn, demanding that Elizabeth renounce any desire to marry Darcy. Since any movement in this direction is news to her, she takes hope from the insulting visit, while doing all in her power to put the obnoxious Lady Catherine in her place. Soon after, Darcy visits and proposes to Elizabeth, and she joyfully accepts, later assuring her family that she really is marrying for love.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Mr. Bennet - A gentleman of modest income, he is cynical, witty, and eccentric. He loves Jane and Elizabeth very much, but considers the other women in his house to be fools.
- Mrs. Bennet - A foolish woman whose chief goal in life is to see her daughters married to wealthy men.
- Jane Bennet - The eldest of the Bennet girls, she is beautiful, kind, sweet, and shy. She is afraid to show her love for Bingley, and almost loses him as a result.
- Elizabeth Bennet - The protagonist of the novel, Elizabeth is intelligent, strong-willed and independent-minded. Her tongue is sometimes too sharp for her own good, and she tends to make snap judgments about people that are not always accurate. Her initial dislike of Darcy turns to love as she discovers his true character.
- Mary Bennet - A little snob who prides herself on her intelligence and musical ability, both of which she is lacking.
- Catherine Bennet (Kitty) - Easily swayed, she tends to be dominated by her other sisters, especially Lydia.
- Lydia Bennet - The youngest of the Bennet sisters, a wild, fun-loving but naive teenager. Gossipy and self-centered, she easily falls for Wickham's line, and never does realize how much damage she has done to her family in the process.
- Charles Bingley - A genial, kindly young man with a large fortune. He falls in love with Jane, but is dissuaded by Darcy, though the two are ultimately reconciled and marry.

- Miss Bingley - Bingley's snobbish sister.
- Fitzwilliam Darcy - An intelligent, honest, very proud, and extremely wealthy young man, he is Bingley's best friend. He falls in love with Elizabeth, but she rejects him. After he rescues Lydia from Wickham's clutches, she sees his true character and they marry.
- Georgiana Darcy - Darcy's shy younger sister, she had almost been deceived by Wickham until Darcy prevented it. She is befriended by Elizabeth.
- Lady Catherine de Bourgh - Darcy's aunt, a rich and self-centered noblewoman and Mr. Collins' patroness. She tries to prevent Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth, but only winds up encouraging it.
- Mr. Collins - A pompous clergyman who is subservient to those in higher social classes. He is in line to inherit Mr. Bennet's property. When he proposes to Elizabeth, she rejects him in no uncertain terms, and he winds up marrying her best friend, Charlotte Lucas.
- Charlotte Lucas - The Bennets' neighbor and Elizabeth's best friend, she marries Collins because she is afraid that it is her last chance at marriage, and feels that she will at least be able to live comfortably.
- George Wickham - A handsome, fortune-hunting military man, he seduces Lydia and convinces her to run away with him. Darcy, whose sister Wickham had earlier tried to entrap, finds them and forces him to marry her.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (p.225 - first line of novel)

"The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased; and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend." (referring to Darcy, p.229)

"I have no wish of denying that I did every thing in my power to separate my friend from your sister, or that I rejoice in my success. Towards *him* I have been kinder than towards myself." (Darcy, p.333)

"You are mistaken, Mr. Darcy, if you suppose that the mode of your declaration affected me in any other way, than as it spared me the concern which I might have felt in refusing you, had you behaved in a more gentleman-like manner.... You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it." (Elizabeth, p.334)

“‘How despicably I have acted!’ she cried - ‘I who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! Yet, how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly. Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.’” (Elizabeth, p.343)

“If you were to give me forty such men, I never could be so happy as you. Till I have your disposition, your godness, I never can have your happiness.” (Elizabeth, p.423)

“‘I do, I do like him,’ she replied with tears in her eyes, ‘I love him. Indeed he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. You do not know what he really is; then pray do not pain me by speaking of him in such terms.’” (Elizabeth, p.438)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Jane Austen once described the subject of her novels as “three or four families in a country village.” Such a narrowly proscribed scope cuts her characters off from larger historical movements or philosophical discussions of the day, such as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and Romanticism, and limits her plots to the events of everyday life. Do you consider this to be an advantage or a disadvantage? Why? Use specific incidents and characters from *Pride and Prejudice* to support your conclusion.
2. Charlotte Bronte, the author of *Jane Eyre*, did not like Jane Austen’s work because she thought Austen failed to write about her characters’ hearts. Do you think this criticism is accurate? What incidents in *Pride and Prejudice* give evidence of the depth or superficiality of the emotional lives of Austen’s characters?
3. Jane Austen’s work falls into the gap in the history of the English novel between Gothic and Romantic literature. Though Austen satirizes the Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey*, she shows little inclination to follow the trends of the burgeoning Romantic movement. Using *Pride and Prejudice* as an example, show how Austen’s writing differs from the styles that preceded and followed her.
4. Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* was originally titled *First Impressions* - a title she had to change when another author published a work of the same name in 1800. Was her original title an appropriate one? What role do first impressions play in the story? In which cases do first impressions turn out to be accurate, and in which cases are they not?

5. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, after Jane becomes engaged to Bingley, she wishes that Elizabeth could be as happy as she is. Elizabeth replies, "If you were to give me forty such men, I never could be so happy as you. Till I have your disposition, your goodness, I can never have your happiness." Do you think Elizabeth's statement is true? Is it better to be good, always thinking the best of people, and be happy, or to see the world more accurately and be less happy?
6. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet is an appealing character because of his wry wit and honesty, but it is also very clear that he has been a failure as a father. In what ways does Mr. Bennet let his children down? How does his action (or inaction) affect the behavior of his daughters? his wife? the development of the story?
7. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte doesn't marry Mr. Collins for love. Why does she marry him? Are her reasons valid? Are they fair to Mr. Collins?
8. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, both Elizabeth and Darcy undergo transformations over the course of the book. Of what do these changes consist, and how are they brought about? Could the changes in one have occurred without the changes in the other?
9. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Bennet, Mr. Collins, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh are wonderful comic creations. What makes them so funny? How does Elizabeth's perception of them affect the reader's trust in her views of other people in the book, particularly Wickham and Darcy?
10. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the title describes the heart of the conflict separating Elizabeth and Darcy. Give specific examples to illustrate their pride and prejudice. How are these stubborn sins that keep them apart overcome in the story? To what extent should the resolution of their conflict serve as a model for dealing with similar problems today?
11. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the great events of the day, such as the Napoleonic Wars, are not mentioned at all, allowing the author to concentrate all her attention on the private drama being worked out in the everyday lives of her characters. Some have suggested that it is this very insularity of the novel that gives it such a timeless appeal. Do you consider *Pride and Prejudice* to be timeless? In what ways are the themes of the book relevant to all ages, and in what ways are they peculiar to the time in which Austen lived?
12. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the problem of human pride as a barrier to healthy relationships is explored from many angles. Use specific characters and incidents from the novel to distinguish between pride that is good and proper and that which is destructive and inappropriate.
13. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the moral values of the author are grounded more in society as a whole than in the organized church or explicitly-stated religious principles. To what extent is the world of Jane Austen's novels a Christian world? Use specific characters and incidents to support your assertions.

14. Class consciousness plays a large role in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. To what extent is Austen critical of the class divisions of English society, and to what extent does she accept them as inevitable? Use specific incidents from the novel to support your conclusions.
15. Compare and contrast the relationships between Jane and Bingley and Elizabeth and Darcy in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Which relationship do you consider to be stronger by the end of the novel? Why?
16. To what extent does Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* serve as a critique of the place of women in early nineteenth-century British society? What aspects of the place of women does she consider unjust? How does the novel serve to make her point?
17. Jane Austen characteristically allows dialogue rather than description to create a picture of the characters in her novels in the minds of the readers. Give examples of this from *Pride and Prejudice*. Is this more or less effective than description? What does it say about Austen's understanding about the key to a person's character?